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The Epidemic Gods of Japan and India

– A Preliminary Study –

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1. Introduction

This study explores the defining characteristics of the worship of epidemic gods in Japan by conducting a comparative analysis with Indian epidemic gods such as Mariamman, Maa Shitala, and Hariti, and Japanese epidemic gods such as Kishibojin (鬼子母神), Susanowo (須佐之男命), Tsuno Daishi (角大師), and other minor epidemic gods often depicted in hashika-e (麻疹絵) and housou-e (疱瘡絵). The term "epidemic god" here, refers to an entity that spreads pestilence, eradicates it, or possesses the power to do both.

2. Aim

This research attempts to identify:

- i) Differences in the attitudes of worshippers and the rituals associated with epidemic gods,
- ii) Differences in the characteristics of the epidemic gods themselves, and
- iii) The relationship between societal conditions and epidemic gods.

3. Methodology

Observations were made through the analysis of primary sources such as local ethnographic journals, paintings, statues, videos, and folk songs. The scarcity of ethnological records and the lack of paper-based depictions in India resulted in a reliance on oral traditions, statues, and festival performances. In contrast, Japan has an abundance of well-preserved ethnological sources, including drawings such as aka-e (赤絵), housou-e (疱瘡絵) and hashika-e (麻疹絵)

4. Findings

4.1 Attitudes Toward Epidemic Gods

In Japan, there are two primary attitudes towards epidemic gods. The first is the practice of appeasement, where deities are entreated to end an epidemic. Rituals such as goryoue (御霊会), which date back to the Heian period, were conducted to pacify vengeful spirits believed to cause epidemics, turning them into protective deities. Gods such as Gozu Tennou (牛頭天王) and Susanowo no Mikoto (須佐之男命) are highly revered, as exemplified by the Gion Matsuri. And there are Tsuno Daishi talismans for protection from epidemic diseases, distributed at Enryakuji.

The second attitude is more playful, as seen in the comical depictions of lesser epidemic gods in housou-e and hashika-e. There are also cases where communities actively expel epidemic gods through rituals like ekijin-okuri (疫神送り), meaning "sending off the epidemic god."

In India, two unique attitudes exist. In the first case, epidemic gods, often major deities and community guardians, are revered and appeased during epidemics, as seen in the worship of Maa Shitala and Mariamman. These deities are perceived as both harbingers and eradicators of disease, requiring veneration. And in the second case, minor epidemic demons or gods, considered malevolent, are expelled with the help of a superior epidemic deity. For example, in Eastern India, Maa Shitala is invoked to vanquish the fever demon Jwarasur.

4.2 Transfer vs. Destruction of Lesser Epidemic Gods

In Japan, rituals such as housou-okuri (疱瘡送り) and housou-nagashi (疱瘡流し) where the small-pox deity is sent away, involve transferring the disease or epidemic god to an object and floating it away. Similarly, in housou-kanjin (疱瘡勧進), the small-pox god is carried out of the village rather than destroyed.

In India, representations of epidemic demons are often burned and completely destroyed. And sacred fire plays a prominent role in the rituals associated with powerful epidemic goddesses like Bhadrakali worshipped in the southern state of Kerala. It is important to note here, that both Indian and Japanese societies take it upon themselves to tackle the epidemic gods, only when they are lesser deities.

4.3 Differences in Gender and Characteristics of Epidemic Gods

Indian epidemic deities are predominantly female, exhibiting both nurturing and violent characteristics, often wielding weapons. The major epidemic deities of India Mariamman, Ma Shitala, Bhadrakali and Hariti, are all female deities and often depicted with weapons. And the lesser epidemic gods and demons are usually male, and are vanquished by the powerful epidemic goddesses. There are versions, in case of the lesser epidemic god Jawarasar, one with him being defeated by Ma Shitala, and the other where he is depicted as her spouse.

Japanese epidemic gods are primarily male, with non-violent depictions. They often hold ritual objects like gohei (御幣) rather than weapons. But there also exist violent depictions, such as the 12th century hekijaku-e (辟邪絵) of Tenkeisei (天刑星) devouring epidemic gods, including the Japanese epidemic god Gozu-Tennou (牛頭天王). And Ningyou-doushin (人形道祖神) also are depicted with weapons in their hands.

4.4 Visual Representations of Epidemic Gods

Japan has an extensive variety of paper-based depictions, including aka-e (赤絵), housou-e (疱瘡絵), hashika-e (麻疹絵), and talismans (お札). And there are a variety of toys and figures that were used in rituals, as well as presents given to the afflicted, of which daruma (達磨), owl (ふくろう), shoujou (猩々) were popular motifs. The waraninyou-doushin (藁人形道祖神) found widely in Akita prefecture, are often made by incorporating agricultural implements such as tawara, as well as weapons such as swords and spears, and are often made with a large phallus.

In India, epidemic goddesses such as Hariti are primarily represented through stone carvings and statues, and depictions on paper are scarce. Most often, a single stone represents the village deity. The portrayals of tutelary goddesses like Mariamman and Maa Shitala vary widely based on oral traditions, and it is common to find naked or half-naked portrayals of goddesses like Ma Shitala and Hariti. The common element with Japanese epidemic deities, is the agricultural motif that appears in portrayals of Ma Shitala and Hariti, the former depicted with a winnowing fan on her head, and the latter holding a cornucopia.

4.5 Social Class and the Worship of Epidemic Gods

In India, the caste system is closely tied to the worship of epidemic gods. In most cases, historically marginalized lower castes worship epidemic gods, and consider them to be the protector deity of the village or community. Lower caste characters often appear in folklore related to epidemic gods, such as one about Renuka (Mariamman in disguise) who was fed humble food by a lower caste woman, and repaid the debt by advising her about the effective remedies and ritualistic offerings to be carried out when afflicted by smallpox.

Whereas, no similar correlation between class/caste and epidemic gods could be identified in Japan. The closest parallel I could find was in the legend of Somin Shourai (蘇民将来の伝説), where the affluent brother Kotan Shourai refused to entertain the epidemic god Mutou Tenjin (武藤天神), and the poor brother Somin Shourai hosted him with great generosity of spirit. It is this generosity of spirit despite having less material possessions, that I found to be a common factor while comparing with the aforementioned Indian tale. The rituals associated with epidemic gods seemed to be practiced across various regions and social classes in Japan.

4.6 Transmission of Epidemic Gods Across Regions

Indian epidemic deities such as Hariti and Mariamman have spread to other countries over the years. Mariamman worship spread to South Africa, Sri Lanka, Malaysia, Singapore and Thailand. Hariti (later transformed to Kishimojin in China) worship spread from India to China.

In contrast, Japan has absorbed epidemic gods from India and China, including Kishimojin (鬼子母神), Gozu Tennou (牛頭天王), Shouki (鍾馗), Tenkeisei (天刑星), and Shoujou (猩々).

5. Conclusion

The worship of epidemic gods in Japan and India reveals both shared themes and distinct cultural differences. In Japan, epidemic gods are either appeased or expelled, often depicted humorously, while in India, they are venerated or eradicated, depending on their role. Lesser epidemic gods are transferred away in Japan but destroyed by fire in India. Gender representations also differ, with Indian deities being predominantly female and warrior-like, while Japanese gods are mostly male and non-violent, though exceptions exist. Visual representations reflect these contrasts, with Japan favoring paper-based art and talismans, whereas India relies on stone carvings and oral traditions. Additionally, while India's epidemic god worship is tied to caste, Japan's rituals are more socially widespread. Finally, Japan has absorbed foreign epidemic deities, whereas Indian epidemic god worship has spread globally, influencing religious traditions in other regions.

6. Future Research

The comparative analysis of Hariti in India and Kishimojin (鬼子母神) in Japan is significant for future studies. While Hariti was originally an epidemic goddess in India, her role transformed in Japan, where she became the guardian deity of the Nichiren sect and a protector of children and childbirth. The underlying reasons for this transformation remain unclear, and further research will be conducted to explore this phenomenon. In the future, I would also like to analyze the objects held by the epidemic gods of India and Japan, and their significance. It is intriguing that Indian epidemic gods hold weapons, whereas Japanese epidemic gods have a milder portrayal.

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