

After Great Pain

The Uses of Religious Folklore in Kenji Mizoguchi's SANSHO THE BAILIFF (JP 1954) and Kaneto Shindo's ONIBABA (JP 1964)

Abstract

This article studies the adaptations and applications of religious folklore in two masterworks of Japanese cinema: Kenji Mizoguchi's *SANSHO DAYU* (*SANSHO THE BAILIFF*, JP 1954) and Kaneto Shindo's *ONIBABA* (JP 1964). While academic approaches will often draw a strict line between narrative genres and discursive forms, these films, I argue, draw creatively from Japanese tradition for both critical and constructive purposes in the postwar context. Besides mounting trenchant criticisms of Japan's erstwhile militaristic violence and imperial ambitions, both filmmakers present their respective female protagonists as models for spiritual and sociocultural transformation in the face of anomie. Embodying humanistic compassion on the one hand and ontogenetic eros on the other, the two women compose complementary poles for reconstruction amidst the painful aftermath of war.

Keywords

Buddhism and Film, Japanese Cinema, Kaneto Shindo, Kenji Mizoguchi, *ONIBABA*, Religious Folklore, *SANSHO THE BAILIFF*

Biography

Teng-Kuan Ng is Assistant Professor of Religious Studies in the College of Integrative Studies, Singapore Management University. He received his Ph.D. in Theological and Religious Studies from Georgetown University. His research focuses on the interdisciplinary study of religion and film, particularly in East Asian contexts. He also works in the areas of Buddhist studies, Chinese and comparative philosophy, and World Christianity. He is currently working on a monograph that explores the ways that cinema mediates the diffusion and practice of Buddhist wisdom in contemporary China.

Introduction

After great pain, how does one come to terms with the world again? In the wake of terrible trauma, where does a society turn for hope and healing? According to the cultural historian Yoshikuni Igarashi, after the Second World War Japan “desperately sought narratives of historical continuity that could encompass and transcend the loss it had endured”, narratives capable of reckoning with the past while providing direction for the future.¹ These narratives were often located in cultural productions such as film and literature, which, more than formal religion or partisan politics, provided a wide platform for critical and constructive discourses. Building on Igarashi’s identification of popular media as a site of crucial sociopolitical and existential import in postwar Japan, this article compares two retellings of religious folklore in Japanese cinema: *SANSHO DAYU* (*SANSHO THE BAILIFF*, Kenji Mizoguchi, JP 1954) and *ONIBABA* (Kaneto Shindo, JP 1964).

SANSHO THE BAILIFF is based on a Mori Ogai (1862–1922) short story from 1915, itself a variation of a legend that traces its roots to medieval Japan. *ONIBABA*, meanwhile, is adapted from *The Mask of Flesh*, an old Buddhist fable that belongs to a larger constellation of folktales centered on the figure of the onibaba, or “demon hag”.² While both films are commonly viewed in the West as works of rarefied art cinema, this image was relatively muted during their release and reception in postwar Japan. Like Kenji Mizoguchi’s two preceding films – *SAIKAKU ICHIDAI ONNA* (*THE LIFE OF OHARU*, JP 1952) and *UGETSU MONOGATARI* (*TALES OF THE MOON AND RAIN*, JP 1953) – *SANSHO THE BAILIFF* won a top prize at the prestigious Venice Film Festival. Even so, it was billed by Daiei Studios as a melodrama, conforming to what Japanese audiences had come to associate with Mizoguchi from his prewar movies. Likewise, though *ONIBABA* was an independent film made at the Kindai Eiga Kyokai (Modern Film Association), it was commercially distributed by Toho Studios and proved highly successful at the box office.

Some might hesitate to treat films’ texts as folklore due to their non-traditional mode of transmission. In Mikel J. Koven’s estimation, cinema remains “tangential and an adjunct to the main tenants of folkloristics”.³ While there

1 Igarashi 2000, 12.

2 See Mayer 1986, 102–111.

3 Koven 2003, 190. Subsequent exceptions include Sherman/Koven 2007; Koven 2008; Greenhill 2012. In these works, however, the focus falls overwhelmingly on Western cinema and folklore, with scant attention paid to East Asian films and religion.

are often good methodological reasons for the way that disciplinary horizons are drawn, this article stresses instead the interdisciplinary interrelations between ancient folklore and modern cinema, especially in the ways that both forms of narrative converge in what Marilyn Ivy calls a “temporal structure of deferral, of loss and recovery”.⁴ Rather than being beholden to a single definition of what folklore or religion should be, it would be more productive to consider how manifestations of religious folklore in popular media function like folklore and religion – and how they engage conventions and sensibilities that have been pre-shaped by the earlier narratives in the first place.⁵

Traditional stories like Momotaro (“The Peach Boy”) were used before and during the war to inculcate nationalism among the populace, but what do Mizoguchi’s and Shindo’s cinematic folktales reveal about the ideological and religious discourses animating postwar Japan?⁶ Given that Shindo acknowledges his mentor Mizoguchi as his “principal influence”, what similarities and differences can we observe between these two films, perhaps in light of their philosophical worldviews or their attitudes toward Japanese history and tradition?⁷ And while Durkheimian paradigms cast folklore and religion as essentially tools for maintaining social and cultural stability, to what extent does religious folklore actually play this role in a context of radical anomie?⁸ Pursuing these lines of inquiry, this article argues that both *SANSHO THE BAILIFF* and *ONIBABA* deploy the folkloric form to critique Japan’s erstwhile militarism as the cause of postwar trauma while simultaneously reinterpreting nostalgic ideals of Japaneseness for spiritual and cultural reconstruction.

The first section of this article discusses the provenance of the films’ folkloric narratives. I pay attention not only to the directors’ approaches to their sources, but also to the function and message of these sources in their original contexts. The second section analyzes the films’ critical functions, grounded in their subversion of key motifs in their sources to convey Japan’s

4 Ivy 1995, 67.

5 See Bird 1996, 346 for a similar argument. See also Plate 2017 and Lyden 2019 for broadly functionalist and pragmatic understandings of the interrelations between religion and cinema.

6 On the nativist and ethnocentric uses of the *Momotaro* tale to enshrine the heroic “Japanese spirit”, see Antoni 1991.

7 See Wakeman 1987, 1021.

8 See Bascom 1954; Durkheim 2001; Hausner 2013.

dual role as both perpetrator and victim of suffering. *SANSHO THE BAILIFF* suggests that Japan's cruelty toward conquered territories during the war led to the spiritual enslavement of its own citizens, while *ONIBABA* blames imperial ambition and arrogance as the root causes of Japan's atomic devastation. Finally, in the third section I examine the films' constructive functions through the lens of their female protagonists. For Mizoguchi, Anju – exemplifying his ideal of the virtuous, self-sacrificial woman – betokens the hope to be found in humanistic compassion. But for Shindo, it is a lusty, anti-heroic old woman who represents the indefatigable will to survive, however scarred or blighted the present may be.

Origins

SANSHO THE BAILIFF opens with two evocative shots of stony, grassy ruins. An intertitle frames its narrative as an ancient legend that “has been retold by the people for centuries, treasured today as one of the epic folktales of history” (see fig. 1). Variations of this tale, sometimes known as The Legend of Anju and Zushio, began circulating during the medieval and early Edo periods, such as in the form of “sermon-ballads” (*sekkyo bushi*) sung by itinerant priests and blind minstrels.⁹ The narrative's basic structure revolves around the trials and tribulations of two siblings. Though they are from a noble family, Anju and Zushio become enslaved as children after a series of misfortunes. In the compound, the slaves suffer under a cruel bailiff named Sansho. After many years, and through courage and sacrifice, Zushio finally escapes. At the story's end, he is restored to nobility and assumes high office. In these incarnations, even as it entertained, the legend was a morality tale with didactic and hortatory functions. Besides upholding Buddhist teachings on karma and the importance of faith, the versions of this tale were also encouragements “meant for a dispossessed people who could identify with the characters or with their plight”.¹⁰ A syncretistic variant of the tale, discovered in the region of Tsugaru in rural northeastern Japan, culminates in Anju's fantastical apotheosis and ends with this message: “Without undergoing so much suffering, one can't become a deity, and so, human

9 For detailed accounts of the *sekkyo bushi* genre and premodern versions of the legend, see Ishii 1989 and Matisoff 1992, from which the term “sermon ballad” comes.

10 Andrew 2000, 49.

Fig. 1: “It has been retold by the people for centuries, and it is treasured today as one of the epic folktales of history.” Film still *SANSHO THE BAILIFF* (Kenji Mizoguchi, JP 1954), 00:02:35.



beings, that is why you should hold firm faith to the gods.”¹¹ In their original contexts, the premodern legends also served what William R. Bascom terms the projective and validatory functions of folklore in culture.¹² Through the gruesome retribution that Sansho receives – he is buried in sand for three days before being decapitated with a bamboo saw – wandering outcasts and indigents gave vent to resentment against feudal oppression.¹³ At the same time, the tale basically affirmed the prevailing social order of its day: Zushio is reinstated to nobility when he becomes a provincial governor at the end.

While Mizoguchi was probably familiar with famous medieval versions of the legend, his inspiration for *SANSHO THE BAILIFF* came from Ogai’s modern retelling. This brings a doubled complexity to the film’s provenance. In *Rekishi sono mama to rekishi banare* (*History as It Is and History Ignored*), an essay often read as an afterword to his short story, Ogai reveals that he wrote “without examining the legend in too much detail”, and instead allowed himself to be “taken by a dreamlike image of this story that seems

11 See Susan Matisoff and Jeffrey Angles’ translation of this tale – titled “An Account of the Life of the Deity of Mount Iwaki” – in the booklet accompanying the Criterion release of *SANSHO THE BAILIFF*.

12 Bascom 1954, 348. In this landmark study, Bascom delineates four essential functions of folklore. First, it serves as a “projective system”, allowing legitimate outlets for repressed desires and emotions. Second, it plays a key role in “validating culture”, legitimizing its social institutions and rituals. Third, it plays a pedagogical role. And fourth, it promotes and enforces conformity to established norms of behavior.

13 Matisoff 1992, 250; Barrett 1989, 144.

itself a dream”.¹⁴ At first blush, the looseness of Ogai’s adaptation may seem to compromise the film’s folkloric vintage. Yet these concerns dissipate in view of the structure, function, and reception of Ogai’s story.

First, whether in terms of plot or character, his story is in fact largely faithful to the medieval legend. The differences (which I discuss later) lie in the details and underlying messages. Second, by exalting “lost virtues and values that depended on a rigid social hierarchy and conservative views of women” and presenting “correctives to the liberal excesses of his day”, Ogai’s tale – like its oral source – squarely performs the validatory, pedagogical, and disciplinary roles that Bascom observes in classic folklore.¹⁵ And third, because of its literary success and widespread popularity, Ogai’s story is effectively the definitive version of the folktale, so much so that it is lauded as a “true, touching picture of ancient and modern Japan” and of “the native Japanese spirit at its best”.¹⁶

Mizoguchi got the idea of adapting Ogai’s short story from his friend the director Daisuke Ito. During the 1930s and wartime years, Mizoguchi made several propaganda films and even travelled to China with the army to work with the Shochiku-China Film Company. Noel Burch takes these films as signs of Mizoguchi’s “ideological plasticity”.¹⁷ But Shindo’s interviews with Mizoguchi’s closest collaborators in *ARU EIGA KANTOKU NO SHOGAI: MIZOGUCHI KENJI NO KIROKU* (*KENJI MIZOGUCHI: THE LIFE OF A FILM DIRECTOR*, Kaneto Shindo, JP 1975) paint a nuanced portrait of him as torn between the need to survive as a filmmaker and the desire to maintain artistic and personal integrity in a difficult situation.¹⁸ *SANSHO THE BAILIFF* screenwriter Yoshikata Yoda notes that after the war, Mizoguchi was not fully persuaded by the new democracy proclaimed by the American occupation. As Japan reeled from the economic, political, and cultural impacts of its defeat – a defeat still raw in the minds of its populace in the early 1950s – Mizoguchi felt that the way forward lay in the transformation and evolution of Japanese tradition. It was against this background that he decided to retell the *Sansho* legend.

Like *SANSHO THE BAILIFF*, *ONIBABA* opens in a patently folkloric register. Before the title appears, the camera comes to rest on a hole in the middle of

14 Mori 1991a, 182.

15 Cavanaugh 2000, 19.

16 Mori 1970, v, ix.

17 Burch 1979, 276.

18 See also *TONY RAYNS ON SANSHO DAYU* (*Masters of Cinema*, GB 2007).



Fig. 2: “The hole ... Deep and dark... A dark passageway from ancient times to the present.” Film still ONIBABA (Kaneto Shindo, JP 1964), 00:01:05.

a patch of grass. An enigmatic pronouncement reads, “The hole ... Deep and dark ... A dark passageway from ancient times to the present” (see fig. 2). The sense of primeval mystery conveys the antique and legendary nature of the tale about to unfold. Shindo explains that the film was inspired by *The Mask of Flesh*, a fable derived from a compendium of medieval Buddhist tales titled *Ofumi*.¹⁹ Written by Rennyo (1415–1499), the charismatic Shin Buddhist patriarch credited for the popularization of Jodo Shinshu, these tales taught Buddhist precepts to commoners in understandable terms. The moral of the story in *The Mask of Flesh* is simple. A crusty, elderly mother-in-law dons a demon mask to scare her pious, widowed daughter-in-law out of visiting the temple frequently. But the plan backfires. The mask magically sticks to the older woman’s face – and comes off only when she chants the *nembutsu* (an invocation of the Amida Buddha) in contrition.²⁰ In this fable, regular piety and faith in the Buddha are squarely commended.

Shindo’s deployment of the folktale lies at the intersection of two trajectories in his own artistic development and mirrors the evolving concerns of postwar Japanese society. On the one hand, *ONIBABA* belongs to a series of works that explore the aftermath of the 1945 atomic bombings. Starting with the screenplay he wrote for *NAGASAKI NO KANE* (*THE BELL OF NAGASA-*

19 See Shindo’s essay – titled “Waving Susuki Fields” – in the booklet accompanying the Criterion release of *ONIBABA*.

20 See Reina Higashitani and Moto Tohda’s translation of this tale – titled “A Mask with Flesh Scared a Wife” – in the booklet accompanying the Criterion release of *ONIBABA*.

KI, Hideo Oba, JP 1950), Shindo, who was born in Hiroshima in 1912, also directed films like *GENBAKU NO KO* (CHILDREN OF HIROSHIMA, JP 1952), *DAIGO FUKUYRU MARU* (LUCKY DRAGON NO. 5, JP 1958), and *HONNO* (LOST SEX, JP 1966). With *ONIBABA*, these films constitute what some film scholars view as “the most important and undervalued body of work dealing with the atomic bomb in Japanese cinema”.²¹

On the other hand, the production of *ONIBABA* in 1964 falls near the beginning of Shindo’s turn to the theme of human sexuality, a theme that Japanese New Wave contemporaries like Nagisa Oshima, Yasuzo Masumura, and Shohei Imamura also unabashedly pursued. Where earlier works like *SANSHO THE BAILIFF* often wrestled with the war’s immediate consequences, New Wave works also grappled with fresh issues that had arisen from further processes of social differentiation and cultural transformation. After *HAHA* (MOTHER, JP 1963) and *ONIBABA* (1964), Shindo made *AKUTOU* (SCOUNDREL, JP 1965), *HONNO* (LOST SEX, JP 1966), *SEI NO KIGEN* (LIBIDO, JP 1967), and *YABU NO NAKA NO KURONEKO* (A BLACK CAT IN A BAMBOO GROVE, JP 1968). Based on Shindo’s confessed view that sex is the “very foundation of human life”, these films use human sexuality as a prism through which to view basic existential questions on “how human beings live”.²² Driven by these two overarching trajectories at play in Japan’s postwar environment, Shindo turned to ancient folklore like *The Mask of Flesh* for illumination. As he explains in an interview with Joan Mellen, he sought in particular to adapt fables with “universal and modern implications” that could help with “reevaluating primitive man’s energy and identity”.²³

Critique

According to Bascom, classic folklore is characterized by a “basic paradox”: even while it provides cathartic relief for societal repressions, its ultimate function lies in “transmitting and maintaining the institutions of a culture and in forcing the individual to conform to them”.²⁴ For Mizoguchi and Shin-

21. Lowenstein 2005, 83. For a succinct biography of Shindo’s life and career, see Bickerton 2012.

22. See *KANETO SHINDO ON ONIBABA* (The Criterion Collection, US 2003).

23. Mellen 1975, 91.

24. Bascom 1954, 349.

do, however, the key paradox no longer lies in the interplay between sublimated wishful thinking, cultural validation, and the disciplines of power. Instead, it lies in the ways that both filmmakers simultaneously recall and subvert traditional cultural paradigms for critical as well as constructive purposes. In this section, I focus on how their cinematic folktales critique Japan's twin role as perpetrator and victim of suffering.

SANSHO THE BAILIFF alters Ogai's folktale at key junctures to expose Japan's militaristic violence as the cause of its citizens' spiritual devastation both during and after the war. The opening intertitles state that the story is set in the late Heian period (794–1185), "an era when mankind had not yet awakened as human beings". Given that postwar films were almost always concerned with the transformation of Japan into a democratic society, audiences would have understood these words as an invitation to political allegoresis. Mark Le Fanu notes, as well, that *SANSHO THE BAILIFF* serves as an allegorical commentary on the war, with "the cruelties of the medieval slave compound interchanging metaphorically and seamlessly with the yet more terrible cruelties of the modern concentration camps".²⁵

The film amplifies the family's suffering at points where Ogai's story feels muted. In earlier versions of the legend (including Ogai's), Tamaki, the children's mother, simply spends her days fending off birds from a field after being separated from her family. But in the film, she is first trafficked by slave traders to a brothel – mirroring the plight of countless "comfort women", both Japanese and non-Japanese, who were forced into sex slavery during the war. About midway through the film, when she is caught escaping to find her children, her tendons are severed to prevent her from escaping again. After protracted sequences of futile struggle and anguished cries for mercy, the vicious operation takes place off-screen, signaled by Tamaki's blood-curdling shriek and the other prostitutes' turning of their faces. The shot composition here can only gesture toward the unspeakable trauma suffered by victims of sex slavery.

The film is also unflinching in depicting the physical torture and spiritual degradation of the slave compounds. In the oldest versions of the folktale, slaves caught escaping are punished by branding.²⁶ In Ogai's version, though Anju and Zushio both have dreams of being branded, branding never actually takes place anywhere within the story; it is only proclaimed as a threat.

25 Le Fanu 2013.

26 Mori 1991a, 182.



Fig. 3: Sansho's son Taro refuses to brand a slave and withdraws into the background. Film still *SANSHO THE BAILIFF* (Kenji Mizoguchi, JP 1954), 00:32:48.



Fig. 4: Zushio, his heart now hardened and disenchanted, steps up to brand a slave under Sansho's approving eyes. Film still *SANSHO THE BAILIFF* (Kenji Mizoguchi, JP 1954), 00:44:10.

Mizoguchi retrieves the explicit depiction of torture present in oral variants of the tale. *SANSHO THE BAILIFF* uses off-screen diegesis again for two key shots of torture: when Sansho himself brands an old slave called Namiji early on, and when the grown-up Zushio brands another old slave caught escaping. The violence of slavery assumes spiritual proportions. In all other versions of the folktale the children maintain their childlike purity despite their vicissitudes. Only in Mizoguchi's film does Zushio fall from innocence. His heart gradually becomes callused from the injustice of their fate. By doing what Sansho's son Taro had refused (branding runaway slaves), Zushio performs and internalizes the cruel ideology of his captors. Via two parallel sequences that play on the positioning of Sansho/Taro and Zushio/Sansho within the frame (see fig. 3 and fig. 4), the cinematography casts Zushio

as Sansho's spiritual heir.²⁷ Even the womenfolk in the compound gossip, "He must be the son of a bandit." More than abandoning his noble origins, Zushio renounces the principle of compassion that his father, Masauji, had imparted: "A man is not a human being without mercy. Even if you are hard on yourself, be merciful to others. Men are created equal. Everyone is entitled to their happiness."

With these modifications, Mizoguchi imbues the original folktale with richer religious significance. The film now tells the journey of the fall and redemption of a human soul, in turn metonymic of the larger Japanese body politic. This politico-religious discourse is further evident in two other crucial modifications. The first detail concerns the culprit who sells Tamaki and her children into slavery. In Ogai's tale, they are tricked by a sailor named Yamaoka Tayu, who first appears holding a Buddhist rosary in his hands. But in Mizoguchi's film, the culprit is a Shinto priestess who cunningly invites them to spend the night at her shrine. Her identity as an icon of Shintoism is clear from her priestly garb, the background altar, and the shide, or paper streamers, adorning her quarters. Just as Shinto was disgraced after the war for its "legitimation of the prewar state and [...] state-sponsored myths of the cultural identity of the Japanese people", by making this modification Mizoguchi pointedly critiques the nation-state's abuse of religion for causing the pain and enslavement of many.²⁸

Second, whereas in Ogai's tale Masauji gives his children a statue of the Jizo bodhisattva as a keepsake, in Mizoguchi's film it is a statue of Kannon – the bodhisattva of compassion – that is passed down. In the former, Jizo represents supernatural protection; in the latter, Kannon embodies the activist mercy that guides the family's destiny. When Zushio hurls the Kannon statue to the ground, decries its impotence, and declares that "it's better to be loyal to the bailiff and get on his good side", what we witness is a heart that has grown weary of virtue, that has renounced religious idealism for harsh realpolitik. Just as a disillusioned Zushio has strayed from his father's doctrine, militaristic Japan, too, has forsaken her forefathers' spiritual heritage.

Following in his mentor's footsteps, in *ONIBABA* Shindo transforms a straightforward folktale of Buddhist faith into a keen critique of Japan's militarist past. To begin with, whereas the widowed daughter-in-law and moth-

27 Carole Cavanaugh makes a similar observation; see Cavanaugh 2000, 22–23.

28 Hardacre 1991, 133.

er-in-law are named (Kiyō and Omoto) in *The Mask of Flesh*, they are conspicuously nameless in *ONIBABA*. Denying them proper names, Shindo casts them as archetypes of the countless common folk whose lives have been blighted by the war. Mirroring their lives amidst endless susuki fields – these fields of enormous reeds allow them to hide, kill, and survive – their anonymity reveals the film’s focus on those “totally abandoned, outside society’s political protection”. As Shindo explains, the “tall, dense, swaying reeds represent the world in which these commoners live and to which the eyes of lords and politicians do not reach. My eyes, or rather, the camera’s eye is fixed to view the world from the very lowest level of society, not from the top.”²⁹

The mask in the mother-in-law’s ruse further advances the film’s politico-religious discourse. In the older fable, Omoto’s mask is a family heirloom that she already owns. It is simply a prop that she uses to frighten Kiyō and does not signify much else. In *ONIBABA*, however, the older woman comes to possess the demon mask via somewhat tortuous means. After orchestrating a masked samurai general’s plunge to death, she descends to the bottom of the pit – strewn with the remains of others whom she and her daughter-in-law plundered – to rip the mask from his face. The motivations behind this act are laden with allegorical import. The older woman’s decision to murder the samurai arises, for one, from her vengeful protest against the ruling classes and the suffering that their wars have brought to commoners. When pretending to lead him toward the path to Kyoto, she taunts, “Did you cause many soldiers to die? A cruel thing. The dead died in vain. The dead can never come back to life.” Within Japan’s postwar context, this is clearly an indictment of the ruling classes, whose imperialist ambitions caused the demise of troops and innocent civilians.

Moments later, watching the samurai fall into the abyss, she snarls, “Serves you right. Men like you killed my son!” Glaring down into the hole while making this pronouncement, she stares straight at the camera positioned for an extreme low angle shot (see fig. 5) – as if she were addressing, in a stark reversal of power dynamics, the disgraced militarists of wartime Japan.

Her decision to kill the samurai general also arises from an intense desire to see his face. As they walk through the susuki fields, he shares that his real reason for wearing a mask is not so that he can look fierce, but rather because he fears marring his face – “the most beautiful face in Kyoto” – in bat-

29 Mellen 1975, 80.



Fig. 5: In an extreme low angle shot, the old woman gazes down into the hole and snarls at the fallen samurai general, “Serves you right. Men like you killed my son!” Film still ONIBABA (Kaneto Shindo, JP 1964), 01:11:40.



Fig. 6: Unmasking the samurai general’s “most beautiful face”. Shindo used photographs of maimed hibakusha (survivors of atomic bombing) to design the disfigured faces of the samurai and the old woman at the film’s end. Film still ONIBABA (Kaneto Shindo, JP 1964), 01:15:59.

tle. He haughtily dismisses her repeated pleas to see his face, claiming that she would be unable to bear beholding his glorious countenance, that his is “not a face to show peasants”. This exchange constitutes a commentary on the prewar imperial cult. Were not the Japanese people, too, forbidden from seeing the face of the divine emperor? And were not countless soldiers sacrificed in the name of mythologized, nativist Beauty? The commentary climaxes when the older woman eventually pries the mask off the general’s corpse, only to reveal a face hideously disfigured by scars and boils (see fig. 6). After recovering from a moment of shock, she sarcastically remarks, “So this is the most beautiful face?” Arguably, this movement from denoue-

ment to surprise to scorn mirrors the psychic aftermath of the infamous *gyokuon hoso*, or “jewel voice broadcast”. This radio broadcast, declaring Japan’s surrender after the twin bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki in August 1945, was the first time that the nation heard their emperor’s voice. Yet, due to Hirohito’s alien royal diction and circumlocutory message, it led not to awe but instead to confusion, bewilderment, and politico-religious disenchantment. Further, via the older woman’s final words to the general’s corpse (“You caused others to die. You deserve this punishment”), Shindo expresses his view – as he did in *CHILDREN OF HIROSHIMA* – that “Japan, who is guilty of her own share of wartime atrocities, bears equal responsibility for what happened at Hiroshima”.³⁰

ONIBABA’S politico-religious critique emerges through a third crucial alteration: rather than regularly visiting the temple because she had “found meaning in her life” through Rennyō’s teachings,³¹ the young woman in the film sneaks out at night for trysts with her lover, Hachi, a former neighbor who has returned from the same war that killed her husband. The symbolism of the susuki fields comes to the fore here. During the day, the three go through the motions of hunting, fishing, and washing by the grassy riverbanks, exchanging suggestive glances disclosing the triangular desire between them (the older woman lusts for Hachi herself). At night, the young woman races through the fields, now dark and foreboding, to Hachi’s hut for their regular romps. By day or by night, “whether moving like big waves, or slowly, or forcefully”, the ubiquitous swaying grass, Shindo explains, “symbolically represents sexual desires and emotions”. In this world, the mother-in-law is punished not for attempting to hinder religious piety, but rather for blocking the natural ebb and flow of eros, an “innate spiritual part of humanity”.³²

Compared to Omoto in *The Mask of Flesh*, the older woman in ONIBABA is far more complex. She is, as Adam Lowenstein puts it, “the key that unlocks the film’s ambivalent presentation of victimization and war responsibility”.³³ By using the samurai’s mask to empower herself and restore the status quo (the younger woman’s affair with Hachi threatens her survival, for she is unable to kill and plunder alone), she has – like Zushio – internalized the meth-

30 Mellen 1976, 202.

31 See footnote 20.

32 See footnote 19.

33 Lowenstein 2005, 87.

ods of her oppressors. Though a widow acquainted with sexual frustration herself, she inflicts on her daughter-in-law the same crime of “reproductive oppression” that she has suffered under the ruling classes, whose war “destroys the masses in a way more sinister than outright killing: the sexual drive itself is perverted when families are torn apart”.³⁴ Her identification with the psychology of her oppressors is further seen in her abuse of religious rhetoric. Just as during the war “myth, legend, and fairy-tale materials that were once independent [...] were gathered together into a homogeneous whole to serve a political and legitimizing purpose”, the older woman exploits Buddhist doctrines of hell and moral injunctions against fornication (“a great priest said so”) to baptize her agenda with an aura of sanctity.³⁵ At work here, altogether, is a self-reflexive statement on the nature and function of the folkloric mode. Using photographs of maimed hibakusha (survivors of atomic bombing) to design the disfigured faces of the samurai and the older woman, Shindo hints at the catastrophic consequences that can arise when folklore’s validatory powers are misused.³⁶

Reconstruction

Up till this point, I have shown how *SANSHO THE BAILIFF* and *ONIBABA* adapt traditional folktales to mount penetrating critiques of postwar Japan’s physical and spiritual desolation. But as Dudley Andrew reminds us, folklore and legends also “store primitive power that can be called up as required but that no adaptation exhausts”.³⁷ This final section investigates the riches of “primitive power” harnessed in these two filmic folktales. Specifically, I examine the ways that they nostalgically depict, for the sake of spiritual reconstruction in the face of anomie, a “Japan as created by a ‘pre-existent people’ [that] challenges modern Japan to resemble their ancient ancestors”.³⁸

Like the medieval legends that gave cheer and solace to the dispossessed, *SANSHO THE BAILIFF*’s opening shots of ruined pillars adumbrate the hope that persists even in devastation. Though the structure that they once supported

34 McDonald 2006, 119.

35 Antoni 1991, 156.

36 Lowenstein 2005, 87.

37 Andrew 2000, 44.

38 Andrew 2000, 44.

is no longer present, there remain traces of its foundations, foundations that perchance provide a blueprint for rebuilding a blighted nation and its culture. The will to retrieve wisdom from the past is signaled by several recurrent motifs. In the opening scenes, as Tamaki travels with her brood to Tsukushi to reunite with their exiled father, Masauji, the editing uses many fades and dissolves. More than establishing background information for narrative coherence, the repeated flashbacks frame the film's spiritual vision in a mnemonic register. Consider the sequence where a past scene of Masauji's humiliation (for trying to protect the peasants despite having been stripped of his governorship) dissolves into a present shot of Tamaki by a stream. Here, her gentle scooping of water betokens the re-collection of old virtue from the recesses of time.

The salvific power of memory is most powerfully conveyed in the two parallel scenes where the siblings gather twigs. The first occurs during their childhood, when their hearts are still bright and upright. They are gathering straw and grass to spend the night, right before they are unwittingly delivered into slavery. The second unfolds when they are young adults. Zushio's heart has grown cold and hardened from years of slavery, and they are gathering twigs to keep the sick Namiji warm even as she is left to die in the mountains. The synchronistic recapitulation of this activity – on both occasions, they fall to the ground after breaking a branch together – triggers Zushio's repentance. His second fall reminds him of who he used to be and who he must again aspire to become. At the end of both sequences, Tamaki's heart-rending voice calls for their return; it is a “mother's cry [...] to reawaken in those who hearken to it a memory” of nobility and virtue.³⁹ In concert with the religious significance of names in traditional Japanese folktales,⁴⁰ Zushio's redemption is sealed when he receives a new name at the film's end: Masamichi, meaning “righteous path”.

Where does this “righteous path” lead? The answer – the core of the film's constructive spiritual power – lies in two characters who each represent a nostalgic nativist ideal. First there is Masauji, who embodies egalitarian, humane governance. In Ogai's source, he is exiled for committing an offense against a temple; in Ogai's own retelling, it is because he was “implicated in some misdemeanor”.⁴¹ Both versions are vague on details, but a specter

39 Andrew 2000, 46.

40 Mayer 1974, 80.

41 Mori 1991a, 182, 176.

of ignominy nonetheless remains. Mizoguchi, however, turns Masauji into a political martyr who is exiled for resisting the injustices of medieval feudalism. While traveling to meet Masauji, Tamaki tells Zushio, “We are walking the same road that your father walked.” And when mother and son are finally reunited at the end, she tells him, “I know you have followed your father’s teachings. That’s why we can meet again.” Just as Tamaki shepherds and affirms Zushio’s path, the film beckons viewers to follow the footsteps of its moral exemplars.

Scholars point out that Masauji’s egalitarian ideals “do not exist in Japanese tradition”⁴² and that they are actually modern projections reflecting Japan’s participation in the humanistic ethos of postwar global society.⁴³ While there is much historical validity to this reading, I argue that in Masauji, Mizoguchi draws out what he saw as latent in the Japanese Buddhist tradition. Rather than being entirely anachronistic, Masauji’s political humanism was a potential already present in his Buddhist faith, a seed that had yet to fully blossom during the time in which the folktale was set or arose. A few years before making *SANSHO THE BAILIFF*, Mizoguchi embraced Nichiren Buddhism, a faith that, pregnantly enough, his own father also held.⁴⁴ Moreover, Masauji’s Buddhist activism is in fact not alien to the religious milieu of Kamakura Japan (1185–1333), during which oral versions of the legend first circulated. Whether manifest in Shinran’s (1173–1262) Pure Land emphasis that Amida’s efficacious mercy is open to all, or in Nichiren’s (1222–1282) commitment to socio-religious reform, during the Kamakura period Buddhism became “democratized as a religion of faith” and elevated the inherent dignity of the individual with unprecedented force.⁴⁵ Mizoguchi’s folktale invites postwar viewers to aspire to a version of religious history as it could have been in the past – and as it could be in the future.

The second character at the heart of the film is none other than Anju, who, even more than her father, embodies the salvific power of compassionate self-donation. By casting her as the saintly heroine of the film, Mizoguchi is not unlike Ogai, who used folklore as “a vehicle of his hermeneutical discovery of ontological dimensions of personal and cultural experience – and as a

42 Cavanaugh 2000, 36.

43 Andrew 2000, 65–66. See also Chapman 1991 and Buruma 2003.

44 Shields 2011, 326.

45 Heinemann 1984, 265, 262.

vehicle of his literary typology of ideal human qualities”.⁴⁶ But the film’s idealization of Anju assumes devotional and religious dimensions absent in Ogai’s story. The film historian Tadao Sato observes that *SANSHO THE BAILIFF* belongs to a long list of Mizoguchi films featuring the “veneration of womanhood”, a theme linked to Mizoguchi’s own admiration of his elder sister, who became a geisha to support their impoverished family.⁴⁷ More specifically, Anju’s self-sacrifice – after Zushio and Namiji escape, she commits suicide so that she will not divulge their whereabouts under torture – parallels the other-oriented redemption accomplished through the suffering of virtuous women in Mizoguchi’s *TAKI NO SHIRAITO (THE WATER MAGICIAN, JP 1933)* and *ZANGIKU MONOGATARI (THE STORY OF THE LAST CHRYSANTHEMUM, JP 1939)*, prewar films marked by what Darrell William Davis calls the “monumental style”:

The appeal to the sacred is the work that films in the monumental style perform on the traditional forms they appropriate from the past and is also the quality that gives them a strong pull toward the mythic, the nativist, the ultranationalistic [...] [The monumental style] is a prewar cinema permeated by a hieratic, sacramental appropriation of a classical heritage in order to promote an apotheosis of Japanese national identity.⁴⁸

Though Davis restricts the monumental style to prewar Japanese cinema, it provides a suitable assist for understanding *SANSHO THE BAILIFF*’s use of folklore, now channeled toward irenic ends and tempered by non-triumphalist forms of nationalism.

In Ogai’s source, Anju is brutally tortured and killed for helping Zushio escape. And in Ogai’s own version, Anju’s death is suggested when Sansho’s search party finds “a pair of small straw sandals at the edge of the swamp at the bottom of the hill”.⁴⁹ In contrast, *SANSHO THE BAILIFF* draws on traditional Japanese aesthetics to depict Anju’s suicide with a “monumental” sensitivity. When shooting Anju’s slow walk into the river, the cinematographer Kazuo Miyagawa took pains to compose shots in the manner of traditional sumi-e, or “black ink” brush painting (see fig. 7).⁵⁰ We also hear in the back-

46 Dilworth 1991, 39.

47 See TADAO SATO ON *SANSHO THE BAILIFF* (The Criterion Collection, US 2007).

48 Davis 1996, 44–45.

49 Mori 1991b, 174.

50 See Jeffrey Angles’s commentary on this scene in the Criterion Collection edition of the film.

Fig. 7: Anju's suicide. Mizoguchi and his cinematographer, Kazuo Miyagawa, took pains to evoke the aesthetics of traditional sumi-e, or black ink brush painting, in this shot. Notice how the ripples in the pond resemble a nimbus. Film still *SANSHO THE BAILIFF* (Kenji Mizoguchi, JP 1954), 01:11:50.



ground Tamaki's plaintive song ("Zushio, how I long for you! Anju, how I long for you! Isn't life torture?"), accompanied by the faint cadences of the shamisen. Against the tremulous hues of light gray and white into which Anju gradually submerges, the music infuses the sequence with a sense of ethereality and transcendence. As Gregory Barrett observes, "on the religious level [Anju's] self-sacrifice represents the sacred aspect of overcoming selfishness", a veritable source of sin and delusion across time and place.⁵¹ In this scene we witness nothing less than the visual transfiguration of Anju: giving herself for the liberation of many, she becomes a living avatar of Kannon. Drawing from wellsprings of Buddhist religiosity, Mizoguchi adapts the medieval legend and Ogai's tale to underscore the liberative powers of compassion, now embodied in a virtuous, self-sacrificial Japanese woman. If "without compassion man is not human", then as the personification of compassion Anju exemplifies how one becomes human again in the postwar world.

Like his mentor Mizoguchi, Shindo uses a feminine ideal for his vision of existential aspiration – albeit in a radically different way. In Sato's appraisal, while Shindo's cinematic feminism "blossomed under his master's encouragement", in contrast to Mizoguchi's heroines his are "neither naively beautiful nor awe-inspiring".⁵² The eponymous character of *ONIBABA* harks back to something to be found in Japan's past, but not in the forms and

51 Barrett 1989, 155.

52 Wakeman 1987, 1023.

institutions of Japanese tradition per se. Borne by the countercultural New Wave that arose in the decade after the American occupation (1945–1952), in Shindo's filmic-folkloric world there are no formal paradigms of religiosity to venerate, no medieval models of humanism to emulate. In place of the ruined pillars at the start of *SANSHO THE BAILIFF*, the dark, grassy hole in *ONIBABA*'s opening shot – suggestive of the vagina – points to a primordial energy: the elemental drive for survival, vitality, and regeneration that pulses through sexual desire.

The devastation of war is a double-edged sword in *ONIBABA*. On the one hand, it has inflicted great suffering on the populace, not least on the two women. Having lost the only man in their family, they eke out a hand-to-mouth existence by murdering and plundering soldiers who end up in the susuki fields. After their first kill in the film, we see them in their hut, wolfing down food with their bare hands and falling asleep while chewing. The pulsating drumbeats and bestial cries in the background soundtrack highlight the savagery of their way of life. On the other hand, this mode of existence proves revelatory: by stripping away the adventitious trappings of civilization, war uncovers that which is most fundamental to human life. Besides the primary need for food and water, erotic desire – rather than religious piety per se – is the engine that drives the narrative. The older woman thwarts the younger's relationship with Hachi not only because she fears not having a means of subsistence, but also because she jealously covets a man herself. For instance, after spying on the couple's love-making, the old woman staggers deliriously through the susuki fields. The intensity of her pain is palpable as she groans while straddling a phallic tree trunk. The camera then slowly tilts upward to show a close-up of the tree's desiccated bark and branches, which symbolically lay bare the barrenness of her sexless life.

If sexual deprivation torments and dehumanizes, sexual intimacy becomes a fount of joy and vigor even in the middle of devastation. In one of the most kinetic sequences in the film, the couple run naked through the fields, their ecstatic merriment conveyed through rapid cross-cutting and echoes of laughter. The hardships of war dissolve as the couple recover, through sex, a moment of paradisaical bliss. Instead of serving as camouflage for killing and plundering, the susuki fields are now an Eden (or a Pure Land) where humanity is restored to sensuous harmony with nature. When curating the soundscape for these scenes with the composer Hikaru Hiyashi, Shindo deliberately included the cooing of pigeons, known for

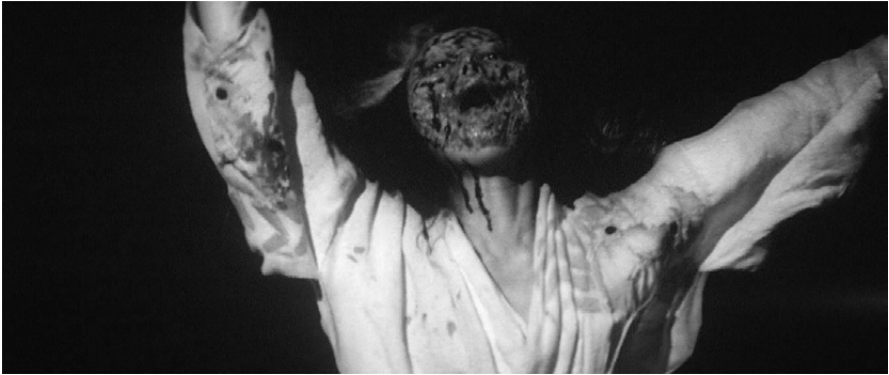


Fig. 8: ONIBABA abruptly ends with a series of cuts replaying the old woman's jump over the hole. The indeterminacy and energy of these final shots convey hope and resilience. Film still ONIBABA (Kaneto Shindo, JP 1964), 01:42:30.

their fecundity and libido.⁵³ The younger woman's passion for Hachi even emboldens her to resist (what she thinks is) a demon. In these ways, Shindo exalts eros as the one force that can drive postwar reconstruction and rehumanization.

The full thrust of Shindo's discourse on human nature comes at the film's end. When the old woman realizes that the mask is glued to her face after the rain, she confesses her ploy to her daughter-in-law and asks for help. The young woman obliges on the condition that she be allowed to be with Hachi. When she finally pries the mask off, she is horrified to see her mother-in-law's disfigured face. Believing that the old woman has turned into a demon, she flees from their hut. Oblivious of her maimed features, the older woman gives chase. As she leaps over the hole, she cries, "I'm a human being!" The film abruptly ends here with a series of cuts replaying her jump and showing different aspects of her scarred face (see fig. 8). The indeterminacy and energy of these final shots evoke a sense of hope and possibility. As Shindo explains in his interview with Mellen, the old woman's punishment is essentially spiritual in nature, "so that through suffering [he] could reveal the soul" and courage that lies within: "the destroyed face is not the end of her world. This miserable face will dry later, and she will find the day to live again. She has to find it. By destroying her face, I said something about the beginning of a new life for people who are assaulted by unexpected social

53 See KANETO SHINDO ON ONIBABA.

events.”⁵⁴ Within the postwar context, the film challenges its viewers to find the same indomitable will to live within themselves, no matter how blighted circumstances might be.

The old woman’s role as existential exemplar reveals Shindo’s creative subversion of Japanese tradition. Displacing the pious daughter-in-law in *The Mask of Flesh* as the heroine and instead affirming the unlikely virtues of the mother-in-law, *ONIBABA* shows how folklore must be dynamically reinvented if it is to foster human well-being. Compared to Mizoguchi’s idealized women – who, like prewar paradigms of Japanese femininity, still embody desexualized beauty and motherly/sororal sacrifice – the anti-heroic old woman stands as a thoroughly flawed and earthy ideal.⁵⁵ As David Desser writes in a psychoanalytic vein: “*ONIBABA* reveals what [Mizoguchi] suppressed, namely, that women cling to life and survive by asserting their sexual essences, that women, more than men, can cope with times of terror.”⁵⁶ In contrast to Anju’s saintly perfection, Shindo’s “demon hag” stares straight into the eyes of postwar trauma and thus presents a realistic model for existential aspiration.

Conclusion

Against hermeneutical frameworks that draw a sharp line between original narratives and their subsidiary expressions, the historian of religions Jonathan Z. Smith argues that myths are best understood as strategies for responding to specific existential needs and situations: “There is no pristine myth; there is only application [...] That is to say, the incongruity of myth is not an error, it is the very source of its power.”⁵⁷ In much the same way, *SANSHO THE BAILIFF* and *ONIBABA* demonstrate the critical and constructive deployments of religious folklore within the postwar Japanese context. Though the ideals that Anju and the old woman represent are almost diametrically opposed, they are not mutually exclusive. Viewed together, they offer a choice between religious idealism and earthy realism – between self-giving compassion and ontogenetic eros – which compose comple-

54 Mellen 1975, 81–82, 86.

55 Lowenstein 2005, 93

56 Desser 1988, 121.

57 Smith 1993, 299.

mentary poles for balanced reconstruction amidst socio-cultural anomie. And though the films are products of their particular time and place, their creative adaptation of traditional forms provides an instructive model for those among us who must continue to grapple with the reality of great pain.

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