

In Search of the Dragon

Mt. Murō's Sacred Topography

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This article considers the worship of the dragon, a spirit believed to reside in the caves on Mt. Murō, and the early history of the temple of Murō-ji, located in southern Nara prefecture. Throughout Murō-ji history, these dragon caves have functioned as sites considered to be particularly efficacious for conducting prayers for rain. This study uses the evidence of literature and material culture to explore the relationship between the dragon belief, agricultural rituals, and relics on Mt. Murō. A particularly compelling connection is the momitō, or rice-grain stupas, discovered inside the Miroku-dō (Maitreya Hall) on the grounds of Murō-ji.

THE MURŌ-JI 室生寺 TEMPLE COMPLEX is located in a beautifully wooded valley near Murō village in the Uda district of southern Nara prefecture, about twenty-five kilometers from the modern city of Nara. It sits at the foot of Mt. Murō, a mountain imbued with such power that it has been considered sacred since ancient times, and is now off-limits to tourists and pilgrims. The temple is perhaps best known for its impressive architecture and Buddhist images from the ninth and tenth centuries, and accordingly most investigations of Murō-ji center on the history of its grand national treasures. In this article, however, I will focus not on these treasures but on the reasons why such important properties exist at the temple. The topography of Mt. Murō may be awe-inspiring, but the element that most contributed to it as a site worthy of veneration is—the dragon.

The locale around Murō-ji is largely undeveloped and maintains an atmosphere of great antiquity. Mt. Murō, located at the center of a group of inactive volcanoes, is not a plain mountain with a single summit, but consists of several peaks, the highest reaching a height of about five hundred meters. The dramatic topography must have played a role in the selection of Mt. Murō as a sacred site.

Mountains are revered in Japan not only for their grandeur but for



Figure 1. Mt. Murō, Nara Prefecture. Some of the Murō-ji structures are visible in the valley. Photo by author.

their importance in agriculture. Clouds accumulate on peaks and rain falls on the slopes, creating streams that provide water for the fields in the area. As I will explain, rain permeates religious practice at Murō.

The oldest historical record regarding the temple is *Ben'ichizan nenbun dosha sōjō* 一山年分度者奏状, dated to Jōhei 7 (937), which records the origin of the temple and early events at the site (ŌTA 1976, p. 67). Although the original has been lost, there are three extant copies, and some fragments of a fourth, that testify that the original was dated to 937.¹ Ben'ichizan is an old name used for Mt. Murō, the location of Murō-ji. Many old documents bear the characters “Ben'ichi” 一 as an abbreviation for “Murō” 室生 in which only the top section of the first character and the bottom section of the second character are written.

The original function of the document was as a formal request to the government to obtain a *nenbun dosha* 年分度者 (yearly ordinand) to perform rain prayers. *Nenbun dosha* were qualified monks who were

¹ Two copies are now kept in the Kanagawa Kenritsu Kanazawa Bunko in Yokohama; one bears the date Shōan 3 (1301) and the other is considered to date from later in the fourteenth century. NISHIDA Nagao considers another copy, formerly owned by the Tōji Kanchiin 東寺観智院 but now in the collection of Nishida himself, to be from the mid-Kamakura period (c. 1250) (1978, pp. 195–318)

officially initiated at the beginning of every year to pray for the well-being of the country in the year to come (GRONER 1984, p. 5). In order to legitimize the request a history of the temple was included, making this the most useful document on the early history of the area.

The document states that in Hōki 8–9 (777–778) five monks were sent to the mountain to perform a long-life ceremony (*enjuhō* 延寿法) for the ailing Prince Yamabe 山部 (737–806), the future Emperor Kanmu. Kengyō 賢璟 (714–793), a Hossō school monk from Kōfuku-ji 興福寺, was one of the monks sent to perform the ceremony. Fortunately the Prince recovered, and it is assumed that because of the efficacy of the ceremony Kengyō was asked by the imperial court to establish a temple at Murō at some point between 778, the year after the ceremony, and the time of his death in Enryaku 12 (793) (TSUJI 1979, pp. 27, 77).

The document also states that a Dragon King (Ryūō 龍王) who had been residing at this site vowed to protect the country and particularly the temple complex. For this gesture the dragon king was honored with a courtly rank, as was commonly offered to deities. *Sandai jit-suroku* 三代実録 (a tenth-century history) confirms that the status of the Murō Dragon-cave deity was raised from junior fifth rank lower grade (*jugoige* 從五位下) to senior fifth rank lower grade, (*shōgoige* 正五位下) in Jōgan 9 (867), eighth month, sixteenth day (KT 4, p. 257). The *Ben'ichizan nenbun dosha sōjō* also states that the temple was named Ryūō-ji 龍王寺 (Temple of the Dragon King) in the same year. Although this name for the temple was not maintained, it shows how intimately the temple was related to the reverence of the dragon in the ninth century. This apotropaic deity of Mt. Murō was a “Buddhist” dragon, appropriated from a belief system that had been previously established in China and Korea.

Further evidence to support the early importance of the reverence for the dragon is the long tradition of rain prayers offered at Mt. Murō. The dragon in Asia has long been associated with water, and believed to be a bringer of rain. The Chinese, Korean, and Japanese dragon most likely evolved from the Indian *nāgas*, which were water-serpent deities that figured prominently in Hinduism and Buddhism (BLOSS, pp. 37–53). Throughout East Asia in times of drought it was common practice to have sutras read to encourage dragons to bring rain (VISSER 1913, pp. 30–33).

The earliest recorded date for rain prayer offerings at Mt. Murō is given in the *Ben'ichizan nenbun dosha sōjō* as Ten'ō 1 (781). The Murō-ji pagoda may have been erected by this time, but none of the other temple structures were in place. Many rain-making ceremonies are

documented at Murō in the ninth and tenth centuries, and they continued long afterward, indicating that belief in the efficacy of the dragon spirit persisted.² In the early thirteenth century, during the time of a serious drought, the custom of sending monks on summer prayer retreat (*sanrō* 参籠) to Mt. Murō was instituted by Kōfuku-ji which controlled Murō-ji as a subtemple (WASHIZUKA 1991, p. 182; TSUJI 1979, p. 164).³ Every year for the three months of summer, monks were sent to Mt. Murō for rain prayers. In later periods the length of the retreats was shortened, but they continued to be held until Murō-ji became independent of Kōfuku-ji in Genroku 7 (1694) (TSUJI 1979, p. 181).



Figure 2. Dragon cave on Mt. Murō.
Near Ryūketsu Shrine, Nara Prefecture.
Photo by author.

DRAGON CAVES

The landscape of Mt. Murō reveals physical evidence for the existence of the dragon in the form of several caves believed to be the openings to the abode of the powerful dragon spirit. Presently the shrine to the east of Murō-ji is called Ryūketsu Jinja 龍穴神社 (Dragon Cave Shrine). This shrine now maintains the cave, which is located much deeper in the mountain than the formal shrine precincts (figure 2). Once considered part of the temple complex, the shrine has been administered separately since the government issued edicts to separate Buddhism from Shinto in 1868.

The notion of the *ryū-*

² For a list of rain prayers held at Ryūketsu Jinja from Kōnin 8 (817) through Kaō 2 (1170) see TSUJI 1979, pp. 79–80. See also TSUJI 1962, pp. 184–90; VISSER 1935, pp. 508–10. Visser describes the measures taken and sutras read, including the role of Ryūketsu Shrine, during a severe drought in Tenryaku 2 (948).

³ See GRAPARD 1992, p. 77, on *sanrō*.

ketsu 龍穴, a mysterious dragon cave, was most likely imported from China or Korea, as examples abound in those countries. In Japan the *ryūketsu* at Murō are the oldest reported dragon caves (TAKAYA 1982, p. 15). An entry from Kōnin 9 (818) in the early Japanese history *Nihon kiryaku* 日本紀略 explicitly states that rain prayers were offered at the dragon cave on Mt. Murō (KT 5, p. 430).⁴ The caves are discussed in many historical documents, and some include amazing descriptions. The *Kojidan* 古事談, a collection of legends written in Kenryaku 2–Kenpō 3 (1212–1215), gives an account of a monk who entered one of the dragon caves.

The dragon cave on Mt. Murō is the dwelling place of the Dragon King Zentatsu 善達. This Dragon King previously lived in Sarusawa 猿沢 pond. Long ago when a palace lady (*uneme* 采女) drowned in the pond, the Dragon King fled to Mt. Kōzen 高山 (Mt. Kasuga), where he lived until the corpse of a low-ranking person was thrown into this pond. Then the Dragon King again fled to reside in a cave on Mt. Murō, where the Buddhist prelate Kengyō was practicing religious austerities. Kengyō was the master of the prelate Shūen 修円. Years later the priest Nittai 日對 wished to view the venerable form of the Dragon King. He entered the dragon cave and went about three or four *chō* 町 in darkness. Then he arrived at a palace under a blue sky. To the south he saw a bright light through a jeweled window screen. When the screen fluttered in the wind, he saw a section of the *Lotus Sutra* resting upon a jeweled table.⁵ Then he heard a voice asking him who he was and where he came from. Nittai answered that he wished to see the form of the Dragon King and announced his name. The Dragon King answered, “You will not be able to see me in this place. Leave this cave and go about three *chō* from the entrance.” Nittai left the cave and at the agreed-upon place he saw the Dragon King, dressed in a robe and crown, rise out of the ground and then vanish. Nittai built a shrine (社) to the Dragon King on that spot which still exists. When rain prayers are offered and sutras are read at this shrine, a black cloud forms over the cave and, spreads through the sky, and rain falls.⁶

(KT 21, pp. 102–103)

⁴ Rain prayers were offered at Kibune 貴布禰 Jinja in Kyoto on the same date, but not specifically at a dragon cave.

⁵ VISSER 1911, pp. 301–303, 317, mentions that the *Lotus Sutra* is a favorite of dragons and snakes. It is likely that this idea was perpetuated because of the story of the Nāga princess who becomes a Bodhisattva in the twelfth chapter of the *Lotus Sutra*.

⁶ See also TYLER R. 1990, p. 150. Tyler discusses how the dragon left Kasuga to come to Murō-ji in the first part of the story.

Nittai's visit through the cave (which enshrined a sutra) and subsequent vision of the dragon links a Buddhist authority with the site. Another interesting point about the legend is that it gives the pedigree of the dragon. The dragon moves from the Sarusawa pond, just south of Kōfuku-ji, then moves to a small pool in the hills above Kasuga Shrine and then finally to Murō.⁷ An entry from the diary of Jinson 尋尊 (1430–1508), *Daijōin jisha zōjiki*, from Kanshō 2 (1461) confirms that the “main place” (本所) of the Kōzen Dragon King is Murō (JINSON 1931, 3: 45). The transfer of the dragon from the Kōfuku-ji and Kasuga area to Murō is interesting in terms of the later rivalry at Murō-ji between the Shingon and Kōfuku-ji factions. As mentioned, Murō-ji was a subtemple of the Kōfuku-ji/Kasuga complex until the seventeenth century, when it became an independent Shingon temple (*Murōzan Sōron no Ki*; TSUJI 1979, pp. 189–90).

To describe the belief system of *ryūketsu* that continued at Murō-ji, I must first introduce two important documentary sources on Murō-ji from the fourteenth century, the *Ben'ichizanki* 一山記 (ZGR suppl. vol. 27, pp. 296–298) and the *Ben'ichihiki (kō)* 一秘記 (甲) (BZ 119, pp. 26–28). These nearly identical documents both claim that they were copied at the Kotōin 小塔院 of Gangō-ji 元興寺 in Nara in Shōhei 8 (1353) by the monk Yūen 融圓, age sixty-three. TSUJI Hidenori has done a considerable amount of research on these records and determined that they are both copies of an earlier primary source (1979, pp. 140, 153).

These documents present the dragon caves on Mt. Murō from the perspective of esoteric Buddhism. There are three dragon caves at Murō known from secret oral transmissions: the cave in the west is known as Sharakishhō Ryūketsu 遮羅吉祥龍穴, the one in the middle is called Jihō 持宝 Ryūketsu, and the cave in the east is Myōkishhō 妙吉祥 Ryūketsu. At Ryūketsu Jinja there is a sign requesting pilgrims to wear special white clothing and receive permission from the shrine priest (who is only present at the shrine on weekends and the fifteenth each month), before visiting the cave. About a twenty-minute walk east down the road from Ryūketsu Jinja is a dirt path up the mountain with a small sign indicating the way to the dragon cave. Presently the Myōkishhō Ryūketsu is the only cave that pilgrims are allowed to visit, as most of Mt. Murō is considered sacred and off limits. The *Ben'ichizanki* and *Ben'ichihiki (kō)* continue on to report that although Jihō Ryūketsu has been there since ancient times, only the monk Ningai

⁷ The Noh play *Uneme* is based on this story. See TYLER R. 1990, pp. 139, 150. There is no published English translation of the play. See also TYLER S. 1992, p. 108. Susan Tyler identifies the small pool on Kōzen as Naruikazuchi 鳴雷 Jinja.

仁海 (951–1046) has entered it.⁸ These documents also report that the last person who attempted to enter one of the caves was knocked down on his rear and broke his bones when a great wind blasted out of the cave (BZ 119, p. 28; ZGR suppl. vol. 27, p. 298; NISHIDA 1978, pp. 297–98). Stories that asserted the miraculous properties of the dragon caves grounded the site with additional internal power and authority. Today, although Ryūketsu Shrine operates independently from Murō-ji, the caves are still revered within the context of the larger worship space of Mt. Murō.

Relics on the Mountain

The dragon is not the only object of great veneration beneath the surface of Mt. Murō. In particular, long cherished at Murō-ji was the legend that the ninth century Shingon master Kūkai 空海 (774–835) brought back relics from China and buried them on the mountain. The document *Murōzan oshari sōden engi* 室生山御舍利相伝縁起 [Tradition of the Mt. Murō relics], written in Shōan 4 (1302) by Sōmyō 宗明, explains that in order to alleviate troubles in the world Kūkai enshrined relics in a seven-story pagoda hidden at the bottom of a cave on Mt. Murō (BZ 119, p. 29). Kūkai's involvement with the Murō relics not only gives them a more important provenance but also serves to promote the Shingon lineage of the temple. The legend of the relics also adds that in Kenkyū 2 (1191) a young Chinese monk named Kong Ti (Jp. Kūtai) 空體 (or 空鉢), a disciple of the Tōdai-ji 東大寺 prelate Chōgen 重源 (1121–1206), smashed open the stupa with an iron hammer in order to steal these relics, but was later arrested. Stories such as this, which assert the desirability of the relics hidden deep within the terrain, lend the land of Murō an enhanced prestige. As relics are referred to as jewels in Buddhist literature, here they are also functioning as buried treasure.

Relics are also commonly associated with the belief in the dragon, who often holds or chases a sacred pearl. This combination is particularly appropriate in terms of Mt. Murō, which has strong links with both dragons and relics. As visual evidence, an Edo period painting in the collection of the Matsuhira Bunkakan 松平文華館 in Murō village illustrates the image of a relic within the landscape of Mt. Murō as a

⁸ Ningai was trained at Daigo-ji, became abbot of Tō-ji, founded the Zuishin'in 随心院 in Kyoto and the Ono 小野 school of Shingon. He was also well known for his rainmaking abilities and performed many services at the Shinsen'en. See *Mikkyō daijiten*, single volume version (1983), s.v. "Ningai." Nittai's visit to the dragon cave, as recorded in *Kojidan*, is not mentioned in the *Ben'ichizanki* and *Ben'ichihiki (kō)*.

huge flaming jewel, visible beneath a conical peak (OGAWA 1985, p. 82). A sixteenth-century painting owned by Murō-ji clearly illustrates the revered relationship between dragons and jewels. Known as the Nyoihōju mandara 如意宝珠曼荼羅 (TANAKA 1979, fig. 59), this image was based on the esoteric sutra named *Nyoihōju tenrin himitsu genshin jōbutsu kinrin shuōgyō* 如意宝珠轉輪秘密現身成仏金輪咒王經 (TANAKA 1979, p. 135; T #961). Two dragons surrounded by clouds and rising out of the waves flank a two-story pavilion that enshrines three flaming jewels on a lotus petal dais.

MIROKUDŌ

To dig deeper into the pursuit of the hidden Murō relics, we should proceed to the thirteenth-century Mirokudō 弥勒堂 (Hall of Maitreya) on the grounds of Murō-ji. During the restoration of the Mirokudō in 1958 the main sculpture was removed and under it was detected a covered square hole on the surface of the altar. When this cover was lifted,

the astounding number of over 37,000 small stupas were revealed underneath.⁹ These unusual wooden stupas are known as *momitō* 粉塔 (literally, “rice-grain stupa”) as each one has a rice grain inserted into a small hole in the bottom (figure 3). Wrapped around each grain is a paper upon which a *darani* 陀羅尼 (Skt. *dhāraṇī*), a sacred incantation used for the removal of suffering and illness, was printed in Sanskrit. The *momitō* all measure about nine centimeters in height (excluding the finial, which is about five cm.) and they are made of wood in the form of a *hōkyōintō*



Figure 3. *Momitō* (rice-grain stupa). Murō-ji, Nara Prefecture. Photo by author.

⁹ The *momitō* are no longer stored in the Mirokudō, but were placed in thirty-two wooden boxes and transferred to a storehouse at Murō-ji.

宝篋印塔.¹⁰ After an extremely detailed survey in which the physical properties of the *momitō* were examined, the investigators concluded that they date from around the fourteenth century (GANGŌ-JI BUKKYŌ MINZOKU SHIRYŌ KENKYŪJO 1976, p. 59).

The circumstances surrounding the offering of these *momitō* are unknown, yet there are several precedents for the dedication of groups of small stupas. The earliest example in Japan is the famous donation of one million stupas made by Empress Shōtoku in Hōki 1 (770) after a civil disturbance. Following this donation, there are many recorded incidents of the offering of large numbers of wooden or clay stupas in Japan.¹¹ The number 84,000 became standard in imitation of the offering said to have been made by King Aśoka in India in the third century BCE. The story of Aśoka's donation is mentioned in the twelfth-century Japanese collection of tales *Konjaku monogatari-ishū* 今昔物語集, which indicates that this legend was known on a popular level at that time (NKBT 22, pp. 271–72). It is quite possible that the original number of stupas offered at the Mirokudō was 84,000, with a loss of over half.

An entry from Bunmei 15 (1483) in Jinson's diary *Daijōin jisha zōjiki* tells of a *kuyō* 供養 (memorial service) in which 84,000 stupas were offered at the Iwai River in Nara (near Kasuga Shrine) along with prayers for rain (JINSON 1931, 8: 57). This provides evidence that the offering of stupas also had a role in rain control. Given the long history of rain prayers and the worship of the rain-making dragon at Mt. Murō, it is a natural supposition that weather control was the reason for the donation of these stupas. Since ancient times the rice grain has been deeply revered in Japanese society and has often been the object of prayers and ceremonies. Moreover, stupas are reliquaries and the similarity between a rice grain and the usual tiny shape of a relic in Japan provides a clear example of the adoption of an indigenous agricultural ritual into a Buddhist format. As further material evidence for the long-standing tradition of relic worship at Murō, the

¹⁰ This form of a stupa has a square body between three upper and three lower square stepped platforms (*kamachi* 框), topped by a roof (*kasa* 笠) consisting of two or three successively smaller stepped platforms. Triangular decorations project up from each corner of the lowest layer of the roof and a finial (*sōrin* 相輪) rises out of the top. This specific shape is associated with the *Hōkyōin darani* 宝篋印陀羅尼 (Sk. *Karaṇḍa-mudrā-dhāraṇī*), which is an incantation used by the Tendai and Shōngon schools for the removal of suffering and illness. GANGŌ-JI BUKKYŌ MINZOKU SHIRYŌ KENKYŪJO 1976, pp. 80–82, includes a transliteration of the *dhāraṇī*.

¹¹ See HIGO 1938, pp. 209–11, for a chart of recorded groups of stupa donations from the eighth to the fifteenth centuries. There are twelve incidents of offerings of 84,000 recorded. See also GANGŌ-JI BUKKYŌ MINZOKU SHIRYŌ KENKYŪJO 1976, p. 86.

temple owns a small wooden reliquary, measuring eighteen centimeters high, in the shape of a lotus bud and stem. Through arch-shaped openings in the bud section, one can see a tiny crystal stupa that contains relics of transparent crystal jewels.¹² The inscription on the stem of the reliquary states that it contains five relics from the lineage of the Eight Patriarchs of Tō-ji (*Tōji hasso sōden* 東寺八祖相傳) dedicated to Zennyō Ryūō 善如龍王 at Murō-ji in Tenshō 19 (1591). This reliquary should be viewed as an object that perpetuates the lineage of Tō-ji (a major temple of the Shingon school) while linking it to the Murō dragon. Throughout Buddhist literature the *nāgas* (and dragons by extension) protect the sacred jewels of Buddhism, and therefore the dedication of relics is an extremely appropriate offering. *Nāgas* are known to desire wealth, and once converted to Buddhism they become the protectors of sacred treasures (BLOSS 1973, p. 37; VISSER 1911, p. 301). The dragon's role as a fertility deity and bringer of rain is certainly linked with the dedication of the abundant *momitō* as fecund symbols within a Buddhist context.

VISUALIZING THE DRAGON

With all the acclaim for the Murō dragon, it is natural that images would be created. As in the case of most spirits, the visual and literary images have a variety of appearances. One of the most well-known images of the Murō dragon comes from the story of the famous rain-making contest held in Tenchō 1 (824) at the Shinsen'en 神泉苑 garden in Kyoto (figure 4). During the event the powerful dragon who resided at Murō, named Zennyō Ryūō 善女 (or 善如) 龍王 and known for its rain-making prowess, was summoned down into the garden pond.

There are different interpretations of the appearance of Zennyō Ryūō, the dragon of Murō. One of the earliest is from *Goyuigō* 御遺告 (T #2431), a record of Kūkai's last words written after his death in Jōwa 2 (835) by a disciple. This describes a golden snake measuring eight *sun* 寸 (approx. 24 cm) riding on the head of a dragon measuring nine *shaku* 尺 (approx. 2.7 m).¹³ This description is repeated in several other literary sources. As for visual depictions, *Kōya Daishi gyōjō zuga* 高野大師行狀図画 [Pictures of the activities of Kūkai] has an illus-

¹² See TANAKA 1979, p. 142, fig. 74. Another reliquary owned by Murō-ji is an elaborate black lacquer stupa in the *hōkyōintō* 宝篋印塔 form measuring fifty-five centimeters high. This wooden reliquary has two small doors on three sides that, when open, reveal paintings of a different Buddhist deity on each interior panel. The center of the reliquary contains a small crystal stupa on a lotus base. An inscription dates it to Eishō 9 (1512) (TANAKA 1979, p. 143).

¹³ The story is repeated in Keihan 經範 (1031–1104), *Daishi gogyō jōshūki* 大師御行狀集記, written in Kanji 3 (1089); see ZGR 8, suppl. no. 2, p. 511.

tration of the rain-making contest at the Shinsen'en painted in Gen'ō 1 (1319). Zennyō Ryūō is seated in front of Kūkai on a rock in the pond in the form of a dragon with a small golden snake on its head.¹⁴ The painting is consistent with the legends which continued to be handed down in written descriptions.

Zennyō Ryūō may also appear, depending on the story, in a human male or female form. A story from *Miwa shōnin gyōjōshō* 三輪上人行狀抄 dating to Kenchō 7 (1255), describes the Tendai monk Keien 慶円 (1143–1223) converting the Dragon King in the guise of a beautifully dressed woman to Buddhism by revealing a specific mudrā.¹⁵ NISHIDA Nagao noted in his investigation of the *Ben'ichizan nenbun dosha sōjō*, that although in one copy of the text the character *nyo* 女 (woman) was used in the word Zennyō, he feels it was an error. He emphasizes that originally the character was 如, as in 善如 (Zennyō), and that the



Figure 4. Lantern dedicated to Zennyō Ryūō. Shinsen'en garden, Kyoto. Photo by author.

¹⁴ See SEKIGUCHI 1988, pp. 76, 79, fig. 30; see also UMEZU 1983, pp. 122–23 and pp. 51–52 for text. The scroll is owned by the Hakutsuru Bijutsukan in Hyōgo prefecture.

¹⁵ See ST 2: 21–22, repeated in *Genkō shakusho* 元亨釈書, compiled in Genkō 2 (1331) (SZKT 31, p. 185), and again in *Yamato meishoki* from Enpō 9 (1681) (HAYASHI 1681, p. 9). VISSER translates the passage from *Genkō shakusho* as follows:

Keien lived for a thousand days as a hermit near the Dragon-hole on Mount Murōbu [*sic*]. On his way from there to another place he crossed a bridge over a river, when suddenly a lady, noble looking and beautifully dressed, came and, without showing her face, politely asked him for the mudrā (mystic finger-charm) used to become at once a Buddha (即身成佛印明). At his question as to who she was, she answered: “I am the Dragon Zennyō.” Then he taught her the mudrā, whereupon she said: “This is exactly the same mudrā as that of the seven former Buddhas”; and when the priest requested her to show him her face, she replied: “My shape is so terrible that no man can look upon it. Yet I cannot refuse your wish.” Thereupon she rose into the air and stretched out the little finger of her right hand. It proved to be a claw, more than ten shaku long, which spread a five-coloured light. Then she vanished at once. (1913, pp. 168–69)

dragon was not female.¹⁶ Accordingly, it is very likely that he had seen pictures of Zennyo Ryūō as a male. The *Mikkyō daijiten* merely states that either character can be used.¹⁷ Therefore, projecting the gender of the dragon from the name alone seems incorrect.



Figure 5. One of the paintings of the Dragon King. Color on paper. Sixteenth century. Collection of Murō-ji. Photo by Matsuhira Masayuki.

Six pictures are known of Zennyo Ryūō in the form of a man (see figure 5).¹⁸ The earliest extant painting (163.6 x 111.2 cm) of this subject is kept at Kongōbu-ji 金剛峯寺 on Mt. Kōya (NAKANO 1968, fig. 17, p. 337). According to the *Kōyasan monjo* 高野山文書 [Records of Mt. Kōya], the painting was made by Jōchi 定智, a monk from Miidera 三井寺, and is dated Kyūan 1 (1145). There is a similar figure depicted in a line drawing (100.0 x 44.8 cm) from Daigo-ji 醍醐寺 in Kyoto; this drawing has an inscription stating that Chinga 深賀 copied the Mt. Kōya painting in Kennin 2

¹⁶ NISHIDA 1978, pp. 218–19. *Nyō* 如 means “to be like” or in a Buddhist context “thusness” as in *nyorai* 如来 (Skt. Tathāgata), “Thus-come one,” or in other words, a Buddha.

¹⁷ *Mikkyō daijiten*, single-volume edition (1938), s.v. “Zennyo Ryūō.” I have investigated links with Ryūnyō 龍女 (Skt. Nāgakanā), the eight-year-old daughter of the Dragon King who attained enlightenment after hearing the Buddhist teachings from Mañjuśrī in the second half of the twelfth chapter of the *Lotus Sutra*, but she is not referred to as Zennyo Ryūō. In addition, I have not been able to find any exact connections to the Chinese maiden named Zenmyō 善妙 featured in *Kegon engi* 華嚴緣起. After Zenmyō dove into the sea to follow Uisang 義湘 (Jp. Gishō, 624–702), she turned into a dragon and protected his boat as he sailed back to Korea (see BROCK 1990).

¹⁸ This image of the male figure coincides with Nittai’s vision from *Kojidan* previously mentioned. For a discussion of the paintings see GANGŌ-JI BUKKYŌ MINZOKU SHIRYŌ KENKYŪJO 1976, figs. 1–5, pp. 88–90. Murō-ji owns three paintings of Zennyo Ryūō. See also TANAKA 1979, pp. 131–32, pl. 54, for a photograph and information on one of the dragon paintings (92.5 x 38.0) owned by Murō-ji dating from the thirteenth or fourteenth century (different from the one pictured in this article, figure 5).

(1201) (SAWA 1967, fig. 198). In all these works the Dragon King figure is a male holding a plate of jewels, wearing a hat adorned with the character for king (王) and a Chinese robe with a dragon tail coming out from beneath it. While the images of the elusive Murō dragon vary, without even a fixed gender, in writings and rituals it is actually the physical landscape of Mt. Murō (with its caves), rather than the painted images, that has been given a more prominent role in bringing forth the presence of the dragon.

AUTUMN FESTIVAL AT MURŌ

The spirit of the dragon still hovers over the present religious practice at Murō, especially during the annual Autumn Ryūketsu Shrine festival held on October fifteenth. The earliest record of the event dates to Meireki 1 (1655), although the festival is believed to date from much earlier (MURŌ SONSHI HENSHŪ IINKAI 1976, pp. 563–72). At Murō the role of the dragon is prominent at the festival as it links together the two religious establishments of the shrine and the temple.

The day before the festival, two identical dragon forms, measuring about five feet long, are made. Local men create a central ring of straw to which long straw-braided cords are attached and into which maple leaves are inserted to represent scales (figure 6). In the end, one would probably not recognize these rather



Figure 6. A local man hangs the straw dragon form in the tree. Murō village. Nara Prefecture.



Figure 7. Priest from Ryūketsu Shrine offering prayers in front of the straw dragon hanging in the tree. 15 October 1994. Photo by author.

abstract forms as dragons unless told. One is hung in a tree next to the river in front of the shrine where the shrine priest reads prayers and offers saké (figure 7). The other straw dragon is placed in a tree on the grounds of the temple. The following day the main event of the festival takes place, a procession that gathers on the bridge in front of the temple. The head priest of Murō-ji comes out to greet the procession just before it proceeds to the temple grounds. After rituals are performed in the area where the straw dragon hangs at the temple, the procession travels twenty minutes down the road to the shrine, first stopping to pay reverence again to

the straw dragon form by the river.

Straw dragons of various shapes and sizes are prominent in contemporary rainmaking practices all over Japan (TAKAYA 1982, pp. 350–66). Historically, dragon forms were created by rainmakers in order to coerce the Dragon King to produce rain. The *Kiu nikki* 祈雨日記 [Rain-making diary], compiled by Shōken 成賢 in Eikyū 5 (1117), describes an example from the Kōhō era (964–967) in which a Shingon monk named Gengō 元果 (914–995) of Daigo-ji Enmei'in 醍醐寺延命院 was successful in producing rain at the Shinsen'en after making a dragon out of miscanthus reeds (*kaya* 茅) (ZGR 25, p. 226). In Enchō 3 (925), on another occasion of rainmaking at the Shinsen'en, two dragon forms were made of an unspecified material (ZGR 25, p. 220).

The Murō festival is not viewed today as a rainmaking event, and in fact rain prayers are no longer conducted on Mt. Murō.

However, I suggest that the straw dragons at Murō may be a vestige of previous rainmaking practice. In any case, an examination of the festival provides an opportunity to view a rare living tradition of religious practice where shrine and temple ritual still intermingle and express the continuing reverence for the dragon at Mt. Murō.



The dragon has provided a base of authority on Mt. Murō from the time of the founding of the temple to the present. The dragon was the key figure in the rain prayers of Mt. Murō, and when the Shingon lineage promoted the cult of relics at Murō-ji the dragon was there to protect them. Now only very dedicated pilgrims make the trek to the dragon cave on Mt. Murō, but the cave itself remains the best evidence of the Murō dragon, a creature that pervades the mountain with a numinous nature.

ABBREVIATIONS

- BZ *Dai Nihon Bukkyō zensho* 大日本仏教全書. Tokyo: Bussho Kankōkai, 1917.
- NKBT *Nihon koten bungaku taikei* 日本古典文学大系. Tokyo: Iwanami Shoten, 1957.
- KT *Kokushi taikei* 国史大系. Tokyo: Keizai Zasshisha, 1897.
- ST *Shingon Shintō* 真言神道, pt. 2 of *Shintō taikei; ronsetsu hen* 2 神道大系論説編二. Shintō Taikei Henzankai 神道大系編纂会, ed. Tokyo: Shintō Taikei Henzankai, 1993.
- SZKT *Shintei zōho kokushi taikei* 新訂増補国史大系. Tokyo: Yoshikawa Kōbunkan, 1930.
- T *Taishō shinshū daizōkyō* 大正新脩大藏經. 100 vols. Takakusu Junjirō 高楠順次郎 et al., eds. Tokyo: Taishō Issaikyō Kankōkai and Daizō Shuppan, 1922–1932.
- ZGR *Zoku gunsho ruijū* 続郡書類従. Tokyo: Zoku Gunsho Ruijū Kanseikai, 1929.

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