

NECROMANCERS IN THE TŌHOKU

*By Wilhelm Schiffer, S.J.
Sophia University, Tokyo*

The desire of man to look into the future and to predict the outcome of his own destiny is universal. During the course of history numerous ways of fortunetelling have been invented, one of the oldest being necromancy (the establishing of contact with the dead by means of a medium), because the dead are supposed to have from the hereafter a deeper insight into the entanglements of man's destiny. The phenomena and practices of spiritism are too well known to need further explanation. A classical description of necromancy is given in the Old Testament :

Saul said to his servants, "Seek out for me a woman who is a medium, that I may go to her and inquire of her." And his servants said to him, "Behold, there is a medium at Endor." So Saul disguised himself and put on other garments, and went, he and two men with him ; and they came to the woman by night. And he said, "Divine for me by a spirit, and bring up for me whomever I shall name to you." The woman said to him, "Surely you know what Saul has done, how he has cut off the mediums and the wizards from the land. Why then are you laying a snare for my life to bring about my death?" But Saul swore to her by the Lord, "As the Lord lives, no punishment

shall come upon you for this thing.” Then the woman said, “Whom shall I bring up for you?” He said, “Bring up Samuel for me.” When the woman saw Samuel, she cried out with a loud voice; and the woman said to Saul, “Why have you deceived me? You are Saul.” The king said to her, “Have no fear; what do you see?” And the woman said to Saul, “I see a god coming up out of the earth.” He said to her, “What is his appearance?” And she said, “An old man is coming up; and he is wrapped in a robe.” And Saul knew that it was Samuel.¹

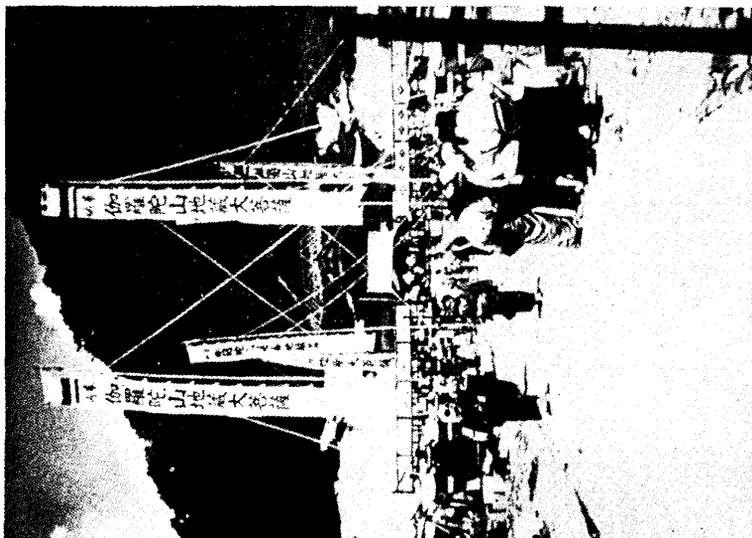
From olden times there have been similar women in Japan, who function as necromancers or at least who are thought of by the people as being capable of calling back the spirits of the dead to this world. They are named in different ways:

<i>miko</i>	child of god
<i>kuchiyose</i>	caller with the mouth
<i>shinikuchi</i>	when a dead person is called
<i>ikikuchi</i>	when a living person is called
<i>kamikuchi</i>	when a god is called

Local terminology includes *itako*, *idago* (Tōhoku), *arimasa* (Tsugaru), *waka*, *agata* (Iwate), *ita* (Kumane), *ichijo* (Fukuoka), *yuta* (Okinawa). We will limit ourselves to the necromancers from Tōhoku, whose name, *itako*, seems to be related to Yakut *udagan* (shaman).

In Japanese there exists a wide literature on these women. For further details, see:

Hori Ichirō, *Waga Kuni Minkan-shinkō-shi no Kenkyū*, Tokyo 1951, Vol. 2, p. 651 ff.



Osoreyama
Entrance to Entsuji Temple



An Itako



“Bring up for me whomever I shall name to you.”



“I see a god coming up out of the earth.”

(Pictures: Ernst Lutze)

Nakayama Tarō, *Nihon Miko-shi*, Tokyo 1930

For literature in Western languages, see :

Matthias Eder, "Schamanismus in Japan," in *Paideuma* VI (1958), 7, p. 1 ff.

William P. Fairchild, "Shamanism in Japan," in *Folklore Studies* XXI (1962), p. 1 ff.

Observations

On the Shimokita peninsula in Aomori prefecture, there is an extinguished volcano, called Mt. Osore (943 m). The volcano has not yet completely settled as the sulphur emanations from fissures and hot-water springs indicate. No trees or undergrowth are found on the mountain. No fish swim in the lake which formed in the extinguished crater; there are no birds in the air. On the top of the mountain, there is a small Zen temple called Entsūji, which, according to tradition, was founded as a Tendai temple by Ennin, or Jikaku Daishi (794—864). The Jizō statue of the temple is said to have been brought here by Ennin. The temple is open only in the summer, since according to popular belief in the North of Japan, the mountain is the residence of the dead, who can easily be contacted at the yearly All Souls Day (*O-bon*) in July. Thus every year necromancers from the North gather here between the 20th and the 25th of July to assist those who visit the temple in establishing contact with the dead.

The necromancers belong properly speaking to Shinto. That is why they cannot exercise their profession in the temple. They squat around the temple or along the road used by the pilgrims. They are women, blind or with limited sight. Most

of them are old ; for today there are other ways in which young blind women can provide for themselves.

The necromancers have in front of themselves a box wrapped in a piece of cloth, the *gehōbako* (i. e., the box outside of the Buddhist Law). Its contents are kept in strict secrecy, but it was found out that they have something to do with the personal protective deity of the women. The contents include small figures, a representation of an embracing couple, skulls of cats, dogs and sometimes even human beings. On their backs the women carry a black lacquered tube, which may not be opened. It contains the initiation certificate of the necromancer and a talisman of the protective deity. In their hands they hold a rosary, whose beads are often separated alternatively by bones of male and female animals, and to which a medal is fixed which, when opened, shows again the picture of an embracing couple. Some of the necromancers have bows instead of rosaries, whose strings sing as they pluck them. Others have two simple puppets, called *O-shirasama*, which they make dance.

The pilgrim sits down in front of these women, gives an alms and asks to call down the deceased, mentioning their date of death. Then the necromancer recites a song while rubbing the rosary, plucking the bow string or playing with the puppets. The song of necromancers from Aomori prefecture sounds as follows :

Yāinā, I call the water of today.
 What kind of water do I call?
 I call the water on the small, young twigs.
 My sleeve is wet with tears,
 The hem of my dress is wet with dew.

I cannot see the form, neither can I hear the voice;
I cannot distinguish the shape, neither can I hear the
sound.

Climbing seven, no eight rapids I came,
I came to play.

Among those of Akita prefecture, the following song is
customary :

I come to the shore of paradise;
There the plovers chirp to the best of their strength.
What do they chirp about?
They chirp about tea and clear water.

After such a song, the necromancer announces suddenly that the spirit of the dead has appeared. According to folk belief, what the necromancer says from this moment on, is spoken by the dead. One can also ask questions which the dead answers through the mouth of the necromancer. The petitioners, mostly simple fishermen or farmers, are deeply impressed by the whole scene and very often break into tears, together with the necromancer. A young woman from Morioka who had ten spirits evoked by ten different necromancers expressed how consoling it was to have such an institution like necromancy. She said that even if many of their pronouncements were not relevant, still, the few true words were sufficient to console the bereaved. (From among the ten spirits, which she had evoked, only two had said something relevant.)

The Institution of the Necromancers

Necromancers are already mentioned in the late Heian literature.² Even today, although especially numerous in the Tōhoku,

they are still found all over the country. There is a tradition explaining why almost all of them are blind. Since blind people are unproductive in human society, in olden times all the blind people of the country were killed every five or ten years. But one official who thought that blind people were also able to contribute to the common good, called a blind woman who was trained in necromancy and went with her in his garden. There he asked her questions about the environment. She answered that she was standing under a pine tree, close to a stone lantern. Because her answers were correct, from that time on blind women were trained in the profession of necromancers.

The novices spend a long time (one to four years) under a mistress during which time they learn the necessary prayers. At the end of this apprenticeship, an initiation rite, called *Kamizuke-shiki* (ceremony of the union with god is held). This rite is preceded by a hundred-day fast, which is strictly observed especially during the last three weeks. This initiation normally takes place before the first menstruation since at a later time the union with a god is believed to be more difficult.

There are local differences in the details of the rite. It consists, however, mainly of two parts: a ceremony for the dead, at which occasion the novice wears a robe of the dead, and a wedding ceremony, during which the novice is married to her patron deity. During the wedding ceremony the initiate wears a wedding dress, has the teeth colored black and partakes in the *sansan-kudo* ceremony (the triple ritual sipping of *sake*). Until quite recent times, this mystical marriage of the necromancer with her patron deity was also consummated, a Shinto

priest taking the place of the deity. After the initiation ceremony, the new necromancer retires for eight more days into the isolation of a shrine and is then ready for the practice of her profession. When someone dies in the village, she visits the family of the deceased in order to call back the soul, or people come and visit her when they want a message from the hereafter.

Professor Hori from Tokyo University draws attention to one particular point, namely, to the connection between necromancers and prostitutes. Many necromancers were not bound to one place but exercised their profession by traveling from one village to another. They seem also to have acted as prostitutes, which seems to be indicated, according to Professor Hori, by the word *yūjo* (prostitute) which he does not interpret as *asobime* (i. e., pleasure woman), but as *yūkō-suru josei* (i. e., itinerant woman).³ Origuchi tries to explain the same connection by pointing to the institution of the *ichiyo-tsuma* (i. e., one-night wives), which is already mentioned in the *Manyōshū*.⁴ It was their task to make themselves available to “itinerant gods” (*marebito*).⁵ This would also explain why pleasure quarters are so often found in the neighborhood of Shinto shrines and prostitutes so fervently participate in shrine festivals.

We would like to draw the attention to one more phenomenon. Necromancers are often married to *Yamabushi* (mountain ascetics), who are also known for their special spiritual powers. It seems only natural that they prefer to take as a wife somebody who is believed to be in connection with the other world.

Are necromancers shamans ?

Here arises the question whether the Japanese necromancers, as we can still observe them in Northern Japan today, are shamans or not.

Generally shamanism is defined as the institutionalized and formalized ecstatic communication of man with the other world in the service of the community.⁶ This definition applies to the necromancers only in part. They are certainly “in the service of the community,” but their “ecstatic communication with the other world” is quite questionable. According to Eder, a slight ecstasy can be observed among the necromancers, and therefore he identifies them as shamans. Fairchild agrees with him. But Professor Hori thinks that the necromancers are not shamans who experience some possession by a god, although some phenomena are indeed hard to explain.⁸ I agree with Professor Hori. The tests I made with the necromancers of Mt. Osore and the precise and detailed interviews I conducted with these women, have convinced me that today the whole profession of necromancy is nothing but a custom to entertain the simple people of the Tōhoku and thus help them remember their dead at *O-Bon*. The necromancers themselves state clearly that they never fall in a trance or in a similar state of mind, and that they don't have any “ecstatic communication” with the other world. A psychiatric examination conducted by the doctors of the Juntendō Hospital in Tokyo has confirmed their statements.

Notes

1. 1 Samuel 28, 7 ff.
2. Cf. *Shaseki-chū* 2, 1, 1 and *Ryōjin-hishō* 2.
3. Cf. Hori, op. cit., II, p. 684.
4. *Manyōshū*, XVI, Nr. 3873.
5. Origuchi Shinobu, "Josei oyobi marebito," in *Minzoku* IV, 1, p. 44 ff.
6. About shamanism, cf. M. Eliade, *Le Chamanisme et les techniques archaïques de l'extase*, Paris, 1951.
7. Cf. the above-mentioned articles by Eder and Fairchild.
8. Cf. Hori, op. cit., II, p. 664 ff.