

# Researching Shamanism in Contemporary Japan

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**Abstract** This paper takes its cue from Massimo Raveri's studies and interests, especially concerning Japanese shamanic practitioners and the relationship between media and religion. By further broadening his analysis with more recent data, this paper suggests how a study of contemporary Japanese shamanism could be undertaken, within the theoretical framework offered by critical discourse analysis. Through the suggested examination of the multiple discourses on shamans conducted in peripheral and central areas of the country, it would be possible to reach a better understanding of both shamanism and contemporary society, overcoming essentialist views.

**Keywords** Shaman. Japanese shamanism. Discourse analysis. Polythetic class. Contemporary Japan.

**Summary** 1 Introduction. – 2 Analysing Shamanism in Japan as Multiple Discourse. – 3 Researching the Discourse on Shamans in Peripheral Areas. – 4 Researching the Discourse on Shamans in Central Areas. – 5 Conclusion.

## 1 Introduction

Massimo Raveri has opened up several paths for those who, especially in Italy, are interested in the anthropological study of Japanese religions. His prose and tone have always been able to captivate the reader/listener's attention, making him/her eager to learn what comes next and what lies behind the narrative. No wonder, then, that in 2006 a lecture which Raveri gave in Bologna, where I was in my first year of university, opened my eyes and mind, making me aspire for more knowledge in the field of religious studies, especially with regard to the role of the shamanic actor.

What follows thus stems from two main aspects of Raveri's work: on the one hand, I will set out from his studies on *itako* イタコ (blind female shamans) and on forms of direct communication between humans and other-than-human beings; on the other hand, I will refer to his interest in how contemporary religiosity is being shaped through the use of different media and different languages. In his works and researches, Raveri emphasises the need to take into account narratives and images produced and spread through the most advanced technologies and media in each particular period of time.<sup>1</sup>

At the root of this paper there lies a third aspect indebted to Massimo Raveri's work and insights, namely the theoretical concept of polythetic classification, which enables the scholar to overcome the risk of essentialism and universalism, a risk so keenly felt in the field of shamanism studies.

The concept of 'polythetic class' was borrowed from the domain of the natural sciences by anthropologist Rodney Needham, who applied it - together with Wittgenstein's concept of family resemblances<sup>2</sup> - to anthropology. His aim was to define a category characterised by the fact that, in his words,

among the members of such a class there is a complex network of similarities overlapping and criss-crossing; sometimes overall similarities, sometimes similarities of detail. (Needham 1975, 350)

In other words, each member of a class conceived in this way must possess certain characteristics, but none of these must necessarily be present in every member of the class itself. Presenting the benefits of such a classification, Needham explains that

[polythetic classes] are likely to accommodate better than monothetic the variegation of social phenomena: they have [...] a high content of information, and they carry less risk of an arbitrary exclusion of significant features. (358)

Moreover, we must bear in mind that, as underlined by Fitz John Porter Poole, a polythetic way of conceiving reality

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**1** During his class in History of Modern and Contemporary Japanese Thought for MA students at Ca' Foscari University of Venice, great attention was paid to the topic of the relationship between media and religion. The same theme was mentioned during a seminar Raveri co-organized in 2016, "Languages of the Absolute", which resulted in a publication (Raveri, Tarca 2017).

**2** It must be noted that Jonathan Z. Smith has been critical of Needham's combination of Wittgenstein's family resemblances with the concept of polythetic class, since the two stem from different premises and different fields. See, for example, Smith 1982, 1-18; 2000.

is sufficiently flexible to accommodate new knowledge without the monothetic necessity of modifying definitions and redrawing boundaries every time an anomaly arises. (Poole 1986, 427)

In studies on shamanism and shamanic actors, such an approach would be essential and could allow us to bypass the problems raised by the best-known and most widely used definition of the word 'shaman', namely that provided by Mircea Eliade. The main problem with his definition is the fact that it is monothetic and thus built around what Eliade perceived and conceived as the essence of shamanism, a sort of static and immutable nucleus.

On the contrary, analysing and understanding shamanism as a polythetic class would enable us to give voice to the multiplicity of its aspects and to create a dynamic description, closer to the reality of the practice.

As Wittgenstein wrote in what is probably the most widely quoted part of his work on family resemblances, the strength of a rope lies in the fact that its fibres overlap: there is no need for them to go through the rope's entire length. Applying the metaphor to the definition of what a 'shaman' is and does, in order for the definition to be effective and strong, there is no need for certain elements to be present everywhere and always. It suffices that they be present here and there, and that they overlap and be intertwined.

For these reasons, I believe that studying (Japanese) shamanism as a polythetic class might produce more valuable results than the use of a rigid classification and definition, structurally unable to encompass the variety of actors and practices found on the field.

Raveri offers compelling descriptions of the *itako* and her rituals: through his words one can picture what is going on – the colours, the sounds, the atmosphere, and the participant's reactions. There are two aspects, though, that could be further developed.

The first concerns the use of the term 'Altered States of Consciousness' (ASC), which is problematic since it depends on the absence of a clear definition of the term 'consciousness'. As a consequence of this vagueness, it is also difficult to define what can be considered an alteration of consciousness: for example, can we describe sleep and dreams as altered states of consciousness?

Looking for a way to solve the problem, some scholars have proposed reading the acronym differently.

Ruth-Inge Heinze, for instance, has chosen to use the word 'alternate' instead of 'altered', since

the term 'altered states of consciousness' carries negative connotations [...] while the term 'alternate states of consciousness' better describes the progression of states which an individual experiences in descending or ascending order. (Heinze 1991, 159-60)

The problem of the word 'consciousness', though, remains as she does not provide a clear definition of the term.

A better solution is the one advanced by Graham Harvey, who suggests reading ASC as an acronym for 'Adjusted Styles of Communication':

In contrast with the common claims that shamanism is fundamentally a matter of achieving, controlling and utilizing altered states of consciousness (ASC), it is preferable to think of shamans as adjusting their styles of communication. In animist cultures, shamans are (among other things) ritual leaders who mediate with other-than-human persons by means of respectful etiquette. The advantages of this reconfiguration of 'ASC' are that it avoids claims about individuals' immediate experiences (which are likely to be inaccessible) and focuses attention on shamanic practices, actions, or performances – which are central to the concerns of those who employ shamans and may be seen as signs of the relationship between shamans and those who possess or help them. (Harvey, Wallis 2010, 14)

Shifting our attention away from the individual experience of the alteration of consciousness (which – as already noted – cannot easily be defined), the claim that the defining characteristic of shamans is the use of a particular style of communication enabling them to mediate with other-than-human entities seems quite reasonable, especially if one considers contemporary shamanic practices.

A second step, which can lead the research on Japanese shamanic actors to broaden and deepen our knowledge and comprehension of the topic, concerns the view and the description of the shaman as 'marginal'.

This is evident in many studies, where the shaman is perceived as a liminal figure, marginal to social life. Lori Meeks has made it one of her aims to show that this perception and description of the *miko* 巫女 – the term mostly used to refer to Japanese shamanesses – in relation to pre-modern Japan is highly stereotypical and that, instead, the *miko* was everything but marginal to the social and religious sphere.

The reason that explains why such prejudice is still present in many works by different scholars has to do with the lack of in-depth studies on the role and characteristics of shamanic actors in pre-modern Japan. As Meeks shows, this is the consequence of two main historical facts: on the one hand, *miko* have not left any sources from which we can now reconstruct their activities. Moreover, it is necessary to bear in mind that the role of shamanic actors strictly complied with codes and rules from the late Nara period through the Meiji Restoration when practices and beliefs were banned as superstitions, to the Constitution of 1947, which granted religious freedom, thus also allowing the shamanic practices which had previously been suppressed.

As a result, the majority of studies on Japanese shamans have contributed to spreading the view that such practices have remained homogeneous and unchanged since prehistoric times, thus consolidating two ideas:

- (1) the idea that Japan has a timeless 'folk religion' comprised of ill-defined superstitions practiced in rural areas, and (2) that this folk religion can be neatly separated from the more intellectual and theoretically systematic traditions of Confucianism and Buddhism. (Meeks 2011, 210)

An accurate historical reconstruction of the role and characteristics of the *miko*, therefore, would help lend substance and depth to the various practices and actors involved. It would promote a broader understanding of the topic, also by illustrating the relationships established in the social and religious spheres in each of the historical periods under investigation. This would help us move beyond static and flat descriptions, making room for the multifaceted complexity of shamanic practices.

Meeks moves towards this goal by analysing various sources to understand the role of *miko*, since - as previously noted - they did not write about their activities and thoughts.

Evidence of their activities, then, must be gleaned from third-party sources: from literary and visual sources that depict *miko*, for example, or from institutional records, state histories, or courtier journals that mention them. The study of *miko* in premodern Japan thus requires scholars to reach beyond the traditional boundaries of religious studies, to consider large bodies of literature, and to search through relatively obscure or unexamined records. (Meeks 2011, 212)

Meeks considers many sources clearly showing that the *miko* was neither marginal to social life nor to the religious sphere, where she actively cooperated with other actors, such as Buddhist monks.

Meeks' study should be taken as a reminder of the need to always consider each object of inquiry in relation to historical, socio-cultural and economic processes, to avoid essentialist analyses, and to fully consider the web of relations with other actors and objects.

## 2 Analysing Shamanism in Japan as Multiple Discourses

In order to study (contemporary) shamanism without the risk of producing essentialist and static descriptions, a useful theoretical framework could be the one offered by discursive approaches to religion, in the specific form of critical discourse analysis. Broadly speaking, the aim is to show how concepts taken for granted – such as that of ‘shamanism’ – are, in fact, nothing but historical constructs. A universal form of shamanism does not (and cannot) exist. Therefore, instead of trying to define what shamanism is and means universally, it is more fruitful to analyse what people, in a specific historical and cultural context, think it is and what meanings they assign to it. This will lead us to consider the various discourses produced in different times and spaces and to analyse “the rules and dynamics of attributing meaning to texts and concepts and of establishing shared knowledge (explicit or tacit) in a discourse community” (von Stuckrad, Wijzen 2016, 2).

The term ‘discourse’ is understood here in light of Kocku von Stuckrad’s definition:

A discourse is a communicative structure that organizes knowledge in a given community; it establishes, stabilizes, and legitimizes systems of meaning and provides collectively shared orders of knowledge in an institutionalized social ensemble. Statements, utterances, and opinions about a specific topic, systematically organized and repeatedly observable, form a discourse. (von Stuckrad 2015, 433)

My suggestion, then, is to demarcate and critically study the various discourses on contemporary shamans, while always being conscious of their historicity.

What a group of people in a given situation regards as accepted knowledge is by no means arbitrary; it is the result of discursive formations that critical scholarship can reconstruct and interpret. (Von Stuckrad 2013, 12)

In doing this, since discourse is an analytical category, the role of the scholar in delimiting its boundaries should not be forgotten.

One last key point to consider when engaging in critical discourse analysis is the fact that “there is a reality – physical and social – *outside* of discourse that is reproduced and changed discursively” (Hjelm 2011, 140; emphasis in original). It is necessary, therefore, to also investigate the (power) relations between the specific discourse under study and the social, economic and political context.

This approach to the topic of (Japanese contemporary) shamanism will reveal the existence of two main broad categories of discourses,

and the mutual relationship between them. The first category comprises discourses produced in academia, while the second is characterised by discourses created outside the academic context by practitioners, their clients, artists, or the media. It is important to know and analyse both, if possible simultaneously, especially because discourses in the second category usually depend on those in the first, which are commonly regarded as possessing a symbolic capital with the power to legitimate every discursive formation.

From this symbolic capital a hegemonic power derives that it is necessary to acknowledge. One of the main aims of a critical discourse analysis of this topic should be to show that practices which are considered and described as 'fake/inauthentic' by some scholars need to be taken into account in order to reach a better understanding of what is going on in the contemporary world.

A reflection on the terminology used is also required: 'shaman' and 'shamanism' can only be employed as academic tools, as heuristic concepts to describe certain actors and practices.

Shamanism can thus be analysed as a wide category composed of multiple discourses - produced in different historical, social and cultural contexts - that might overlap and intermingle. It is the scholar's responsibility to represent these multiple realities that exist simultaneously and that are created by the term 'shaman'.

In order to identify and illustrate the elements characterising the discourses in question and to reconstruct the processes of formation and legitimation of knowledge, it may be fruitful to combine the theoretical approach of discourse analysis with the method of multi-sited ethnography outlined by George Marcus, who writes:

Ethnography moves from its conventional single-site location, contextualized by macro-constructions of a larger social order, such as the capitalist world system, to multiple sites of observation and participation that cross-cut dichotomies such as the 'local' and the 'global', the 'lifeworld' and the 'system'. (Marcus 1995, 95)

What the ethnographer must do, in Marcus' view, is to follow people, things, ideas and relationships across different sites. However, I acknowledge that, as other scholars have argued, Marcus' multi-sited approach is problematic in its presupposition of the existence of a whole that can be encompassed by studying its parts. What an ethnographer can do is consider the complexity of reality as such, without attempting to reduce or simplify it. Not simplifying complexity, therefore, means maintaining an awareness of the network in which everything exists and of the elements that are part of it, as well as of the inevitable partiality and arbitrariness of one's vision. Marcus' approach does not address the issue of the inevitable role of the ethnographer in choosing and circumscribing the boundaries of his/her

fields. To solve this problem, Matei Candea suggests reframing the method by substituting the term ‘multi-sited’ with ‘bounded field-site’ or ‘arbitrary location’, since “the relevant boundaries to the analysis are not fixed a priori, they are ‘discovered’ on the ground” (Candea 2007, 171). With these improvements, the ethnographic method designed by Marcus can effectively be used to study the various discourses on shamanism, considering different media, texts, and contexts as multiple sites of observation and participation.

From the earliest studies on Japanese shamanism, scholars have focused their attention and efforts on those actors found in the extreme peripheries of the country. It was there that Yanagita Kunio and Orikuchi Shinobu found what they thought to be the true essence of Japanese spirituality, and where Hori Ichirō himself went in search of those characteristics that he thought were once common throughout the archipelago. The centre of the country, on the contrary, has been under-studied and under-represented by scholars, being perceived as a modern and technological place where a loss of ‘tradition’ had inevitably taken place. However, it is clear that the centre has produced – and continues to produce – discourses on shamans, which need to be taken into account if one is to truly understand the meaning of the word ‘shaman’ in contemporary Japan and what practices are offered and sought.

Researching shamanism in contemporary Japan thus requires us to draw a distinction between what happens in the centre and in the peripheries, but, at the same time, it is essential to acknowledge that the two contexts are part of the same network and share a close relationship.

### 3 Researching the Discourse on Shamans in Peripheral Areas

As mentioned before, discourses on Japanese shamans produced by scholars, both within and outside Japan, have mainly focused on the situation in peripheral areas of the country, namely Tōhoku and the Ryūkyū Islands. Consequently, the main actors recognised and defined as ‘shamanic’ in both regions are well represented in literature from the fields of religious studies and anthropology, although it must be noted that there are very few recent contributions.

Concerning the northern periphery, it is the *itako* who, since the sixties, is the most studied and researched actor.<sup>3</sup> Conversely, the shamanic figure that has captured the interest of scholars in the south-

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<sup>3</sup> See, for example, Hirayama 2005; Ivy 1995; Kawamura 1994; 1999; 2003; 2006; Knecht 2004; Miller 1993; Murakami 2017; Naumann 1992; Ōmichi 2017; Sasamori 1995; Satō 1981.



ern islands is the *yuta* ユタ.<sup>4</sup> We should bear in mind that the terms *itako* and *yuta* are simply the most commonly used: there are other terms used to refer to similar practitioners in the two geographical contexts. Concerning the Ryūkyū, it is also necessary to consider the fact that, alongside with *yuta*, other female religious specialists are active with similar roles, although they are usually not defined as ‘shamans’ by scholars, who prefer to use terms such as ‘priestess’, since they do not experience possession or ecstasy and their main role is to perform rituals to maintain the connection between the community and its natural environment, imbued with divine characteristics. Outside the academic world, however, these practitioners are sometimes referred to as ‘shamans’, which shows the overlap of the two terms and roles. In exploring the formation of discourses on shamans this (mis)understanding should also be considered.

Whereas in the northern part of the country the number of shamanic actors is rapidly decreasing, in the southern peripheries, although certain islands are losing their spiritual specialists, others are witnessing an increase in the number of shamans. This often occurs in forms that differ from what is considered to constitute the ‘tradition’, as Shiotsuki shows (Shiotsuki 2012, 271-423). If one wishes to research the discourse on shamans in the peripheral areas of the country, it is thus necessary not only to explore and deepen the discourse built around the more traditional actors, but also to analyse and represent the new forms of practice that are emerging, and which entail the use of new technologies and the re-creation of roles, rituals and definitions.

The latest study on the discourse on *itako* by Ōmichi Haruka (2017) should be taken as an example of how to effectively conduct a discursive study of the topic. Indeed, it is fundamental to also take into account - as Ōmichi does - the representations of shamans provided by magazines, TV programs, advertisements, books, Internet forums and every other possible media to understand the processes of construction of specific meanings and knowledge, as well as the processes of legitimation of such figures. Shiotsuki too has followed the same path, exploring the way literature and films portray shamanism in Okinawa (see, for example, Shiotsuki 2010). This approach should not be limited to the analysis of discourses in the peripheries, but should characterise the analysis of urban shamans as well.

Concerning Tōhoku, further research needs to be done to determine if, and in case how, the discourse on shamans changed after the Great East Japan Earthquake in 2011. This would undoubtedly increase our understanding of the shamanic role in contemporary society.

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<sup>4</sup> See, for example, Kamata 1966; Lebra 1966; Sakurai 1973; Sasaki 1984; Shiotsuki 2012; Sered 1999; Takahashi 2005; Takiguchi 1987; 1990; Wacker 2003.

Moreover, to effectively study and represent the multiple discourses developed around the figure of the shaman in the peripheries, it might be interesting to shift our focus from Tōhoku and the Ryūkyū Islands to other peripheral contexts that are currently under-represented, such as Hokkaidō, Kyūshū and Shikoku. Starting with an investigation of what/who people there think shamans are, it would be possible to work on the reconstruction of the genealogy of these beliefs, adding nuances to our understanding of shamanic practices in Japan.

Researching the discourse on shamanism in the peripheries requires an analysis not only of geographical peripheries, but also of socio-cultural ones, such as the Korean communities active on the Ikoma mountains near Osaka, in Kansai. It would be most interesting and useful to see how their shamanic rituals are performed, and to assess if and how they differ from the rituals currently performed in South Korea, and – if so – what impact they have had on the Japanese religious sphere in the area. A study that goes in this direction, though not focusing only on shamanic practices, has been produced by the Sociological Association for the Study of Religion in Kansai (Shūkyō shakaigaku no kai 2012; see also Miyashita 2015).

Through a critical analysis of the multiple discourses produced and diffused in (and from) the peripheries – an analysis that must take account of the relation between these various discourses and the specific historical-cultural contexts – it is possible, therefore, to trace the genealogy of certain elements and understand what people in different times and places consider relevant to the formation of those same discourses.

#### 4 Researching the Discourse on Shamans in Central Areas

The discourse on shamans at the centre of the country is still under-studied and under-represented, despite the apparent popularity of the topic among people interested in the ‘alternative practices’ offered by many practitioners in the so-called spiritual sphere.

As in the peripheries, at the centre it is possible to recognize multiple discourses on shamans. Researching this field means giving space to the representations and practices of two main categories of actors. The first is characterised by shamans who perform rituals in urban contexts following a ‘tradition’ which they have almost invariably adapted to some degree. This is the case with Nakai Shigeno, a practitioner active in Ōsaka until the late eighties and interviewed by Anne Bouchy, who chose not to define her by the term ‘shaman’, using instead the emic term *dai* ダイ, meaning ‘support’ and ‘substitute’ (Bouchy 1992).

The second category includes practitioners who have developed their own way of being shamans by studying under other shamans,

usually outside Japan, and/or by learning various spiritual techniques through workshops and courses. Examples of these actors can be found in the study of spiritual therapists by Ioannis Gaitanidis and Murakami Aki (2014). In this category, it would be important to assess the impact of the FSS (Foundation for Shamanic Studies) founded by Michael Harner in 1979, with the aim of “preserving, researching, and teaching shamanic knowledge”, which he has redefined as Core-Shamanism.<sup>5</sup> For about 25 years the FSS has been active in Japan, where Kevin Turner, Director for Asia,<sup>6</sup> organized workshops and worked as a shamanic counsellor, mainly in the Kansai region, before moving to Bali in 2014. When I met him in 2013, he told me that approximately 500 Japanese people had participated in his workshops over the years and that around 10% of them were truly interested in practicing shamanism, a figure that needs to be confirmed by ethnographic research.

It is especially this second category that scholars have failed to consider and investigate, even though the practitioners themselves seem to be aware of the scientific definition of shamanism and are accordingly presenting themselves as shamans. The category identified in the field of anthropological and religious studies has been (and is being) adopted both by actors who define themselves by using such term and by a group of people who share the same knowledge and who thus recognise themselves as ‘shamans’.

It is unquestionably the case that urban shamans do not constitute a majority and that their knowledge and practices cannot be considered mainstream, but the same goes for shamans and their communities in the peripheries.

However, if we are to better understand both shamanism and contemporary society, we have to consider this aspect as well. The application of critical discourse analysis to this topic will reveal the entanglements with other discursive strands, such as those that form the discourses on spirituality, healing, and magic, to name a few.

For this reason, when doing research on urban shamans, it is necessary to also investigate the characteristics of the ‘new spirituality movements and culture’, to use Shimazono’s definition (Shimazono 2004, 275-305). Urban shamanism shares many features of these movements and this culture, the main one being a focus on the individual and his/her spiritual empowerment and transformation.

Alongside the two categories of urban shamans, there is another aspect that emerges in the contemporary context: the techniques and roles of ‘traditional’ shamanic figures are linked to artistic creations and performances, as I have shown in another paper (Rivadossi 2018). Musicians, dancers, poets, and artists seem to have taken up

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<sup>5</sup> <https://www.shamanism.org/>.

<sup>6</sup> <https://www.shamanism-asia.com/kevin/>.

Mircea Eliade's invitation to adopt (and - we might say - adapt) the shamanic role (Eliade 1976, 78). As a necessary consequence, analysing shamans in central areas also means researching the discourses produced in artistic fields, through the mass media, and through the various forms of so-called popular culture (see, for example, Staemmler 2011). Without an analysis of this sort, the description of what a shaman is believed to be and do in contemporary Japan would be incomplete and detached from the reality of the practices.

However, researching the multiple discourses on shamans at the centre of the country does not mean regarding them as separate and distinct from discourses on shamans in the peripheries: the two are very much intertwined, and depend on a similar understanding of the meaning of the shamanic role. Moreover, urban shamans derive certain practices and characteristics from shamans from the peripheries, which - as shown before - are considered the heirs to and custodians of a 'tradition' that gives them authority and validates their practices.

## 5 Conclusion

The aim of this brief analysis has been to propose an effective strategy to study shamanic actors in contemporary Japan, by suggesting what gaps left by previous research should be filled in order to reach a wider comprehension of the phenomenon.

First of all, it is necessary to understand the category of 'shamanism' as a polythetic one, capable of accommodating its various forms - built by drawing upon common elements - across different geographical and historical contexts. This approach will dissolve the artificial and misleading distinction between 'true' shamanisms and 'fake' ones and will enable scholars to finally see that the two are part of the same thread. To achieve this, it is important to discuss the terminology used in the field, such as the label 'Altered States of Consciousness'. The main constitutive element for both 'traditional' shamans and metropolitan ones is the fact that they can (or, better, are believed to be able to) enable communication between humans and other-than-human entities. What thus characterises the shamanic role is the ability to know and use the style of communication required to perform the rituals sought by their clients. For this reason, it is more fruitful to shift our attention from the shaman's consciousness to his/her role in the community.

To dismiss essentialist descriptions, it is necessary to consider the specific discourse on shamans in relation to historical, socio-cultural and economic processes. Acknowledgement of the existence of a web of relations involving actors, objects and practices should serve as the foundation for this kind of study. The theoreti-

cal framework that can enable such a task is critical discourse analysis, which makes it possible to analyse the multiple discourses on shamans produced and shared in contemporary Japan, both in the peripheries and at the centre, with special reference to the various media and tools used.

If what has been suggested with regard to contemporary reality were applied to other historical periods, our comprehension of Japanese shamanism would surely be enhanced.

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