Yakushi-ko : Retasking Religion in a Small Town

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Introduction

Religious life in Japan's modern period is most easily characterized by the rise and flourishing of the "new religions," and a great deal of research has been directed toward understanding those movements, particularly in the context of the changes that occurred around the time of the historically momentous Meiji Restoration (conventionally considered Japan's transition to the "modern" era). On the other hand, these new movements did not arise from a vacuum, but had deep roots in the soil represented by the plethora of popular associations (*kō* 講 or *kōsha* 講社, frequently translated as "confraternities" or "sodalities") that appeared during the previous three-hundred years. Given the high number of such associations—both religious and otherwise—that existed in the late Edo period, it is striking that relatively little attention has been given them as predecessors of either the new religions or modern non-profit organizations (Sakurai 1977, 249; Deguchi, 2014). Some—including the one forming the topic of this study—continue to exist at present, though many "fall under the radar" due to their ad hoc nature. In this brief essay, I will describe one example of a religious confraternity that continues to exist at present, although in somewhat different form from that of its early modern predecessor. This is the Yakushi-kō, a confraternity dedicated to the Buddhist Tathagata Yakushi ("Medicine King"), as I have observed it over a period of some fifteen years in one section of the town of Fujino,[1] in northern Kanagawa Prefecture.

The Site: Fujino Town

Like many rural locations in Japan the area here called Fujino has experienced considerable change since Japan entered the modern period; throughout the preceding Edo or early modern period, the central part of the area was a collection of villages mostly contiguous to Yoshino, a post town on the Kōshū Kaidō, (highway to Kai Province; modern-day national road No. 20), which parallels the Sagami River in this area. Of the total forty five post stations on the Kōshū Kaidō, Yoshino was the sixteenth from the old highway's starting point at Nihonbashi in Edo, and located almost equidistant between Nihonbashi and the main road's culmination in the city of Kōfu 甲府 in Kai Province (present-day Yamanashi Prefecture).

Yoshino was given the status of a modern town (*machi* or *chō* 町) in 1913, and it retained that status for the next forty years. When a new rail station for the JR Chūō Line was planned for the area in 1945, however, the location chosen was not Yoshino, but

a spot about a kilometer west of the old post town, and the name Fujino was selected for the station after a nearby community of the same name. Ten years later, the name Fujino was also selected for the new town created in 1955 from another merger of Yoshino with other local villages and administrative units north and south of the Sagami River.

In March, 2007, the town of Fujino was incorporated into the city of Sagamihara, Kanagawa Prefecture; three years later, it ceased to exist as a legal administrative unit as it was woven into the newly established Midori ("green") Ward (*ku* 区)) of the city. In this essay, however, I will continue to use the Fujino name for sake of convenience, and since it continues to be the name of the JR station in the center of the former town, and the co-name of Interchange No. 8 on the Chūō Expressway (Sagamiko/Fujino).

Since the first modern national census in 1920, Fujino's population has remained relatively stable at around 10,000, ranging between a low of 8,065 in 1945 and a high of 11,474 in 1995. The population's relative stasis is likely a reflection of the topographical conditions of the area, characterized by low-lying but steep mountains that form valleys for numerous streams and rivers. Relatively little flat land is available, making it unsuitable for large-scale rice agriculture or expanding human communities. Since reimagining itself as an "art resort town" from the 1980s, however, Fujino has experienced an increasing population of artists and craftspeople, and more recently, Steiner Gakuen schools has opened several campuses and expanded its identity in the Fujino area, drawing numerous Steiner families to the town and producing a vibrant community composed of a balance between "locals" (*jimoto* 地元, families who have lived in the area for multiple generations) and new arrivals.

Demographically, the overall Fujino area is divided into seven traditional "neighborhoods" (*ōaza* 大字), each of which has its own "self-governing body"[2] or (*jichikai* 自治会). In addition to the seven neighborhoods themselves, however, traditionally named "communities" can be found within the larger neighborhoods, and those may also have their own self-governing bodies, leading to some confusion. For example, while the overall Fujino area has only seven main neighborhoods, those seven are home to fifty self-governing associations corresponding to the traditional named sub-neighborhood communities. Paradoxically, the neighborhood forming the setting for this essay is called Hizure, but the Hizure self-governing body has only eighty-one member households. The same Hizure neighborhood, however, includes a sub-neighborhood called Sugi, whose self-governing association has a membership of 424 families. (The overall population of Hizure is 1,883 as of 2013, the last year for which I have found published records.)

Self-Governing Associations' Relations with Religious Events

One of the most important roles of the Sugi self-governing association is to oversee the observance of the three major ritual events through the year: the major Hizure Shrine festival in August, the Yakushi confraternity in October, and the Mt. Kongō confraternity (dedicated to the Kobugahara Shrine in Tochigi Prefecture) in March-April. To carry out

this role, the association establishes a "Sugi Festival Committee" (*Sugi Saiten Jikkō Iinkai* 杉祭典実行委員会) which has direct control over the festival events. In 2018 the Committee is composed of about 79 persons, including 38 members of the Sugi Self-Governing Association itself (including 24 appointed "experienced members"), 11 shrine parish representatives (*ujiko sōdai* 氏子総代), and 30 representatives (including the author) selected on a rotating basis from 38 "neighborhood blocks" (*kumi* 組) spread among five neighborhood wards (*ku* 区).

This overall situation is not unique to Fujino. Local self-governing bodies are frequently given responsibility for sponsoring traditional festivals of shrines or temples within their borders, essentially taking on the job performed by "parishes"[3] in earlier eras. The sensitive relationship between the self-governing association and a shrine or temple is exacerbated due the way the self-governing association collects and handles membership fees, which are not insignificant. Member households are generally charged a single annual membership fee, a proportion of which is used to fund the festival events.

While membership in a local self-governing association is legally voluntary, most newcomers feel a strong sense of obligation to join, out of fear of ostracization. In other parts of Japan, recent years have seen a number of lawsuits questioning the close support of traditional religious festivals by legally "secular," quasi-governmental associations, based on the constitutional separation of religion and state. While this is an important issue in itself, the topic is not central to the current essay, and I will not take it up in depth in the limited space available here.

Confraternities (Kō 講)

As noted in the introduction, this study is directed at one of the religious confraternities (*kō*) that formed an important element of Japanese religion, particularly since the early modern period. Based on their function or purpose, *kō* have been broadly classified by Sakurai Tokutarō (Sakurai 1977) in three categories: religious, economic, and social, although some *kō* combined two or all three characteristics in various proportions, and sub-categories should be added in a number of cases. "Economic"-based confraternities (most commonly known by the names *tanomoshi-kō* 頼母子講, and *mujin-kō* 無尽講) functioned as a kind of local credit union in which members would submit a certain monetary sum at selected intervals, and the collected sum would then be used to make loans to members in need. Confraternities falling into the "social" category could be based on gender, or occupational or social role, although they might still go by the name of a religious cultic figure. Thus Kannon Kō 観音講 and Jizō Kō 地蔵講 take the name of popular bodhisattvas within Buddhism, but they are frequently found as women's associations in which elder mothers and grandmothers provide advice to young wives on childbirth and other topics considered part of a woman's social role. In any event, confraternities demonstrated strong regional variation, with the result that, for example, an association limited to one gender in one location might be open to the general populace

in others.

The largest number of *kō* were nominally religious in orientation, and dedicated to a plethora of religious figures, from traditionally local religious objects like the "mountain *kami*" (*yamanokamikō* 山の神講) and "field *kami*" (*tanokamikō* 田の神講); imported religious cults such as *kōshinkō* 庚申講 and "23rd night *kō*" (*nijūsan'yakō* 二十三夜講); and pilgrimage confraternities, most established by traveling representatives of various famous shrines and temples, beginning with the cult of the Grand Shrine of Ise (*Isekō* 伊勢講、*Shinmeikō* 神明講、etc.) and in the Kantō area including cults dedicated to closer shrines and mountains such as Musashi Mitake Shrine (*Mitakekō* 御岳講)、Nagano's simularly named Ontake Shrine (*Ontakekō* 御嶽講), Ōyama's Afuri Shrine (*Ōyamakō* 大山講), and Sengen Shrine dedicated to Mount Fuji (*Fujikō* 富士講, *Maruyamakō* 丸山講).

The word *kō* itself was already in use in the early Heian period, where it referred to salon-like sermons or lectures (*kōgi*) given on Buddhist topics to noble audiences. The term was later used within Buddhist sects to refer to gatherings of each sect's followers. Within the Jōdo Shin sect, for example, large numbers of such "congregations" were formed, especially from the late 15th century, due to the efforts of 8th patriarch Rennyō.

Overall, the greatest explosion of confraternities occurred during the early modern period, when an enormous number could be found in villages and towns throughout Japan. In his major study of confraternities, Sakurai lists the names of over three-hundred *kō* found nationwide (Sakurai 1977, index 35-40), and local histories of the broader Fujino region (including Sagamiko and Tsukui) list at least thirty, many of which were still active until the postwar period.

Kō meetings could be held at regular or irregular intervals, depending on their object and function. Meetings might be monthy, annually, or—as in the case of the Kōshin confraternity—once every sixty days based on the sexegenary cycle. Most *kō* did not possess specialized structures, but held their meetings at the home of the group's current "chair" (*sewanin* 世話人), a post that usually rotated among members on an annual basis, although occasional exceptions must be noted. Pilgrimage *kō* dedicated to Ise, for example, sometimes had their own chapel-like structures, referred to as Iseya 伊勢屋, which could be used not only to hold regular confraternity meetings, but to provide lodging to the Ise priest (*onshi* 御師) or his deputy on their annual visits to the town or village. This exception also applies to the Yakushikō in Fujino. Yakushi cult confraternities can be found in both Sawai on the north side of the Sagami River, and in Hizure on the south side, and both are unique in being the only confraternities with their own chapels, although they display substantial differences in current organization and activity. The Yakushidō in Sawai is found nearby the grounds formerly occupied by an abandoned Shingon temple, Unshōji, and according to local informants, has not been used for confraternity meetings since the death of the woman acting as the primary leader for the meetings, eight years ago.

The Yakushi Cult

The cult of faith in Yakushi has a long history in Japan, primarily relating to the role of the buddha Yakushi as a healer of disease. In the Fujino area, the strong historical current of faith in Yakushi can be explained not only by the lack of modern medical care (something true throughout Japan until the modern period), but also by the proximity of the town to Mt. Takao with its Shingon-sect temple Yakuōin (薬王院 "Medicine King temple") and the presence of practitioners of the Shugendō religion of mountain worship. According to local informants, the confraternity to Yakushi was held on each 8th or 12th day monthly, and irregularly in the event of illness. Today, the event is held only once annually on October 12 or—in deference to modern lifestyles—the nearest Saturday. In 2018, the event was observed on Saturday, October 6.

In agreement with custom at some other shrines in the Fujino area, if a person became ill or injured, he/she or a close relative would make a banner from cloth emblazoned with the words *Namu Yakushi Nyorai* ("I call upon the name of Yakushi") and hang it within the chapel. Upon receiving a successful cure, another similar flag would be offered in gratitude. It appears that this custom has almost died out in the Sugi confraternity, although two or three flags are indeed visible behind the altar. Historically, the confraternity was apparently open to both men and women, and today children are particularly encouraged to attend as a means of passing on a small element of "traditional Japanese culture."

The following observations are culled from several years of observation in the confraternity, both as a festival committee member, and as ordinary participant.

At around 3:30 P.M., festival committee members arrive and take a small truck to the nearby Hizure public hall to borrow tables, chairs, and tents. In 2003, the first time I attended the event, the committee members appeared not to know the preparation procedures (or else the preparations changed in subsequent years), and no tents, chairs or tables were set up. In subsequent years, attendance at the event has grown to take on the atmosphere of a minor "festival."

The committee members unlock the chapel and set up two small square tables in the center of the room. They also take out the large *juzu* (rosary) and *mokugyō* (wooden fish; a percussion instrument used to beat time for chanting). The ritual itself is performed by the townspeople, but the festival committee takes charge of publicity, cleaning and preparing the chapel, buying snacks for children, and even nagging people to come. No one has ever heard of a professional cleric leading the event, so it appears to be solely an activity of the people.

The purpose of the event is known to locals on a basic level; they agree that Yakushi is "a *kami* that heals disease—especially ears and eyes." I rarely heard anyone make a distinction between objects of worship, whether Shinto *kami* or Buddhist bodhisattvas—everything is viewed as a *kami*. On one occasion the head of the festival committee did offer that the *nyorai* is more powerful than ordinary buddhas, but I never heard anyone

discuss religious issues beyond that brief statement.

When I ask how old the chapel is, locals suggest “about fifty years.” An elderly man tells me that the previous chapel burned down. A young family down on their luck had been allowed to stay in the chapel temporarily, and one day the couple’s young child was playing with matches and caused the fire.

The actual ritual performed at the confraternity is quite simple. A group of people sit around the small tables in the chapel and pass the rosary around while intoning the Yakushi *mantra*. The rosary is especially large; if cut and laid out straight, the string would probably measure about six meters. How many beads does it have? Two young men count and decide it's 540 (108 x 5; in Japanese Buddhism 108 is interpreted as the number of human desires and vexations). The small beads are about 1.5 cm diameter, the larger two are about 5 cm.

When it's formed into a circle, at opposite sides of the circle are two large beads, one of which is connected to a tassle with 11 smaller beads in a loop. On each string between the two larger beads are 270 small beads 1.5 cm in diameter.

The rosary is looped around the tables and passed over the participants' laps or knees. In rhythm with the striking of the *mokugyo* and intoning of the *shingon* (mantra), the participants pass the rosary from left to right around the circle). One person is in charge of counting the repetitions. Each time the tassel passes the person doing the counting, he or she counts one repetition. Some people say that in old times they would do 100 repetitions at a turn when someone was sick. When the large bead with tassel passes an individual, he or she often touches the tasseled bead to forehead or other bodily spot in need of a cure.

The *mantra* chanted by the group is a Japanese transliteration of the original Sanskrit: in Japanese pronunciation it goes “*On korokoro sendari matougi sowaka*”; the original Sanskrit is “*Om! huruhuru candali matangi svaha.*” According to Birnbaum, the basic meaning is “*Om*, vibrate again and again, sweep away the evil influence of Matangi the Wild One! Svaha!” (adapted from Birnbaum 1975: 90). The *mantra* is simple, but often forgotten from one year to the next. In some years I have seen an explanation posted on the wall of the chapel, but when it is absent, the group relies on memory. One woman tells me that when younger, they didn't understand the words and so mumbled "on korokoro sendai *macaroni salad*." When one group completes the number of recitations they have decided on, the participants leave the chapel and another group is invited in. When not actively engaged in passing the rosary, people drink green tea and eat condiments or other foods prepared in the courtyard. This goes on throughout the evening.

As the festival has grown from year to year, the number of tents, tables, chairs and electric lights has increased. Food for the commensural meal is not brought potluck style as it was the first year I participated, but now cooked on site, mostly by women members of the festival committee. Men sit around the outdoor tables and drink beer and rice wine

with neighborhood friends. Canned juices and candy treats are passed out to children who come with their parents. Children are also encouraged to place coins into the offering box and say a prayer.

What is "religious" about this event? While one could argue that the inside/outside pair represented by the chapel and courtyard are prima facie symbols of the sacred and profane, the symbols are lost on most participants. Even inside the chapel, light conversation and playful banter go on whenever the active chanting stops. With the exception of the ritual touching of the rosary's tassel to forehead, attitudes do not appear to be any more respectful than when the participants are sitting at the tables outdoors. Of course the observer cannot read hearts and minds, and some paraticipants may feel some sense of religious potency in the recitation of the *mantra* and passing of the rosary, but most probably attend in order to partake of the conversation and commensurality (of course including the free beer and saké). The distinction between this event and that at the Yakushidō in Sawai is instructive. In Sawai, the event was held together primarily by the efforts of one elderly woman, and when she died, the event ceased, and has remained unobserved for eight years. In the Sugi case discussed here, support of the event is handled by the self-governing association and steered in the "secular" direction of an annual event aimed at the preservation of one element of what the sponsors consider "traditional Japanese culture." I would argue that participation is no longer considered the province of a religious "confraternity" in the early modern sense, but an open-door occasion for fellowship and community.

Conclusions

With few exceptions—particularly in rural areas like the one described in this essay—early modern religious confraternities were not "churches" catering to the spiritual needs of individuals. For the most part, their memberships were composed of men or women representing families, and at least in some cases, membership could be compulsory (Ito, 1952: 413), making it clear that the groups were viewed as part of the existing secular social structure. This agrees with the current mode in which the Yakushikō is organized and overseen by the Festival Committee within the secular Sugi Self-Governing Association. At the same time, this is not to say the present case is applicable to all confraternities. The increasing potential for autonomy and enfranchisement suggested by the early modern village and town confraternities was not lost on the founders and members of the subsequent new religions, and Sakurai thus notes that many of the new religious movements were, in fact, first organized as *kō* or *kōsha* 講社, and only later given legal status as independent religions (Sakurai 1977: 249). Only, there is little hint of such possibility in the way this Yakushikō is currently envisioned and sponsored.

Notes and References

1. Although the town merged into the city of Sagamihara in 2007, I will, unless otherwise noted, continue to refer to the area here by its previous name.
2. Self-governing bodies go by a variety of names depending on the area, including *jichikai, chōnaikai* and others. See "Gendai Nihon no komyunitei: tayōsei to 12 ruikei bunseki: 2006-7 jichikai zenkoku chōsa kara no bunseki, Shin komyunitei arikata kenkyūkai"「現代日本のコミュニティー―多様性と12類型分析：2006-7自治会全国調査からの分析、新コミュニティあり方研究会2008.7.24」, p9.
<http://www.soumu.go.jp/main_sosiki/kenkyu/new_community/pdf/080724_1_si4.pdf>
Translations for these bodies also vary, including self-governing body, autonomous governing association, etc. These bodies are legally provided for through the Local Self-Governance Law (Chihō Jichihō地方自治法) promulgated in 1947.
3. In Shinto, shrine "parishes" are conventionally called *ujiko* 氏子. In Buddhism: *danka* 檀家.

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Festival Committee members arrive early to clean and prepare the Yakushidō chapel.

Parents are invited to bring children, who are encouraged to participate and given snacks and drinks.
Note that in 2003, no tents, tables, chairs or exterior lights were set up, and participants were rather few.

The simple altar enshrines a bronze image of Yakushi Nyorai, and is decorated with "1,000 cranes" origami hanging decorations. In back on left and right are banners hung by individuals who are sick or injured and wish to pray for recovery. The banners are emblazoned with "Namu Yakushi Nyorai" and the name of the person making the invocation.

Inscription on the obverse side of the image: "Statue of Yakushi Nyorai. Purchased with monetary offerings by women devotees of Yakushi, and one part of funds donated for the repair of the stairway at Tennō-sama. September 30, 1984." The "Tennō-sama" refered to here is the nearby Yasaka Jinja, a small shrine dedicated to Gōzu Tennō 牛頭天王.

Preparing the large rosary, a central element in the confraternity's Yakushi ritual.

The mokugyō or "wooden fish" is a percussison instrument used to beat time during the chanting of the Yakushi mantra.

Persons of all ages participate in the passing of the rosary and chanting of the Yakushi mantra: “On korokoro sendari matougi sowaka.”

By 2018, the confraternity event had grown to the point that tables, chairs and tents filled the small courtyard and alley where the Yakushidō is located.

Whatever one’s feelings and attitude while in the chapel, one step outside and the atmosphere is one of pure entertainment and social banter, as is characteristic of most Japanese festivals.

Once a ritual meant to plug the gaps in premodern medicine by the miraculous power of a mantra, today the purpose of the Yakushi confraternity has been retasked as a secular festival; by involving residents of all ages, the event maintains the circle of tradition.