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# How Can an Oracle Become a Public Affair?: The Case of Study of Oshira-sama Shrine in the Tsugaru Area

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## Abstract

In the Tsugaru region, many local communities hold a collective ritual in spring, and a spiritual medium called “*kami-sama*” is invited at the occasion. The purpose of these rituals is to receive oracles from *kami-sama*. These oracles consist on advices for everyday life. The participants care about what the *kami-sama* say, but it is rare that the oracles received lead them to any real action. The most common “action” those people undertakes is just to say “I will keep it in mind”. As a rule, the oracle deal remains limited to this simple exchange between the *kami-sama* and the listener, but in this presentation I will deal with an exceptional case where an oracle became a matter of public interest in the community. This happened in a village in Tsugaru, where we can find a shrine dedicated to *oshira-sama*. This shrine was built in 2001 in response to an oracle in a collective ritual. By examining the construction process of this shrine, it is our purpose to understand the reasons for this result. This shall help us to shed light on matters of a wider sphere, such as the nature of those *kami-sama*’s oracles and their relation with the community.

The Tsugaru area is in Aomori prefecture, on the northern extremity of the Japanese main island. There, we can observe active practices by local spiritual mediums called *kami-sama*. It is a popular practice among people in the Tsugaru area to consult *kami-sama* when they are in trouble. *Kami-samas*' spiritual séances are often held behind closed doors. People visit *kami-sama* privately to seek advice on personal matters such as illnesses, job issues, or family problems. This is why *kami-sama* often are called “local” or “folk” spiritual mediums (*Minkan Fusha* 民間巫者). The word *Minkan* 民間 delineates non-official or private characteristics of *kami-sama* practices.

However, when we think about the relationship between community (not individual) and *kami-sama*, we cannot ignore the degree of communal, or “public,” aspects in their practices. In this paper, I will deal with a case in which an oracle became a matter of public interest in the community. This will help in understanding the nature of *kami-sama* oracles and their relationship with the community.

## 1. *Kami-sama* and a Spring Prayer

*Kami-sama* is a general name for a spiritual medium in Aomori prefecture. Many of them are women, and some tell of their experiences during hard ascetic training to cultivate their abilities to communicate with supernatural beings. Others, however, say they have an inborn ability. The process to become a *kami-sama* varies, but their methods are similar. Clients go to a *kami-sama*'s home and talk about their misfortunes, and the *kami-sama* provides advice from deities or makes a special prayer to protect clients from further misfortunes.



Figure 1: A *kami-sama* praying

However, a *kami-sama*'s role is not limited to personal counseling. They are invited to lead collective prayers in villages. It is an annual event for housewives held in the spring, often called a spring prayer. An *itako*, a different type of local spiritual medium<sup>1</sup>, used to be in charge of the spring prayer, but because of a serious shortage of *itako* successors, *kami-sama* now lead this ritual.

The purpose of the ritual is to receive oracles from *kami-sama*, which means oracles from tutelary deities of the district, including *oshira-sama*. The *oshira-sama* is a well-known twin ritual figure made of wood and widely distributed in Tohoku region (northeastern Japan). The *oshira-sama* is a tutelary of home. Normally, *oshira-sama* are privately owned, but some villages have

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<sup>1</sup> For the purposes of this paper, it is not necessary to discuss the differences between *kami-sama* and *itako*, or their rituals. For more details, see 村上晶 Murakami Aki 「津軽地方の春祈禱にみる巫俗の現状」 “Tsugaru chihou no harukitou ni miru fuzoku no genjyo”, 『哲学思想論集』 33号 *Tetsugaku shisou ronsyu*, vol.33. 2015.



Figure 2: An *oshira-sama* in Tsugaru

public *oshira-sama* displayed as a tutelary of a village. Many people tell stories about how they were saved by an *oshira-sama*, whether from a natural disaster, fire, car accident, or illness, among cited perils. Thus, people who own *oshira-sama* take good care of them.

The oracles in spring prayers consist of advice for everyday life, such as warnings about driving cars and other aspects of life. The participants of the ritual are always eager to listen to these oracles, and some even take notes to ensure they do not forget the advice.

Thus, they care deeply about what the *kami-sama* say. However, it is very rare that they actually act on these oracles. The most common “action” people may undertake after receiving an oracle is to say, “I will keep it in mind.”

I did questionnaire research in three Tsugaru districts in 2014 on what people do after receiving an oracle. The most common answer was, “I kept it in my mind,” which suggests no particular actions were taken. Only one respondent took action based on an oracle: “I went to consult a *kami-sama* for further advice.” That was rather exceptional. In general, the oracle remains limited in the private sphere or limited to simple exchanges between the *kami-sama* and the listener in most cases.

## 2. An *Oshira-sama* Shrine in Suwado: a Case Study

However, an exceptional case in which an oracle became a matter of public interest in the community occurred in Suwado district in the Inakadate village in Tsugaru area, where roughly 350 people live. There, we can find a shrine dedicated to *oshira-sama*. This shrine was built in 2001 in response to an oracle uttered by a certain *kami-sama* during a spring prayer. As an oracle, the *oshira-sama* in the district manifested its wishes to be enshrined there.

Why and how was the construction of an *oshira-sama* shrine made possible? More importantly, how could the oracle of *kami-sama* become a public affair? Since oracles usually are received as private matters, it is surely worthy to consider why this could really happen. By closely examining the construction process for this shrine, it is our purpose to understand the reasons for its construction. This shall, in turn, help us shed light on wider concerns, including the nature of *kami-sama* oracles and their relationship with the community.

## 3. The Construction Process

Like many other districts in the Tsugaru region, a spring prayer is an annual observance hosted by an association of elderly women (*Rofujinkai* 老婦人会) in Suwado district. The association is a voluntary gathering of local women who are all at least 60 years old. The ritual is held at the

community hall, and roughly 25-30 members of the association participate every year.

There is a description of the 1997 Suwado spring prayer in the *History of the Village*<sup>2</sup>. It said the *kami-sama* summoned tutelary deities of the district, including *Iwaki-sama*, *Akakura-sama*, *Takayamainari-sama*, etc. Then *oshira-sama* said, “I want to be enshrined at the shrine because this community hall is filled with an incense smell.” Incense sticks are used as offerings for the dead. The words “filled with an incense smell” meant that the *oshira-sama* sensed the dead in the hall, which makes sense because the community hall sometimes is used for funerals. It is said that *oshira-sama* like to inhabit pure places, and dead bodies or bones are considered to be impure in Japan’s folk or Shinto context. Thus, the community hall is not an appropriate place for *oshira-sama*. This is why the *oshira-sama* insisted on being moved from that place.

At that time, a pair of *oshira-sama* were kept in the community hall’s storage room. Before that, this *oshira-sama* had been kept in the shoya’s (village headman’s 庄屋) house. But the shoya’s family moved away from the district. The *oshira-sama* lost its home and was moved to the community hall. Accordingly, villagers decided to treat this *oshira-sama* as a tutelary of the village.

#### 4. The Turning Point

So, what did the villagers do after receiving this oracle? Actually, they did nothing. They “kept it in their mind.” As stated above, this is common behavior after receiving an oracle. However, the *oshira-sama* did not give up. It repeated this wish annually in the spring prayer, but there was no action taken to implement *oshira-sama*’s wish that a shrine be built.

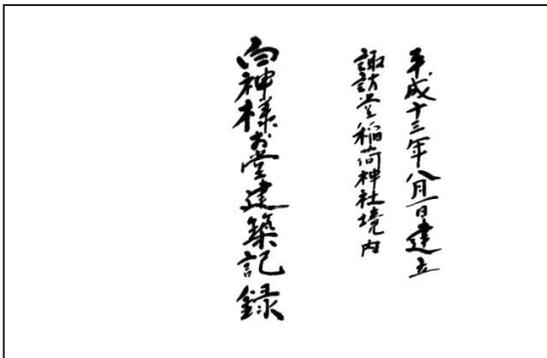


Figure 3: *The Record on the Shrine Building Process*

However, the situation suddenly changed in 2001, according to *The Record on the Shrine Building Process*, written by a villager. In the spring prayer that year, the *kami-sama* (talking as *oshira-sama*) said, “How’s Tanaka-sama (a pseudonym) doing?” This utterance is quite remarkable. The participant answered, “He is not good.” *Oshira-sama* continued: “I know he is always good to the district. Then please build a shrine for me; otherwise, he will

have a great trouble in August or September.”

Tanaka-sama was a politician born in Suwado district. He served as the head of the farm ministry, Defense Agency, and National Land Agency. He is a legendary person in the village. When he left politics, he returned to the district to spend the rest of his life. This oracle was received in February 2001, during which time, Tanaka-sama was suffering from cancer. Since he was quite

<sup>2</sup> 田舎館村 Inakadate-mura, 『田舎館村誌』下巻 *Inakadate sonshi*. Vol.3. 2000.

famous in the village, everyone knew about his illness.

Here, we can understand the meaning of the conversation. The utterance “How’s Tanaka-sama doing?” was a direct message about Tanaka-sama concerning his condition. Since he was quite popular among local people, this utterance was a big deal. Then the chairperson of the old women’s association, Ms. Miyata (a pseudonym), wrote a letter to inform Mr. Tanaka’s wife about this oracle.

Ms. Miyata was an excellent organizer. After she wrote a letter to Mr. Tanaka’s wife, she quickly asked other associations in the district for help, including the residents association and veneration association. These were male associations and had the right to make decisions on such matters in the district. Ms. Miyata and the president of the residents association started working together to build a shrine for *oshira-sama*. Then they organized the Commission for the *Oshira-sama* Shrine Building in June. The commission received a 600,000 yen donation from Mr. Tanaka and his wife, with roughly 800,000 yen needed to build the shrine.

The associations in the district worked hard on the construction. The veneration association obtained permission for the construction project from the chief priest of the village shrine. Members of the residents association and the old women’s association visited every household to seek contributions. Each household contributed between 1,000 and 10,000 yen, with 954,000 yen collected altogether, including the donation from Tanaka-sama. At the same time, members of the residents association cut down trees at the planned site and prepared the site for construction.

A local builder handled the construction project, and when it was built, an inauguration ceremony was held, on August 1, 2001. At the inauguration ceremony, a *kami-sama* was invited to channel and interpret the *oshira-sama*’s words. The *kami-sama* said, “I can hear a ring of a bell. It is the bell of *oshira-sama*. *Oshira-sama* rings the bell with joy.” Finally, the *oshira-sama*’s wish came true.

## 5. How Did the Construction Become Possible?

I want to spotlight the fact that the oracle did not spur action for at least four years. When we think about the reasons why the *oshira-sama*’s wish was not realized for years, we cannot ignore the issue of money, which was the biggest obstacle. The large donation by Tanaka-sama made the construction possible. Secondly, the associations in play were a factor. The old women’s association was a female association and had no right to make decisions on district matters. Only when the residents association and veneration association became involved could the project get off the ground. This suggests that oracles in the spring prayer were shared only in the old women’s association and not made public until later.

Oracles from spring prayers are normally only shared among participants in the ritual and not aired in the public sphere. However, in this example, the 2001 oracle mentioned Tanaka-sama, a very famous politician: a public figure. Thus, the male associations teamed up to build an *oshira-sama* shrine. As a result, we can say that the oracle was realized in the public sphere in the Suwado

district.

However, we must remember that the oracle was ignored for a long time: until Tanaka-sama became a factor.

I would like to end this paper by concluding that oracles are not acted upon automatically when practical matters are involved, especially money. People have the courage to ignore some oracles when they seem impractical or impossible, due to money, time, or power issues.

Many religious rituals held in districts are disappearing in Tsugaru, but when it comes to the spring prayer, many districts still continue to hold them as an annual observance. In such districts, we can find a very balanced relationship between oracles and realistic conditions, i.e. people will not yield to unreasonable demands, even if they come from deities. On the other hand, people accept an oracle as long as it seems reasonable and useful. This practical approach to oracles is a key to understanding why the spring prayer is surviving and is still popular among people.

Finally, oracles by spiritual mediums and related local religious practices in Tsugaru do not often appear in the public sphere, but it would be reckless to conclude that they are relegated only to the private sphere. As we have seen in this paper, oracles have the potential to elicit public action under the right collective circumstances.