

FROM GODDESS TO DRAGON

Benzaiten

The origins of the Japanese goddess Benzaiten are usually traced back to the Indian river goddess Sarasvatī, who was also worshiped as a goddess of eloquence and music. Like her Indian prototype, Benzaiten is often represented as a beautiful maiden playing the lute (*biwa* 琵琶 in Japan, *vīṇā* in India), and her shrines are usually located on small islands on ponds or rivers, or by the waterside. These similarities give the impression of a straightforward transmission from India to China and Japan. However, things are rarely simple in the mythological realm, as everywhere, and the smiling face of the goddess might only be a mask. Medieval Japanese Buddhists were well aware of that possibility, having been counseled repeatedly that “a woman . . . outwardly may look like a bodhisattva, but in her heart she is like a *yakṣa*.”¹ In certain cases, however, their wariness might have been as much a realization of the profound ambiguity of divine power as an expression of misogyny. For these Buddhists, the image of Benzaiten distilled—and symbolized—an even greater ambiguity: she was not only a woman, but a dragon and snake as well.

The standard description of Benzaiten, as found in most Buddhist ritual or iconographic texts, includes her various names, her scriptural sources, her place in esoteric mandalas, her mudrās and mantras, her conventional attributes and symbolic form(s), her acolytes or attendants (*kenzoku* 眷属), her ritual functions, and, last but not least, her main cultic centers and the local traditions related to them. With Benzaiten, Japanese art historians usually identify two types of images: the two-armed Benzaiten and the eight-armed.² That distinction, however, lumps together several different iconographic types: consider a two-armed Benzaiten playing the *biwa* vs. a two-armed Benzaiten holding a sword and a wish-fulfilling jewel;³ or the eight-armed Benzaiten of the *Golden Light Sūtra* vs. the so-called Uga Benzaiten. In medieval Japan, it was only the last Benzaiten, as described in apocryphal sūtras, that can properly be described as the medieval Benzaiten.

The canonical description of Benzaiten aimed at establishing a few stable features. Most secondary sources, by repeating them uncritically, end up glossing over the complexity of the image. To get a better sense of that complexity, we need to destabilize the image and question the canonical sources. The casual assertions of the textbooks actually conceal many misgivings, doubts that are occasionally mentioned in passing as “variants.” When they are taken into consideration, an image of Benzaiten emerges that is quite different from the canonical one. Only then does it become clear that this deity, who has been claimed by Buddhist and Shintō (not to mention Onmyōdō) ideologues alike, always transcended sectarian affiliations.

THE VEDIC GODDESS

The Indian goddess was said to be the personification of the river Sarasvatī. While she may have been an agrarian deity dispensing fertility, her name also came to designate the powers of wisdom, eloquence, and music. From the outset, as it were, we are confronted with multiple origins, and with an essential ambiguity.

In her study on the topic, Catherine Ludvik describes Sarasvatī’s evolution from a river goddess to the goddess of sound and music, identifying four aspects of the pre-Buddhist Sarasvatī: (1) her original, physical presence as the river; (2) and (3) her functions as goddess of speech and of music; and (4) her relationships as daughter-consort of Brahmā, reflecting a wider mythological context. The functional aspects are familiar from the iconography, as in the four-armed Sarasvatī who holds both a manuscript and a vīṇā.⁴ Ludvik summarizes the development of the image of Sarasvatī as follows: “[In the *Vedas*, the] mighty river goddess, through the association, on the one hand, with the recitation of hymns accompanying rituals performed on her banks, and, on the other hand, with inspired thoughts inseparably tied to the composition of these hymns, was identified with speech. Through speech, embodying knowledge, most particularly of the *Veda*, Sarasvatī became goddess of knowledge in her own right. . . . She also became goddess of music . . . and was connected with the vīṇā.”⁵

In the commentaries on the *Vedas* known as the *Brāhmaṇas*, Sarasvatī is identified with the goddess Vāc (Speech). In Vedic India, Vāc was both the daughter of the primordial god, Prajāpati, and his consort, who united with him in an incestuous union to create all beings. The relations between Brahmā and Sarasvatī in the Hindu *Purāṇas* derive from that relationship, since Prajāpati has become Brahmā.⁶ In Ludvik’s words: “Prajāpati-turned-Brahmā falls in love with his daughter Sarasvatī and takes her for his consort.”⁷ In the *R̥g Veda*, Vāc shows strong warrior characteristics, declaring: “I stretch the bow for Rudra so that his arrow

will strike down the hater of prayer. I incite the contest among the people. I have pervaded sky and earth.”⁸ Ludvik also points out that in the *Vedas* Sarasvatī was called a slayer of strangers and was associated with the storm gods (Maruts), “with whom she shares might and a certain wild, fighting spirit.”⁹ In the *Yajur Veda*, she takes on a fierce, combative character and is described as the Vṛtra-slayer.¹⁰

The powers of speech and war point to the first two functions in Georges Dumézil’s tripartite analysis of Indo-European ideology. The third function, abundance, is also a power that was attributed to the Vedic Sarasvatī.¹¹ As a “variable goddess,” Sarasvatī subsumes all three functions and at the same time transcends or eludes them. She is associated with the horse-headed Aśvins (also called the Nāsatya twins), with whom she collaborates to bolster Indra’s strength by telling him how to kill the demon Namuci.¹² (I note in passing that the third function of abundance and fecundity is usually represented by pairs of deities, often twins like the Vedic Aśvins or the Greek Dioscuri.) Sarasvatī and the Aśvins are also among the gods mentioned in the *Rg Veda* in connection with incantations for safe pregnancy and delivery. In other Vedic texts, Sarasvatī “is specifically invoked to grant progeny and to place the embryo in a woman’s womb.”¹³ As consort of the Aśvins, moreover, she bears the newly formed embryo of Indra within her own womb, and becomes both his surrogate mother and his consort.¹⁴ However, “like her wild, raging waters, this mother takes on a fierce, wrathful appearance,” a reminder of her role as a deity of the second function.¹⁵

THE BUDDHIST GODDESS

The locus classicus for the Buddhist Sarasvatī is the *Golden Light Sūtra* (Skt. *Suvarṇaprabhāsa-sūtra*, T. 663, 664, and 665), a text that played an important role in Japan during the Nara and Heian periods.¹⁶ This sūtra actually devotes an entire chapter to Sarasvatī. Of the three extant Chinese versions, it is the translation of the *Suvarṇaprabhāsottamarāja-sūtra* (T. 665) by Yijing 義淨 (635–713) that most strongly emphasizes her warrior characteristics. In this text, the goddess appears before the Buddha’s assembly and, addressing the Buddha according to a well-established pattern, vows to protect all those who put their faith in the sūtra, recite it, or copy it. In particular, if a Dharma master recites it, she vows to increase his intelligence and his eloquence; she will help him understand and remember all the incantations (*dhāraṇīs*), and she will ensure his longevity and ultimately his awakening.¹⁷ Then she teaches the assembly how, by bathing in scented water and reciting incantations, one can heal all illnesses, defeat one’s enemies, escape all demons, curses, ill luck, and baleful astral influences, prolong one’s life, and become rich. Finally, she promises to help beings cross the ocean of *samsāra* and reach supreme

FIGURE 4.1. (*Opposite*)
Eight-armed Benzaiten
(with Yama, Indra, Vasu,
Nanda, and animals).
Edo period. Sheet, ink
on paper. University Art
Museum, Kyoto City Uni-
versity of Arts. BZS 2219.

awakening. Thereupon, the brahmin Kauṇḍinya praises her and compares her to Nārayaṇī (that is, Śrī Lakṣmī), Viṣṇu's consort.¹⁸ Significantly, he points out that she can manifest herself not only as a benevolent deity, but also as Yamī, the sister of Yama, a terrifying deity who haunts the wilderness. He describes her eight-armed form, with all its attributes—bow, arrow, sword, spear, axe, *vajra*, iron wheel, and noose.

Yijing's translation goes on to emphasize that wild animals often surround Sarasvatī's appearance. Compared to a lioness, this Sarasvatī is strikingly different from the elegant vīṇā player of the classical Hindu tradition, and takes up a position next to the goddess of fortune Śrī (Mahāśrī, Lakṣmī, J. Kichijōten 吉祥天) and the earth goddess Dṛdha (a.k.a. Pṛthivī, J. Jiten 地天). Śrī is often described as a daughter of Hārītī (J. Kariteimo 訶梨帝母 or Kishimojin 鬼子母神) and a wife of Vaiśravaṇa (J. Bishamonten).¹⁹ In this text, Śrī, Sarasvatī, and Vaiśravaṇa are described as different facets of the same divine power, which manifests itself as Śrī for people of higher capacities, as Sarasvatī for those of medium capacities, and as Vaiśravaṇa for those of lower capacities. It stops short of explicitly associating Sarasvatī with the wish-fulfilling jewel, however, as she will come to be seen in Japan.

In a Japanese representation based on the *Golden Light Sūtra*, the goddess appears near a river, against a background of mountain and forest, and is surrounded by Basu sennin (Vasu), Enmaten (Yama), the water god Nanda (Nanda suishin), and Taishakuten 帝釈天 (Indra), as well as various animals including the tiger, lion, buffalo, fox, rooster, and goat (Fig. 4.1).

Sarasvatī also appears in the *Mahāvairocana-sūtra* (and its commentary by Yixing 一行).²⁰ In the Womb Realm mandala based on that scripture, Sarasvatī's position is among the devas of the western court external to the Vajra section, between Nārayaṇī and Kumāra. This section also contains Indic deities such as Brahmā, Viṣṇu, Skanda, Yama, and their retinue, as well as other lesser deities. Keeping such company may seem strange for a goddess of music and a provider of wealth. One should bear in mind, however, that in the *Golden Light Sūtra*, too, Sarasvatī is associated with a number of dark female deities who surround Yama—among them the Seven Mothers, Cāmuṇḍā, and the *ḍākinīs*.²¹

GENEALOGY AND STRUCTURE

In Japan, as Ingrid Fritsch has shown, the image of Benzaiten (Sarasvatī) as a goddess of music and of the arts in general was favored not only by court musicians but also by the blind musicians called *biwa hōshi* who sang the legend of the Heike. Eventually her popularity spread, and she became a protecting deity for other groups of the blind as well, including minstrel monks (*mōsō* 盲僧) and the female mediums and massage specialists of northern Japan.

最勝王經辨才天

閻魔天

帝釋天

婆羅仙人

難陀水神

無言藏





FIGURE 4.2. Benzaiten. Kamakura period, 13th century. Ink and color on paper. *Shoson zuzōshū*. Kanazawa bunko.

However, the logic of Sarasvatī's development into Benzaiten may not have been as linear as it appears. In particular, the image of Sarasvatī as a warring deity is reminiscent of that of the Indian goddess Durgā. According to Ludvik, this aspect might have been a response to a new Buddhist concern for state protection, the atmosphere in which the *Golden Light Sūtra* was promoted.²² Yet the emergence of a martial Sarasvatī may also have obeyed a more fundamental structural logic, inasmuch as Vāc, the Vedic goddess of speech, had already displayed martial characteristics. As Georges Dumézil points out, Sarasvatī (like Vāc and Durgā) belongs to the group of trifunctional deities whose activities include war. Already in the *Vedas*, it is said that she destroys the enemies of the gods, the asuras. Admittedly, later sources seem to omit or downplay that aspect of her powers, but this does not mean that its importance in religious practice was lost. Dumézil argues that Sarasvatī is a multifunctional deity not

by accident, as the result of a more or less random evolution, but structurally, as a complete expression of the trifunctional ideology of the Indo-Europeans. Judging from the extant documentation, these functions resurfaced at various times in the “career” of the deity, inflecting it like the meanders of the river Sarasvatī and contributing to the definition of its course.

The Japanese goddess Benzaiten, in contrast, moves freely between functions (and manifestations), transforming from a woman into a dragon, a snake, or even a fox. The structural approach, while taking diachronic developments into account, emphasizes a contrasting synchronic approach, in which Benzaiten is grasped in her relationships with her “paradigmatic others.” Although Dumézil considered that the three functions he identified were specific to Indo-European ideology, one of his students, Yoshida Atsuhiko, has argued that they were also operative in Japanese mythology.²³ As the protector of warriors and musicians, Benzaiten spanned the first and second functions of sovereignty and war. In the Muromachi period, she increasingly became a goddess of wealth and fertility, the third function.

As Ingrid Fritsch remarks, Benzaiten resists categories, and to study her one must place at the center the communities that worshiped her. Fritsch’s perspective encourages a sociological approach to understanding the changes in the deity’s image. Ludvik focuses instead on the figure of the eight-armed Benzaiten, emphasizing the ways in which that warrior deity departs from the traditional image of Sarasvatī as a goddess of eloquence and music. The insights provided by Ludvik and Fritsch are complementary but still leave aside aspects of Benzaiten that may be equally important, aspects with specifically Japanese characteristics that come to the forefront in the cult of Uga Benzaiten.

As noted above, the goddess Sarasvatī was from the outset a multi-functional deity: one could therefore posit, at the origins, a more abstract



FIGURE 4.3. Benzaiten. *Jūnihachibu narabini jūnishinhō zu*, TZ 7: 494, fig. 12.

Sarasvatī, the product of Vedic theological speculation, for whom a merging with Vāc was not a simply random or ancillary development. At the other end of Asia, the course of her development was not random either: metaphorically speaking, the river Sarasvatī flowed into the riverbed prepared for her by the Japanese religious landscape.

Despite the common assertion that Benzaiten *is* Sarasvatī, many things changed in the passage from India to Japan. Admittedly, certain motifs can be surprisingly resilient from one culture to another. Yet the most obvious features are not always the most significant for understanding the hidden dynamics of such a richly layered figure. I will therefore start from the relatively simple, static, and visible opposition between the woman and the *nāga* in order to show how the same symbolism, reinscribed into various contexts, became enriched with new values, eventually forming, with the reemergence of motifs that had been muted, a kind of a symbolic polyphony.

The Warrior Deity

Like her mythological cousin, the Alpheus river, Sarasvatī disappeared into the ocean of Indian myth to resurface in Japanese mythology. But in the meantime a momentous change had taken place. The deity that emerged from Lake Biwa bore little resemblance to her Hindu prototype. She was now an eight-armed goddess, whose image and features were strongly influenced by Yijing's translation of the *Golden Light Sūtra*. The apparition of the eight-armed Sarasvatī in that sūtra had already signaled the emergence (or perhaps merely the resurgence) of the warrior function. This martial figure appealed to the warriors of medieval Japan, who took her as one of their protecting deities. The distance between that deity and the "classical" two-armed Benzaiten did not go unnoticed: indeed, it led to a bifurcation into two distinct identities, Myōonten 妙音天 and Benzaiten.

While the features of the eight-armed Benzaiten were clearly indebted to the *Golden Light Sūtra*, the impact of this text alone is insufficient to explain the development of her cult. Certain essential aspects of Sarasvatī's cult, emphasized in that scripture, seem to have been almost forgotten (for example, the ritual of the perfumed bath), whereas other features of the Indian cult (like the choice of islands in rivers and ponds for her shrines, or the immersion of her icons during festivals) seem to have reached Japan by other—textual or iconographic—means.

As Ludvik points out, "a study of India . . . goes a long way in revealing what is to be found in China and Japan, while a study of China and Japan can show something easily missed in India."²⁴ For instance, "it is from China that we learn of the impact of the Durgā cult on the Buddhist Sarasvatī in India."²⁵ Ludvik argues that the Japanese figure of Uga Benzaiten may reveal another aspect of Sarasvatī that the Indian materials no longer allow us to perceive.²⁶ This is an important point, to which I will return.

While Sarasvatī may be, as Ludvik claims, “Durgā under the guise of Sarasvatī,” perhaps she is equally the earth deity in the guise of Sarasvatī, or Vāc in the guise of Sarasvatī. Or maybe none of the above. In spite of all the analogical links, she is not just a mask put on by other deities; she was perceived as a living power, different from (albeit related to) all the other deities with whom she may have a family resemblance. The strands revealed by historical and sociological research in the magnetic field surrounding Sarasvatī/Benzaiten emphasize the development of certain important features. Yet they do not clarify the relations between Benzaiten and snakes or dragons, or why Uga Benzaiten became so prominent in medieval Japan.

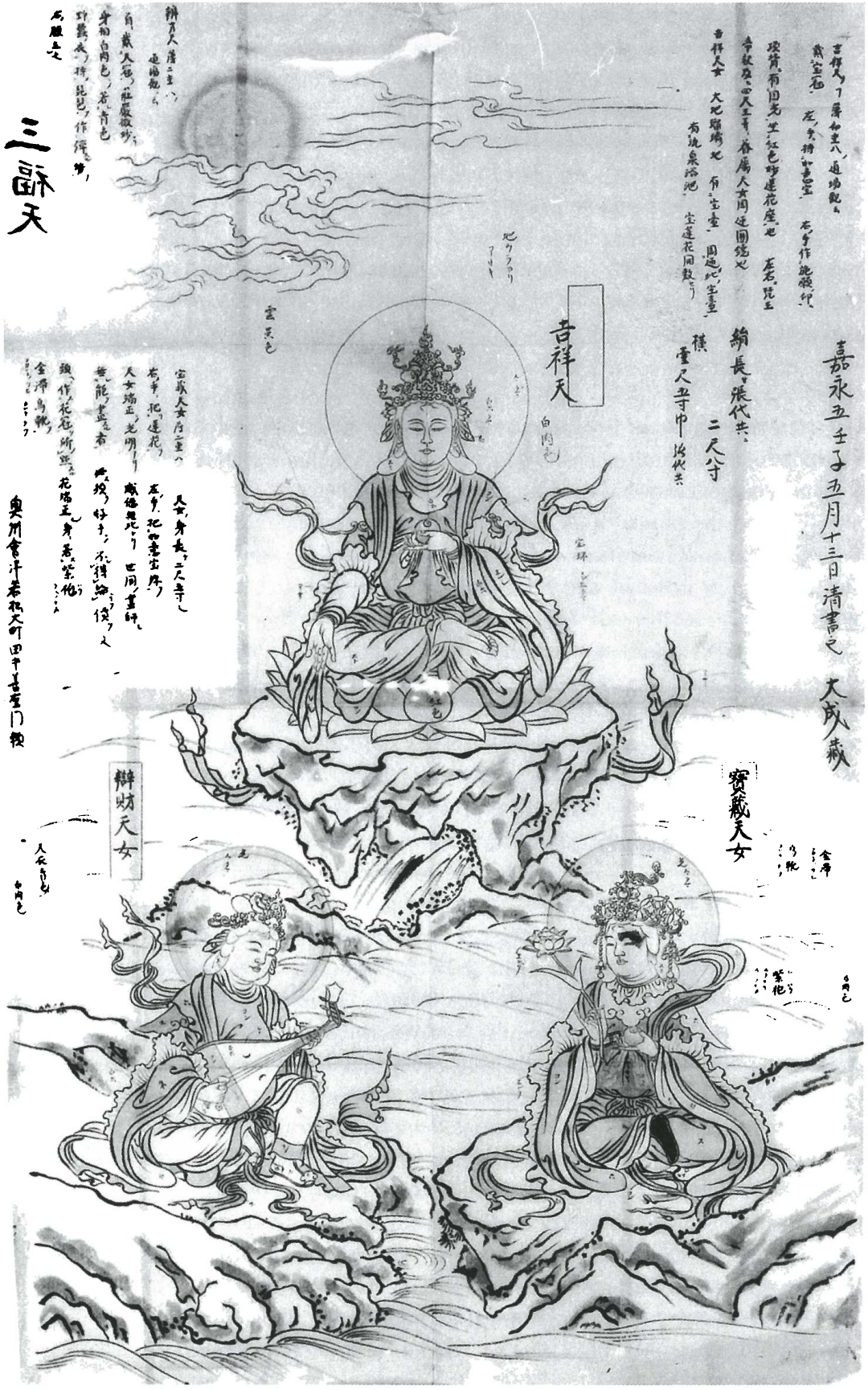
The Music/War Polarity

The usual description of Benzaiten as a goddess of eloquence and music overlooks other features—in particular, her warrior function. Actually, her domain encompasses what the Chinese called the spheres of the literary (*wen* 文) and the military (*wu* 武). The image of Benzaiten developed around a number of polarities—between the musical goddess and the warrior goddess, for instance, and between the dragon deity and the young maiden.

In medieval Japan, it was not always clear whether the names Myōonten and Benzaiten represented a single figure or two distinct ones. Even when Myōonten and Benzaiten coexisted as distinct entities, they constantly exchanged certain of their attributes and functions. According to the *Keiran shūyōshū*, “because there is no duality between Knowledge and Principle, [Myōon Benzaiten] can also assume the body of Ugajin. . . . Her ‘trace’ is a white snake, who dispels the poisons of the three sufferings.”²⁷

Benzaiten’s two functions—war and music—come together in the legend of the Heike warrior Tsunemasa, as related in the *Heike monogatari*. Having come to the shore of Lake Biwa, Tsunemasa sees Chikubushima island in the offing and decides to visit it. Upon landing, he prostrates himself before the shrine of Benzaiten and declares: “Daibenkudokuten 大弁功德天 is none other than Śākyamuni Buddha; she is a bodhisattva who manifests the absolute nature of the Buddha mind. Two are the names Benzai and Myōon, one is the true form of this divinity, who brings salvation to sentient beings. It is said that those who worship here a single time will have every wish granted: thus I face the future with hope.” When he completes his recitation of scriptures, the resident monks bring him one of the shrine’s lutes and convince him to play.²⁸ The suave melody moves the goddess to appear in the form of a white dragon (var. a white snake or fox). Tsunemasa interprets this manifestation as a clear sign that the rebel forces (the Minamoto) will soon be defeated.²⁹ This passage weaves together motifs of the numinous lute, the island of

三昧天



嘉永五壬子五月十三日清書之 大成藏

吉祥天 丁酉如坐八通功配
戴宝冠 左 手持如意宝 右 手持施轮
璎珞 有旧无坐 红色妙莲花座也 左右跪坐
帝杖在 四人三手 眷属大同延圆镜也
吉祥天女 大毗罗羯也 有宝盖 圆通此宝盖
有毗罗羯池 宝莲花同殿也

綉長 張代共
二尺八寸
重尺五寸 以伏共

吉祥天
白肉色

辨財天 唐二主
通佛也
自戴天冠 肚腹微妙
身相白肉色 若青也
野蠻天 持琵琶 作舞也
石羅止之

宝藏天女 唐二主
天女身長 二尺寸
右 手 持 蓮花 左 手 持 如意宝
天女端正 光明 威德無比 世同畫師
無能畫者 此殿 好子 不得知 候 人
願 作 花冠 所 畫 花 冠 正 身 著 宝 冠 他
金澤鳥靴

辨財天女

寶藏天女

奥州會津若松大町田中甚左衛門頼

the immortals, and the messenger animal(s) or animal manifestation of Benzaiten. The lute motif was of course important for the *biwa hōshi*, the main propagators of the *Heike monogatari*. The belief that Benzaiten was the protector of the Taira is a leitmotiv of that work.

Myōonten

The figure of Myōonten initially developed toward the end of the Heian period as an object of worship among powerful aristocrats like Fujiwara no Moronaga 藤原師長 (1137–1192).³⁰ He was a renowned musician, known as Myōon-in 妙音院 because he had transformed a part of his residence (near present-day Shijō Kawaramachi in Kyoto) into a temple of the same name, dedicated to Myōon. He had a wooden statue of Myōon made and enshrined it there. That statue served as the model for a number of later representations, including the Myōonten of Ninnaji.³¹

The name Myōon is traced to the bodhisattva Gadgadasvara (J. Myōon Bosatsu 妙音菩薩), who appears in the *Lotus Sūtra*.³² This bodhisattva, originally unrelated to Sarasvatī, is said to have obtained his extraordinary powers as a reward for playing music on countless occasions for the buddha Meghadundubhisvara-rāja (J. Unraionnō butsu 雲雷音王佛). (See, e.g., Figs. 4.5–4.8, where Myōon is depicted playing a stringed instrument.) One such power is his gift of metamorphosis: to preach the Dharma, he can assume all kinds of forms, including those of the gods Brahmā, Indra, Ísvara, Maheśvara, and Vaiśravaṇa. His metamorphic capacity, as well as his awakening through music, facilitated his identification with Sarasvatī. Not surprisingly, he became the protector of professional groups such as court musicians and blind singers.

The spread of Myōonten's following in medieval Japan was due in part to a cultural (and technical) factor, namely, the growing popularity of the lute (*biwa*) among musicians.³³ The expanded influence of the *biwa hōshi* was probably due to the decline of court music, brought about by the destruction of the capital during the Ōnin war (1467–1477). The image of Myōonten spread by these wandering musicians was not merely that of a goddess of music and a protector of the arts, but also that of a goddess of fortune. The *biwa* itself was seen as a good-luck instrument, associated with prayers for prosperity. Thus, as Fritsch points out, if Myōon Benzaiten became the protecting deity of the *biwa hōshi*, she served as both a goddess of fortune (through the influence of performing arts, *geinō* 芸能) and a goddess of music (through the influence of *gigaku* 伎楽).³⁴

Next to the *biwa hōshi*, we must emphasize the role of another group of minstrels known as the “blind monks of the earth deity” (*jishin mōsō* 地神盲僧), who were influenced by Korean musical traditions.³⁵ This group was particularly widespread in western Japan (Kyūshū and Chūgoku), but also present in Yamato.³⁶ In contrast to the *biwa hōshi*, who specialized in the recitation of epics (principally the *Heike monogatari*,

FIGURE 4.4. (*Opposite*) Benzaiten (bottom left) as acolyte of Kichijōten (with Hōzō tennyo, bottom right). Edo period. Sheet, ink on paper. University Art Museum, Kyoto City University of Arts. BZS 2206.

FIGURE 4.5. Myōon Benzaiten. Kamakura period. Hanging scroll, color on silk. Nezu Museum, Tokyo.





FIGURE 4.6. Myōon Benzaiten. Kamakura period, 13th century. Ink and color on paper. *Shoson zuzōshū*. Kanazawa bunko.

but also the *Soga monogatari* 曾我物語 and the like), the *jishin mōsō* were more religiously oriented. The distinction should not be pressed too far, however: the recitation of the *Heike monogatari* was sometimes performed to placate the spirits of the defeated Heike warriors, whereas the *jishin mōsō* also performed songs for entertainment. As a result, a certain rivalry developed between the two groups. This rivalry eventually led to a famous lawsuit in the seventeenth century. The *biwa hōshi* won, owing to the political strength of their guild, the Tōdōza 当道座, and the *jishin mōsō* were forced to limit themselves to the recitation of the *Earth Deity Sūtra* (*Jishin-kyō* 地神經).³⁷ Despite (or because of) that feud, the two groups influenced each other in many ways, and the mutual impact is reflected in many of their legends and symbols. Both groups, for example, traced their lineage back to a blind prince, variously identified as Amayo 天夜 (var. 雨夜), Komiya 小宮, or Semimaru 蟬丸, who was held to be an incarnation of Myōonten (or Myōon Bosatsu).³⁸ Conversely, as we will see shortly, certain beliefs related to the earth deity were probably transmitted from the *jishin mōsō* to the *biwa hōshi*. At any rate, it was perhaps among these blind musicians that the amalgamation between Myōon-Benzaiten and the earth deity took place.³⁹



FIGURE 4.7. Myōon Benzaiten. Edo period. Sheet, ink on paper. University Art Museum, Kyoto City University of Arts. BZS 2208.

becomes his protector. Komiya is also initiated by a blind monk named Ekan, who had himself been initiated by Benzaiten after a hundred-day retreat at Chikubushima.⁴¹

According to a variant found in the *Zachō shidaiki* 座長次第記, it was Myōon Benzaiten who was born as Prince Chiba (Chiba Taishi 千葉太子), the blind child of Kōkō Tennō 光孝天皇 (830–889), and it was the Kamo deity who revealed to this prince his divine nature and his destiny as leader of the blind.⁴² In certain versions of the *Heike monogatari*, it is suggested that the imperial consort Kenreimon'in 建礼門院, one of the few survivors of the Heike clan, was an avatar (*keshin* 化身) of Myōon.

There were close ties between the Tōdōza and the Enryakuji–Hie Shrine complex on Mount Hiei, where the doctrinal synthesis involving Myōon, Benzaiten, and Ugajin was elaborated. Another group of artists, the *sarugaku* troupe of Ōmi, was closely related to Hie Shrine (while yet another troupe, in Ōtsu city's Kasuga-chō, was related to the Kasuga-Kōfukuji complex in Nara). Thus, the image of Benzaiten first evolved among the monastic circles of Mount Hiei (and to a lesser extent, Kōfukuji) before spreading via the artistic milieux of blind monks, *sarugaku* actors, and other outcasts (*hinin*). It was probably in this context that the relationship between Benzaiten and the Sannō deities (principally Jūzenji 十禅師), on the one hand, and the Kasuga deities on the other was established.

Let us return to Myōonten. Besides the legend of Prince Amayo, the Tōdōza had another origin story going back to the blind prince Komiya, an avatar of the Kamo deity (Kamo Daimyōjin 加茂大明神).⁴⁰ In the *Komiya taishi ichidaiki* 小宮太子一代記, the prince's divine identity is revealed to him by Myōon Benzaiten, who

The idea is usually implied by the comparison of her two ladies-in-waiting with the *nāga* princess of the *Lotus Sūtra* (who is herself often identified with Benzaiten), but in the Naga-to-bon 長門本 recension of the *Heike monogatari*, it is explicitly stated that Kenreimon'in is none other than Myōon Bosatsu (and hence Benzaiten herself, the protecting deity of the *biwa hōshi*).⁴³ Thus, Kenreimon'in's sūtra offerings in memory of her relatives can be seen as an anticipation of the recitation of the *Heike monogatari* by the *biwa hōshi*.⁴⁴

Myōon also figures in the tradition of the blind female singers (*goze* 瞽女) of Tōhoku.⁴⁵ The legendary founder of that tradition is now a princess, named Sagami or Sakagami 逆髮, again an avatar of Kamo Daimyōjin. Her brother, Semimaru, is himself described as an avatar of Myōon Bosatsu. A spurious imperial edict preserved in that tradition says, for example: “The *honzon* Nyoirin Kannon turned into Myōon Bosatsu. The faithful must therefore constantly pray to Myōon Bosatsu, as well as to Benzaiten and Shimogamo Daimyōjin 下加茂大明神, because they are the deities who protect their livelihood. Those who neglect that point will be immediately punished.”⁴⁶

Benzaiten was believed to cure blindness and eye disease, as can be seen in a legend involving the Tendai priest Ennin 円仁 (a.k.a. Jikaku Daishi, 793–864). After Ennin had long suffered from eye disease, the goddess appeared to him in a dream and gave him a remedy, requiring in exchange that he worship her at Chikubushima. When he awoke, he found a small image of Benzaiten near his pillow, together with some medicine. As soon as he ingested the medicine, his eyes were healed. Out of gratitude, he enshrined the image at Chikubushima, where it came to be worshiped as the main deity.⁴⁷ In another popular tale, Benzaiten manifests herself as the young girl Sayohime 佐用姫, who sacrifices herself to restore her blind mother's eyesight.⁴⁸



FIGURE 4.8. Myōon Benzaiten. Stone carving. Okayama prefecture. Photo Bernard Faure.

THE ESOTERIC BENZAITEN

A new phase in the development of Benzaiten was marked by her introduction into esoteric Buddhist discourse—which opened a new set of possibilities. As Myōonten, this deity was also (and perhaps primarily) related to Tantric speculations about sound. We recall that Sarasvatī appeared in the *Rg-veda* as a motherly, protecting figure, ensuring the efficacy of the prayers of sacrifice. Very early on, however, she was identified with speech (Vāc), and this aspect was emphasized in the *Brāhmaṇas*.⁴⁹ Thus, she simultaneously represents the Word and the Mother, the source of creative power. In the Vedic age, the murmur of her waters evoked the sounds of music. As Vāc, she was the consort (or daughter) of Brahmā. She became the inventor of Sanskrit, the goddess of grammar, eloquence, intelligence, knowledge, and craft—hence her name Benzaiten, “Deva of eloquence and talent.” As the *Keiran shūyōshū* puts it: “Because Myōon Benzai is the wisdom of many buddhas, she pervades various worthies. . . . She can be the *honji* of Shaka, Yakushi, and Amida, as well as of the bodhisattvas Kokūzō, Jizō, and Miroku.”⁵⁰

While the image of the Buddhist Sarasvatī was based on the same water imagery as that of the Vedic Sarasvatī, she had already become quite different. She was now the object of several *sādhanās* (means of accomplishment), that is, visualizations through which the practitioner becomes identical with a specific deity and “accomplishes” that deity’s nature. The *samaya* or symbolic form of Sarasvatī used in such visualizations was either the lute or the wish-fulfilling jewel.⁵¹ Another important element of the ritual was the vessel in which she was said to dwell. This motif derives from the legendary invitation proffered by the Tiantai patriarch Zhiyi 智顓 (538–597) to Sarasvatī to take up her abode in a special vase. This vase was said to have been brought to Japan by Saichō.⁵²

Medieval Japanese esoteric rituals usually began with a “contemplation of the ritual area” (*dōjōkan* 道場觀), during which the main deity was invoked through seed-letters (*bīja*, J. *shuji* 種字), mantras and mudrās, and symbolic forms. In the case of Benzaiten, the seed-letter could be, depending on the purpose of the ritual, *a*, *ban* (Skt. *vaṃ*), *on* (Skt. *oṃ*), or *sa*.⁵³ Benzaiten rituals were performed in the Shingon-Ritsu school, as shown by the *Secret Ritual of Benzaiten*, compiled by the Vinaya master Eison. This manual describes the visualization of the ritual area as follows: one must visualize the seed-letter *sa* (first syllable of the name Sarasvatī) on a lotus seat at the center of the altar; that letter then transforms into a *biwa*, which eventually transforms into Benzaiten. The practitioner must then identify himself with the deity, who in this case is Myōon Benzaiten.⁵⁴ In the rituals of Uga Benzaiten, the symbolic form that is visualized is a wish-fulfilling jewel rather than a *biwa*.

One ritual, described in the *Keiran shūyōshū*, involved the use of a ladle and the seed-syllables *a* and *vaṃ*. In the cosmological system built around the five elements, the letter *vaṃ* is the symbol of water. We are told that water is the element in which Benzaiten dwells as a water deity, that is, as a *nāga*. Since the five elements are the basic constituents of the human body, Benzaiten also dwells within the human body, and more precisely in the lungs, the organ most closely related to the water element. According to the *Keiran shūyōshū*:

Inside the water wheel [in our body] are the lungs, which contain golden water. In that golden water dwells a three-inch snake. It is our sixth [consciousness], called the mind-king. The lungs are the locus of the Wisdom of wondrous discernment, in the western direction [of the mandala]. It corresponds to the sixth consciousness, which discerns good and evil; it is our faculty for affirming the right and rejecting the wrong. Its seed-letter is *un* (Skt. *hūṃ*). It is the seed-letter for Benzaiten. Thus, our unconditioned, fundamentally awakened body has the form of a snake.⁵⁵

Benzaiten both symbolizes and emanates from the “wisdom of wondrous discernment” (*myōkanzatchi* 妙觀察智, Skt. *pratyavekṣana-jñāna*), one of the five wisdoms of the buddha Mahāvairocana. Following the psychogenetic schema of medieval esoteric Buddhism, she is said to correspond to the sixth consciousness (Skt. *mano-vijñāna*), out of which the five sense-consciousnesses evolve.

THE BEAUTY AND THE BEAST

Even more than Sarasvatī, Benzaiten is a Janus-faced deity. A primary aspect of her fundamental ambivalence has to do with the fact that she is not only a goddess but also a *nāga*—that is, an animal. As a woman, Sarasvatī plays a number of roles: she is both a lover and a mother figure. She is also a daughter (of Brahmā), a sister (of Yama or Vasu), and a wife (of Viṣṇu or Brahmā). Although Benzaiten is usually presented as the consort of Daikokuten, she is also paired with Bishamonten, a god of war and wealth.⁵⁶

Benzaiten as a Female Immortal

Benzaiten is often depicted as a female immortal, as in the origin story of Chikubushima. In the section on immortals of the *Honchō monzui* 本朝文粹 (mid-eleventh century) and the *Jikkinshō* 十訓抄 (ca. 1252), and in the Nanto-bon 南都本 recension of the *Heike monogatari*, Benzaiten exchanges a poem with Toryōkō 都良香, a man who was said to be an immortal. The motif of the island of the immortals (Penglai, J. Hōrai 蓬萊) reappears in the *Genkō shakusho* 元亨釈書 in its account of the legend

of the nun Nyoi 如意. Nyoi, Benzaiten's human double, is described as a female immortal, and the purple box in her possession is related to the box brought back by the fisherman Urashima 浦島 from his visit to Penglai (identified here with the *nāga* palace).⁵⁷ This legend also emphasizes the essential unity of Myōonten and Benzaiten.

In the Ise tradition, the origins of the building called Sakadono 酒殿 are explained by a legend inspired by the folkloric theme of the feather robe (Hagoromo 羽衣), in which a female immortal is stranded on earth after a man hides her feather robe. The Tendai priest Jihen, in his *Tenchi jingi shinchin yōki* 天地神祇審鎮要記 (1333), tells us how, when eight female immortals came down to earth, an old man of Tango province stole the feather robe of one of them. Unable to return to heaven, the stranded maiden became his daughter (or wife) and was eventually deified as Toyouke, the deity of the Outer Shrine of Ise.⁵⁸ The Ise tradition weaves several mythological strands together, including one of Benzaiten as a heavenly maiden who teaches humans how to fabricate sake, and the image of Ugajin (Uka no Mitama) as the spirit of rice. When the maiden eventually goes back to heaven, she leaves behind her a flask of pure sake in which Uka no Mitama (var. Toyouke) is said to dwell. According to Jihen, the deity of Sakadono is both Benzaiten and Toyouke.⁵⁹ The *Minō Benzaiten no koto* 弁才天の事 gives a doctrinal exegesis of Benzaiten's name and interprets the expression "heavenly maiden" (*tennyo* 天女) in the name Benzaitennyō as an allusion to sexual union. It also mentions the origin story of a heavenly woman called Princess First Flower (Hatsuhana-hime 初花姫), who was said to be a manifestation of Benzaiten.⁶⁰

Benzaiten as a *Gandharva*

In the *Asabashō*, Benzaiten is also identified with the *gandharvas*, although this point was apparently a matter of debate.⁶¹ In another passage, the *Asabashō* states: "Among the devas, she is the one who specializes in poems, songs, and beautiful sounds. She is not a *gandharva*."⁶² Since there are several other extant mentions of Benzaiten as a *gandharva*, the author of the *Kakuzenshō* feels obliged to examine the question and to determine whether Benzaiten belongs to the *gandharva* or *nāga* category.⁶³ In the *Keiran shūyōshū* as well, she is identified with the *gandharva* Bion 美音 (Sound of Beauty), but the associations actually played out are those with the *nāgas*.⁶⁴

The question of Benzaiten's relations with the *gandharvas* derives from the Indian myth of the barter for Soma, when the gods exchanged Vāc (i.e., Sarasvatī) for Soma, who had been stolen by the *gandharvas*.⁶⁵ However, when Vāc is asked to choose between the *gandharvas* and the devas, she prefers the music performances of the latter to the former's recitation of the *Vedas*. Interestingly, this episode marked the very first mention of the *vīnā* (J. *biwa*) in connection with Vāc/Sarasvatī. It also

reinforced a sexist interpretation according to which Vāc, being a woman, is naturally seduced by deceptive music. As a female (and later as a *nāga*), Sarasvatī became linked to delusion and ignorance, like the musical arts over which she presides.⁶⁶

The possible identification of Benzaiten with the *gandharvas* presupposed Myōon Benzaiten's function as a goddess of music, since in Buddhism the *gandharvas* were usually reduced to a subaltern role as celestial musicians. However, as Georges Dumézil has shown, the Vedic *gandharvas* were complex figures, and it may be worthwhile to examine more closely the connection between them and Sarasvatī.⁶⁷

According to Dumézil, *gandharvas* and their Indo-European relatives (in particular, the centaurs of Greek mythology) derived from the carnival masks of the new year, and they represented the demons, the spirits of the dead, and the regents of time.⁶⁸ If we follow this line of thought, what we find in the description of Benzaiten as a Janus-faced deity turns from a simple colloquial English expression into a quite appropriate symbolic expression: like Janus, the Roman god who presides over the change of year, Benzaiten becomes a deity presiding over the new year's rituals. Indeed, her main ritual took place on the fifteenth of the first month, the so-called little New Year (*ko-shōgatsu* 小正月).⁶⁹

Benzaiten as a Water Deity

Beyond her early definition as a river deity, Sarasvatī's redefinition as a *nāga* or dragon proceeded through the logic of association. According to the *Benzaiten engi* 弁才天縁起 quoted in the *Keiran shūyōshū*: "Benzaiten is a water deity. Dragon gods are the quintessence of the water element, and this is why they dwell at the bottom of the ocean. The wish-fulfilling jewel is produced by the water wheel, and it is the source of all beings. Dragons are also the essence of the water wheel. This is why dragon gods see the essence of the relics (*śarīra*) as the vital (*hun* and *po*) spirits of water."⁷⁰ In the *Keiran shūyōshū*'s section on the *nāga* maiden and Benzaiten, the identity both share is established through their *honji*, Nyoirin Kannon, and through their primary symbol, the wish-fulfilling jewel.⁷¹

Benzaiten was also identified with other water deities such as Varuna (J. Suiten 水天). Varuna was originally the god of the ocean and one of the twelve directional devas. As guardian of the west, he became in Buddhism one of the four guardians of the Vajradhātu mandala. In female form, this deity was said to bring rain and to protect against sea disasters. Resembling a celestial woman, she is often shown holding a *cintāmaṇi* in each hand. Benzaiten's affinities with Suiten (Fig. 4.9) also link her to Myōken Bosatsu.

Four of the five great cultic centers of Benzaiten, as well as countless smaller ones, are located on islands: Chikubushima, Enoshima, Miyajima (Itsukushima, Hiroshima prefecture), and Kinkazan 金華山 (Miyagi

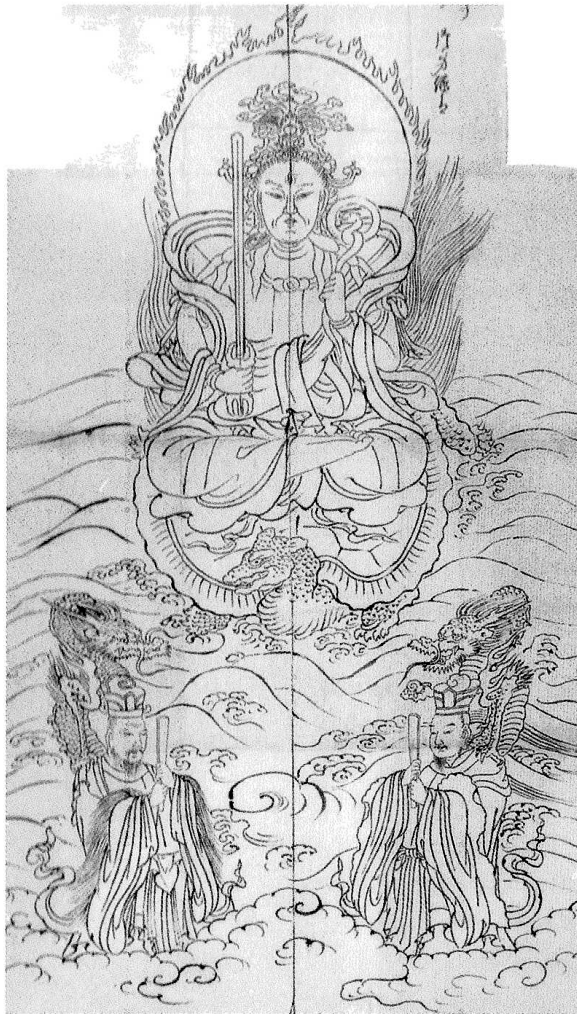


FIGURE 4.9. Suiten. Edo period. Sheet, ink on paper. University Art Museum, Kyoto City University of Arts. BZS 2228.

prefecture). Two other well-known sites are Aojima 青島 (Miyazaki prefecture, Kyushu) and the Benten-dō 弁天堂 on Shinobazu Pond 不忍池 in Ueno Park (Tokyo).

When Taira no Kiyomori attempted to develop seaways in the Inland Sea, he chose Benzaiten as the protector of navigation. As told in the *Heike monogatari*, however, the story takes on greater religious significance: when Kiyomori went to Mount Kōya to pay reverence to the Great Stūpa, which had just been restored, an old monk with hoary eyebrows told him that he should restore Itsukushima Shrine. When the monk suddenly vanished, Kiyomori, struck with awe, decided to follow his instructions. He conveyed the story to the retired emperor and received an order to repair Itsukushima. When the shrine was repaired, he visited it and spent the night in prayer. He dreamed that a divine youth, acting as a messenger from the goddess, handed him a short spear with a silver snake-coil pattern on the hilt, saying: ‘With this blade, bring peace to the realm and protect the imperial house.’ Kiyomori awakened to find the weapon on his pillow. This *In illo signe vinces* is nuanced by a further apparition—that of the goddess herself, who warns him that his good fortune will

not extend to his progeny if he commits wicked deeds.⁷² This is a transparent foreshadowing of the Heike’s fall, to be caused by Kiyomori’s hybris.⁷³

The famous *Sūtra Offered by the Heike* (*Heike nōkyō* 平家納經), a magnificent series of thirty-three illustrated scrolls of the *Lotus Sūtra* and two smaller sūtras (the *Muryōgikyō* 無量義經 and the *Kan Fugen kyō* 觀普賢經), allegedly copied by Kiyomori and members of the Taira clan, was offered to Itsukushima Shrine in 1164. In the dedicatory vow (*ganmon* 願文), Kiyomori mentions his dream on Mount Kōya, gives a list of the thirty-two Taira members who have shared the task of copying the thirty-two scrolls, and asks, in return for the accumulated merits which he now offers to Benzaiten, that she protect the state, vouchsafe the realization of his wishes and those of others, and lead him to awakening and rebirth in the Pure Land.⁷⁴

In 1174, the retired emperor Go-Shirakawa went on pilgrimage to Itsukushima with the Taira clan. A few years later, in 1180, retired emperor Takakura 高倉 twice made the trip himself, to pray that the goddess would soften Kiyomori’s rebellious spirit, which was keeping Go-Shirakawa

prisoner.⁷⁵ The shrine was destroyed in the years 1222–1224 but rebuilt in 1241. In the Muromachi period, the third Ashikaga 足利 shōgun, Yoshimitsu 義満, visited the shrine, and it subsequently prospered. In the meantime, the goddess Ichikishima 市杵嶋 had become Benzaiten.

We recall how Taira no Tsunemasa, visiting Chikubushima, interpreted his vision of Benzaiten as a sign of the Heike's victory against the Minamoto. His interpretation of this event turned out to be wishful thinking, however, as the Heike were defeated soon afterward. The purported auspiciousness of his vision is already contradicted in the *Heike monogatari* by the report of a portentous dream in which another young warrior saw a group of senior officials gathered in a hall of the imperial palace and expelling someone who seemed to be a member of the Heike. When the dreamer asked who this person was, he was told that it was the Itsukushima deity. Then the main official, an emanation of the bodhisattva Hachiman, declared that the sword that had been entrusted to the Heike would now be given to Minamoto no Yoritomo 源頼朝. Another official, an emanation of the Kasuga deity, added that the sword should go to his grandson afterwards. When this dream was reported to the novice Nariyori 成頼 on Mount Kōya, the latter commented: "Ah! The Heike will not last much longer! It was reasonable that the Itsukushima deity should have sided with them. But I had always heard that that divinity was feminine, the third daughter of the *nāga* king Sāgara."⁷⁶ Nariyori perhaps alludes to the supposedly fickle nature of women, and he apparently attributes the demise of the Heike to the Itsukushima deity's inconstancy, but in an earlier section of the *Heike monogatari*, it is clear that the blame has been placed on Kiyomori's hubris. At any rate, the Itsukushima deity—that is, Benzaiten—literally takes a back seat and her protection of the Heike is no longer perceived as a sign of enduring prosperity for that clan. The Heike's relationship with Itsukushima also led to the belief that Benzaiten herself had been reborn in the imperial house as Antoku Tennō 安徳天皇, the child emperor and Kiyomori's grandson, who drowned in the sea at the battle of Dan-no-Ura 壇ノ浦 (1185) with one of the Three Regalia, the divine sword.⁷⁷

If Benzaiten's loss of status in the *Heike monogatari* affected (or reflected) the fate of the Heike, the eventual demise of that clan did not have long-lasting repercussions on the goddess's popularity. On the contrary, she became the protecting deity of the shōgunate founded by the former rebel Yoritomo, and her images were enshrined in the Tsurugaoka Hachiman Shrine in Kamakura, as well as on the nearby Enoshima island.

After the death of Yoritomo, Benzaiten became the protector of the Hōjō family. According to the *Taiheiki* 太平記, at the beginning of the Kamakura period, Hōjō Tokimasa 北条時政 (1138–1215) secluded himself on Enoshima to pray that his descendants would be blessed forever. On the night of the twenty-first day, a fair and stately lady suddenly appeared before him. Acknowledging the meritorious karma he had

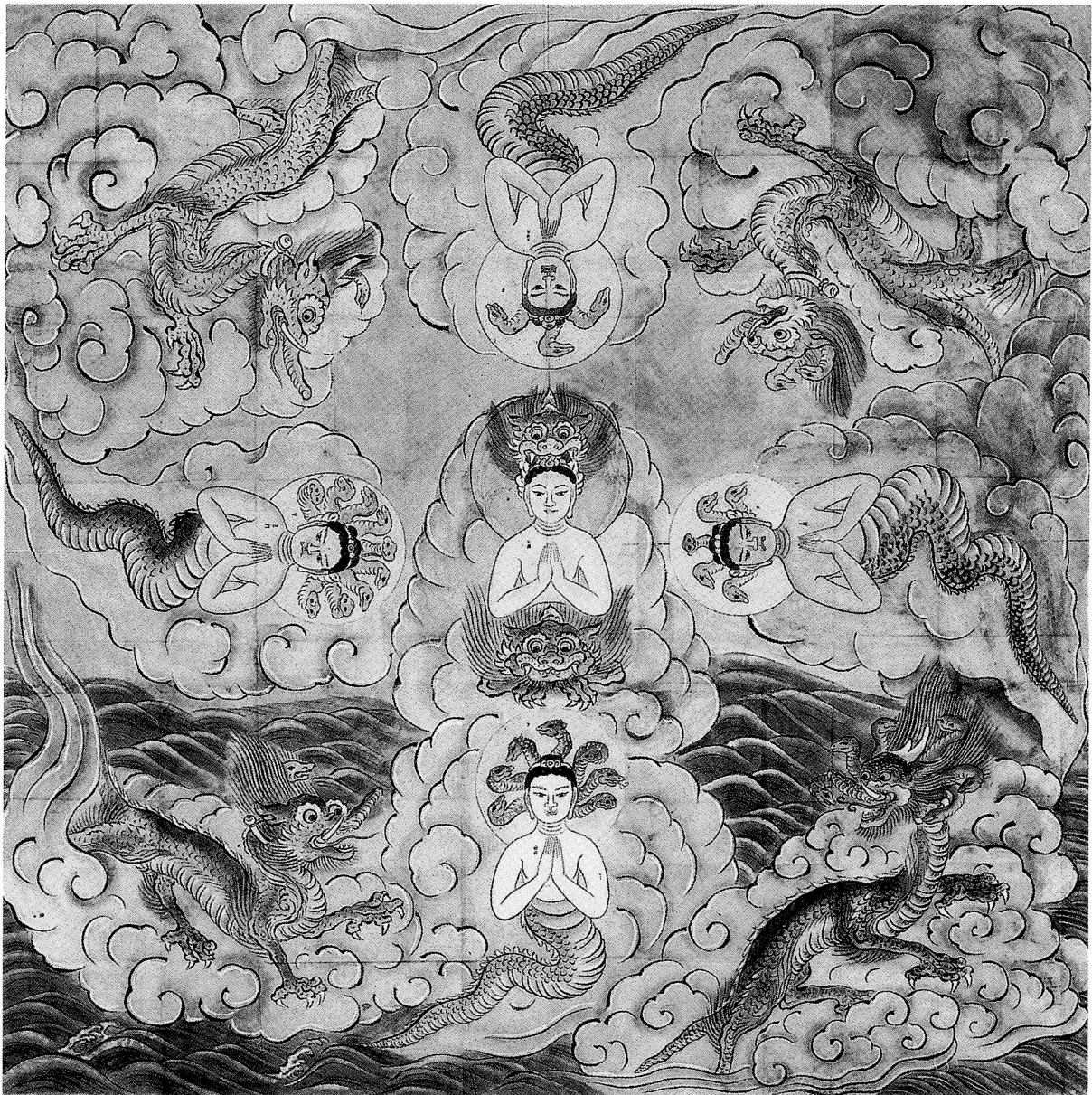


FIGURE 4.10. Detail of the *Scripture on Praying for Rain* mandala (*Shōugyō shiki mandara*). Edo period. Sheet, ink on paper. University Art Museum, Kyoto City University of Arts. BZS 1045.

gained while a monk at Hakone shrine (by making exemplars of the *Lotus Sūtra* to present to sacred places in each of the sixty-six provinces), she predicted that his descendants would rule over Japan; but their prosperity would not extend beyond seven generations if they lacked righteousness. Having said this, the lady turned into a great snake two hundred feet long, which entered the sea. The text concludes: “Thus was it owing to the divine favor of Enoshima Benzaiten and to the effect of a past good cause, that still the Sagami lay monk (i.e., the shōgun Takatoki) ruled the realm after more than seven generations [until the time of Go-Daigo’s Kenmu Restoration]. But as regards the strange doings of Takatoki, may it not be that the time was come for the Hōjō to be cut off? For already the seventh generation was past, and the ninth generation was reached.”⁷⁸

Nāgas and Dragons

So Benzaiten came to be perceived as a female *nāga* or dragon—a deity controlling rain, fecundity, and wealth. (Figs. 4.10 and 4.11 are examples of the association of *nāgas* and dragons with rain-making.) Given the importance of the *nāga*/dragon motif in the development of her cult, it may be useful to delve into the role of these divine animals in Japan, as well as the mythological topos of the *nāga* palace. Although Benzaiten is not mentioned in M. W. de Visser’s classic study on *nāgas*, the goddess had a long history of association with those mythical beings in China and Japan.⁷⁹ The first thing to note is that this was another Buddhist



innovation, since the Vedic river goddess Sarasvatī had not been associated with those water-controlling deities. Indeed, the Indian *nāgas*, figures of autochthony, and as such representatives of local, pre-Buddhist deities, seem to have developed only within the framework of Buddhism.

A complex mythology extends far beyond the few points I can mention here. As an animal, the *nāga* remained subject to the sufferings of karma. According to Buddhist tradition, the *nāgas* were constantly afflicted by the three fevers (*sannetsu* 三熱). This paradoxical image is also found in the “Consecration” chapter (Kanjō no maki) of the *Heike monogatari*. In this chapter, one of the survivors of the Heike defeat at Dan-no-ura, the imperial consort Kenreimon’in, tells retired emperor Go-Shirakawa that all the members of the Heike clan had been reborn as *nāgas*: “I dozed off,

FIGURE 4.11. Mandala of the *Scripture on Praying for Rain* (*Shōugyō shiki mandara*). Edo period. Sheet, ink on paper. University Art Museum, Kyoto City University of Arts. BZS 1046.

and in a dream I saw the Former Emperor and the Taira senior nobles and courtiers, all in formal array, at a place far grander than the old imperial palace. I asked where we were, because I had seen nothing like it since the departure from the capital. Someone who seemed to be the Nun of Second Rank answered, 'This is the Nāga Palace.' 'What a splendid place! Is there no suffering here?' I asked. 'The suffering is described in the *Ryūchikukyō Sūtra*. Pray hard for us,' she said. I awakened as she spoke."⁸⁰

In East Asia, the figure of the Indian *nāga* came to merge with local water deities, especially the dragon, a positive symbol often associated with highborn women.⁸¹ According to Edward Schafer, "in China, dragon essence is woman essence. The connection is through the mysterious powers of the fertilizing rain, and its extensions in running streams, lakes, and marshes. In common belief as in literature, the dark, wet side of nature showed itself alternately in women and in dragons. The great water deities of Chinese antiquity were therefore snake queens and dragon ladies."⁸²

In China, the yin-yang theory is expressed symbolically by two emblems, the dragon and the tiger, standing for water (yin) and fire (yang), respectively. The dragon is also the symbol of heaven (yang), although there are heavenly dragons and earthly dragons. The snake, which is not always distinguished clearly from the dragon and the Buddhist *nāga*, is more specifically chthonian. At any rate, the dragon/snake, associated with earth and water—and, as we will see later, with sacred jewels and relics—is a symbol of fertility and fecundity. The earthly dragon usually lives in ponds, caves, or waterfalls. Many Buddhist temples were built near ponds or waterfalls. Famous examples include Ishiyamadera, Hasedera 長谷寺, and Murōji 室生寺, all centers located near a "dragon hole."⁸³ The story of Kūkai's inviting the dragon king Zennyō 善女 to Shinsen'en is also well known.⁸⁴ The mythology of the dragon and the symbolism of water thus came to play an important role in medieval Buddhism and in its discourse on sexuality. An emblematic image is that of Guanyin/Kannon riding a dragon. Another widespread symbol of yin and yang is Kurikara 俱梨伽羅, a representation of Fudō as a dragon coiled around a sword and swallowing its tip. The dragon king Zennyō (Fig. 4.12) is said to have offered one of his scales to Kūkai when the latter initiated him. The motif of the scale reappears in the legend of Benzaiten's apparition to the second shōgun, which is described below.

The association of Benzaiten with dragons is particularly explicit in the *Keiran shūyōshū*, which uses it to reinforce the link between Benzaiten and the wish-fulfilling jewel. In his attempt to interpret esoteric Buddhism within the framework of the fundamental scripture of Tendai, the *Lotus Sūtra*, Kōshū also links Benzaiten with the *nāga* maiden of the *Lotus Sūtra*.

In the *Heike monogatari*, when a monk on pilgrimage reaches Itsukushima and asks a hunter about the shrine's deity and its relation

to the sea, the hunter replies: “Our principal deity is the *nāga* king Sāgara’s third daughter, a manifestation of the Womb realm Vairocana.”⁸⁵ In his *Ga’un nikkenroku batsuyū* 卧雲日件録抜尤, Zuikei Shūhō 瑞溪周鳳 (1391?–1473) reports an oracle from the goddess of Itsukushima describing how her two younger sisters (i.e., the *nāga* maiden of the *Lotus Sūtra* and the Enoshima Benzaiten) manifested themselves on Mount Katori 笠取山 in Yamashiro and at Enoshima in Izu, respectively.⁸⁶ Here, as in other sources, Benzaiten becomes one of the daughters of the *nāga* king Sāgara. In the *Keiran shūyōshū*, she is also described as a dragon.

The Nāga Palace

In the *Jingi hishō* 神祇秘抄, Benzaiten is described as the ruler of the *nāga* palace.⁸⁷ The *nāga* palace was thought to be a submarine or subterranean world that could be reached from any cave or waterfall.⁸⁸ As the repository of the Buddha’s relics, the wish-fulfilling jewel, and other Buddhist sacra,⁸⁹ it gradually came to be seen as the origin and ultimate destination of all Buddhist treasures, as well as a source of legitimacy for both the Buddhist law and the secular law. Thus, in the *Heike monogatari*, the sacred sword, lost in the waters of Dan-no-ura, returns to the *nāga* palace when the Heian world, which had seen the flourishing of Buddhism and the rise of the Taira warriors, comes to an end. The *nāga* palace is sometimes identified with the palace of the bodhisattva Maitreya or with the heavenly cave of the sun goddess Amaterasu; it can also be described as the source of ignorance and passions.⁹⁰



FIGURE 4.12. The dragon king Zennyō. Edo period. Sheet, ink on paper. University Art Museum, Kyoto City University of Arts. BZS 2186.

Tendai mythological discourse went one step further, interpreting the *nāgas* allegorically as the part of human nature that dwells in the water element of the body. The *nāga* palace thus becomes the source of the mind, the ultimate reality of all things. Furthermore, the *nāga* king came to be identified with the sea king of classical Japanese mythology, who gives to the young god Hoori 火遠理 his daughters Toyotama-hime 豊玉姫 and Tamayori-hime 玉依姫, together with two jewels controlling the tides. The relationship between Benzaiten and her younger sister (the *nāga* maiden of the *Lotus Sūtra*) is patterned after that between the two daughters of the sea king.⁹¹

The Taming of the Dragon

A number of local traditions describe Benzaiten as taming (and/or mating with) a dangerous dragon. At times this taming involves a sacrifice, either of Benzaiten herself or of a maiden who is her substitute. According to legend, on a mountain near Chikubushima lived a giant centipede that required the yearly sacrifice of a young girl. In the end, only one maiden remained. Taking pity on her, Benzaiten appeared in a dream to Fujiwara no Hidesato 藤原秀郷 (popularly known as Tawara Tōda 俵藤太 or Rice-bag Tōda), telling him to kill the monster and leaving a bow and arrows near his pillow. With her protection, the young man was able to fulfill his mission and save the maiden. Another legend, that of Matsuura Sayohime 松浦佐用姫, involves Benzaiten's own sacrifice.⁹² Sayohime was the daughter of the headman of Matsuura village. Having lost her father at the age of three, she lived in poverty with her mother. Lacking the financial means to celebrate the thirteenth anniversary of her husband's death, the mother secretly sold Sayohime to a man named Gongga no tayū, who intended to offer the girl to a local dragon as a substitute for his own daughter. When Sayohime is led to the monster, she recites the Devadatta chapter of the *Lotus Sūtra*, thereby saving both herself and the dragon, and she is eventually able to return home. In the meantime, however, her mother has become blind, because of the tears wept over her lost daughter. With the jewel given to her by the dragon, Sayohime restores her mother's eyesight and later reveals her true nature as the Benzaiten of Chikubushima.⁹³ In this legend, at least, the heroine is not simply "married" (that is, sacrificed) to the dragon to put an end to human sacrifices, and the predominant motif of blindness obviously reflects the concerns of the blind musicians (*mōsō*) who spread Benzaiten's cult.

The Hidden Side

As a *nāga*/dragon, Benzaiten was still subject to the afflictions of her animal nature. After the Muromachi period, this aspect went under concealment, and she became more plain as she turned into one of the Seven Gods of Fortune. But in the medieval period, she retained her mystery,

her ambiguity, her uncanniness.⁹⁴ Schafer's characterization of water goddesses in Tang literature seems to apply equally to Benzaiten: "However glossed they may be with gauze and rouge, however remote they seem from their fierce and powerful originals, however much—in short—they may resemble tinted photographs or fashionably painted dolls, [they] remain pitiless spirits and lethal sirens underneath."⁹⁵

Benzaiten's dark side is emphasized in a number of medieval tales. In "Yoritomo no saiji," for instance, the Benzaiten of Enoshima offers fish to the Chinese Zen master Rankei Dōryū 蘭溪道隆 (Ch. Lanqi Daolong, 1203–1268 or 1213–1278), the abbot of Kenchōji 建長寺 in Kamakura. When the second shōgun, Minamoto no Yoriie 源頼家 (1182–1204), invites Benzaiten to Kenchōji, a fine-looking lady appears and listens to Rankei's sermon. Seduced by her beauty, Yoriie asks her to reveal her true form. Suddenly, a putrid wind fills the room as she turns into a large horned snake, which then begs Rankei to free it from its karmic hindrances in exchange for its protection of the shōgunate.⁹⁶ Here the contrast between her female beauty and her animal ugliness is striking, and could perhaps be read as an allusion to the true nature of women.⁹⁷

Kyōen 慶円 (var. Keien, 1140–1223), a priest who lived near the famous dragon hole of Murōzan 室生山, is reported to have experienced a similar mishap. Once, as he was crossing a bridge, a noble lady appeared and asked him for a mudrā that would allow her to reach buddhahood. When Keien asked who she was, she replied that she was the *nāga* Zen-nyo (the same *nāga* whom Kūkai once invited to Shinsen'en). When he asked her to show her true nature, she replied: "My shape is so frightening that no man can look upon it. Yet I cannot refuse your wish." She then rose into the air, but the only thing Keien could see before she disappeared was a long claw.⁹⁸ *Ex ungue draconem.*

The negative image of Benzaiten is more obvious in the following story reported by the *Keiran shūyōshū*. When the Dharma master Dōchi 道智 went to Enoshima to read the *Lotus Sūtra*, a woman came every day to bring him food and listen to his sermons. Wondering about her real identity, he covered himself with a wisteria cloth and followed her to a cave, where she resumed her animal form. When she found out that she had been followed, she became angry, but, instead of punishing him, she declared that wisteria would no longer grow at Enoshima—a rather puzzling curse. Here the *nāga* goddess reveals her ambiguous nature: although she seeks deliverance, she can be draconian, and one cannot trespass upon her privacy without danger.⁹⁹

CODETTA

I have been using a genealogical approach to describe the gradual transformation of Sarasvatī into Benzaiten. This method can be problematic,

however, if it naively assumes a single origin of the deity. In the mythological field, origins are never that simple. Just as many streams flowed into the river Sarasvatī, the goddess who bears that name is herself the confluent of many deities, with Vāc, the goddess of speech, prominent among them. That fundamental plurality, which had been temporarily subsumed under the Sarasvatī/Vāc (water/music) polarity, diffracted again into a number of streams—which, for the sake of an illusory simplicity, I have tried to harness under such polarities as war and the arts, animality and femininity, and so on.

The logic of this deity's evolution (and involution) is thus much less linear than is implied by the genealogical approach that claimed to take us from Sarasvatī to Benzaiten. Besides her aquatic aspects and musical function, the Buddhist Sarasvatī acquired a warrior's role and other more sinister aspects, to the point that Ludvik sees her as a mere stand-in for the wrathful Hindu goddess Durgā. One of the main changes along the way was her transformation into a *nāga*, which opened the floodgates to a rich water symbolism. Another, more marginal development, deriving from her feminine image and that of the heavenly musician (*gandharva*), was the folkloric motif of the heavenly maiden, which linked her to folkloric legends.

At the crossroads of various religious trends and mythological traditions, the figure of Benzaiten constitutes not only a shared symbol, but also an arena of contention. Her name is shorthand for a complex network that links such variegated motifs as the lute (*biwa*), the snake, the dragon, and the jewel. Because of her multifunctional nature, she does not fit neatly—and actually undermines—the traditional distinction between buddhas and *kami*. Under the name Uga Benzaiten, she becomes part of a broad mythological field that includes devas such as Bishamonten, Kichijōten, Daikokuten, Dakiniten, Kangiten, and the earth deity (Jiten). To understand the emergence of this complex deity, the genealogical approach proves less efficient than a structural one, to which I now (re)turn.