

**SACRIFICE AND SACRED VIOLENCE**

STUDIES ON PHILOSOPHY, INTELLECTUAL HISTORY, ARTS,  
SCIENCES

VOLUME 2

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# Sacrifice and Sacred Violence

*History, Comparisons, and the Early Modern World*

*Edited by*

CRISTIANA FACCHINI, GIROLAMO IMBRUGLIA,  
VINCENZO LAVENIA AND SABINA PAVONE

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# Not Only to Heaven and Earth


## *Logics of 'Sacrifice' in Japan*

▼ **ABSTRACT** This article addresses the terminological issues related to the practice of naming and translating 'sacrifice' in Japanese cultural history, aiming to provide an understanding of the role and dynamics of sacrifice in shaping religious beliefs, social practices, and political ideologies. Focusing on key terms such as *sai/matsuru* and *hitobashira*, the discussion draws on ancient chronicles like the *Nihon shoki* (eighth century CE), premodern sources, and interpretations by influential folklorists, particularly Orikuchi Shinobu (1887–1953), in order to uncover the ritualistic and socio-religious significance embedded in these concepts. Additionally, it explores the challenges posed by the introduction of foreign spirits, particularly Confucius, into the Japanese pantheon, examining the symbolic and political dimensions of Confucian sacrifices over time. Lastly, it examines modern forms of sacrifice, both political and spiritual, in the context of wartime Japan and post-war reconciliation. It analyses the narratives of fallen soldiers, political prisoners, and spiritual leaders, shedding light on the intersection of sacrifice, nationalism, and religious beliefs in twentieth-century Japanese society.

▼ **KEY WORDS** *Sai/matsuru*, Human pillar, *Nihon shoki*, Confucian sacrifices, Wartime in Japan, Post-war reconciliation, Orikuchi Shinobu

In an important essay Cristiano Grottanelli introduces the term “sacrifice”, stating how in many European languages, but not in German (*Opfer*), the shared root for the word comes from the Latin *sacrificium*, which etymologically refers to the action of “making sacred”, indicating the transition of the sacrificed object to a different sphere.

Focusing on Western cultural theories produced in the late nineteenth century, Grottanelli stresses how such theories attempted to account for sacrifice by focusing either on offering or on killing. He also emphasises, quoting Angelo Brelich, the

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semantic field covered by the word sacrifice, which includes three distinctive facts representing different modes of exchange between the human and the extra-human spheres within different types of societies: the initial offering, where the “sacredness of food” is concentrated in the first piece, duly *returned* to its extra-human owner; the sacrifice-gift, where what is consecrated is that which humans offer to extra-human entities; and the communion, achieved either by making the extra-human being a dining companion of humans in consuming the victim, or through the absorption of the extra-human being itself, or else by aiming the sacrificial action to the strengthening of the unity of the human group participating in it.<sup>1</sup>

Grottanelli then examines the theories of thinkers who have impacted the way we interpret sacrifice, including Mircea Eliade, whose work exerted a strong influence on Japanese scholars dealing with religious facts in post-war Japan. Leaving European and American theories on sacrifice at the margins, it is still useful to share Grottanelli’s departing point, referred to the term itself, in order to investigate the practice of naming and translating sacrifice into and from the Japanese language. While doing so, mention will be made of Japanese scholars who have explored notions connected to terms and practices that we can relate to the context of sacrifice, whose interpretations have resonated through time in Japanese (and international) scholarship.

### The Character 祭 (*sai, matsuru, matsuri*)

The first term to be addressed is a Chinese character strictly connected with sacrificial offerings. The character 祭, usually read in Japanese as *sai, matsuru* (the verbal form) or *matsuri* (noun), contains the characters 月 (meat) + 又 (hand) + 示 (altar, ceremony): the hand offers a piece of meat at the altar during a ceremony.

In order to understand the way in which the character has been translated and its usage, it is useful to look at its occurrences in one of the two oldest extant chronicles, the *Nihon shoki* 日本書紀 (Chronicles of Japan). Submitted to the Imperial court in 720 CE, the *Nihon shoki* was written in Chinese in compliance with commands handed down by reigning Empresses and intended, above all, to strengthen Japan’s imperial rule. The first books are focused on myths concerning the birth and the descendants of Amaterasu, the ancestress of Japan’s line of emperors and empresses. The last books deal with the words and deeds of Amaterasu’s human descendants. While still firmly grounded in kami belief and worship, the *Nihon shoki*’s non-Japanese inclinations were criticised by Japan’s National Learning (*kokugaku* 国学) scholars of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, who opted for a similar yet different text for their research, the *Kojiki* 古事記 (Records of Ancient Matters, 712 CE).

The most famous English translation of the *Nihon shoki* was carried out by William G. Aston (*Nihongi: Chronicles of Japan from the Earliest Times to A.D. 697*)

<sup>1</sup> Grottanelli, Cristiano, *Il sacrificio* (Bari: Laterza, 1999), pp. 8–15.

and first published in the *Proceedings of Japan Society* in 1896. Here, the character 祭, whether in compounds or as a verb, has been rendered as “sacrifice” when applied to offerings to the gods of Heaven and Earth, or to Amaterasu:

The Emperor Kami-Yamato Ihare-biko [Jinmu tennō, the first legendary “emperor”].

The Heavenly deity appeared to him [the Emperor] in a dream, and instructed him, saying: ‘Take earth from within the shrine of the Heavenly Mount Kagu, and of it make eighty Heavenly platters. Also make *sacred* [there is no word which can be translated as sacred in the original] jars and therewith sacrifice [祭] to the gods of Heaven and Earth. Moreover, pronounce a solemn imprecation. If thou doest so, the enemy will render submission of their own accord’. The Emperor received with reverence the directions given in his dream, and proceeded to carry them into execution.<sup>2</sup>

[...]

If these tribes intend to give battle to the Emperor, and thy servant is anxious in his own mind on his account. It were now good to take clay from the Heavenly fount Kagu, and therewith to make Heavenly platters with which to sacrifice [祭] to the gods of the Heavenly shrines and of the Earthly shrines.<sup>3</sup>

The Heavenly shrines and the Earthly shrines refer to the types of shrines established in ancient times, indicating the embryonic form of social ranking among shrines. A multitude of kami were enshrined, and the categories of *tensha* (heavenly shrines) and *kokusha* (land shrines) were defined: the *tensha* enshrined the heavenly deities (*amatsukami*), while the *kokusha* enshrined the earthly deities (*kunitsukami*).

A further occurrence is attested in the section related to Keikō tennō, the twelfth legendary ruler of Japan, whose alleged lifetime spans from 13 BCE to 130 CE:

20<sup>th</sup> year, Spring, 2<sup>nd</sup> month, 4<sup>th</sup> day. The Princess Ihono was made to sacrifice to Ama-terasu no Oho-kami.<sup>4</sup>

Within the *Kojiki*, in similar contexts, the character 祭, with the meaning of presenting offerings to deities or ancestral spirits, has been translated as “worship” or “offer” by British linguist and Japanologist Basil Hall Chamberlain, whose translation first appeared as a supplement in the *Transactions of the Asiatic Society of Japan* in 1882, and by American linguist and translator Donald Philippi in 1969.

In Aston’s translation, the same character usually translated as “sacrifice” and the compound *saishi* 祭祠 are rendered as “worshipped” in passages related to Buddha within the section of the *Nihon shoki* referring to the years of reign of Bidatsu tennō (538–585), the thirteenth ruler of Japan according to the traditional order of succession. Historically, it is reported that in the sixth century CE, the anti-Buddhist

2 Aston, William George, *Nihongi, Chronicles of Japan from the Earliest times to A.D. 697* (London: The Japan Society, 1896), p. 119.

3 Aston, *Nihongi, Chronicles of Japan from the Earliest times to A.D. 697*, p. 120.

4 Aston, *Nihongi, Chronicles of Japan from the Earliest times to A.D. 697*, p. 200.

Mononobe and Nakatomi chieftains contended that worshipping foreign deities would anger the native kami. Despite this, the pro-Buddhist Soga chieftain gained the court's approval to worship the image of the Buddha as an experiment. However, when the Soga began their worship, a pestilence broke out. The anti-Buddhist factions then persuaded the court to discard the Buddha image into a canal. The passage that follows refers to the "worship" of Buddha right before the outbreak of the pestilence:

24<sup>th</sup> day. Soga no Oho-omi took ill. Having made inquiry of a diviner, the diviner answered and said: 'It is a curse sent by will of the Buddha [佛神, Buddha as a deity] worshipped [祭] in thy father's time'. Soga no Oho-omi accordingly sent a young man of his family to report to the Emperor the nature of the divination. The Emperor gave orders, saying: 'In accordance with the words of the diviner, let thy father's Gods be worshipped [祭祠]'. The Oho-omi, in obedience to the Emperor's commands, worshipped the stone image, and prayed that his life might be prolonged. At this time there was a pestilence rife in the land, and many of the people died.<sup>5</sup>

### **Matsuru and matsuri**

Aside from the Chinese character 祭, and its translation either as worship, offer or sacrifice, it is relevant to dwell on the word *matsuru/matsuri*, whose original meaning, scholars agree, is contained in the form *matsurau*, 'to be with', 'to attend to the needs of', 'to entertain', in reference to kami, to the spirit of the deceased, or to a person of higher status. Joseph Kitagawa maintains that this term refers to a wide variety of religious ceremonies and relevant festivities. According to him, the physical act of *matsurau* embodied a mental attitude of respect, reverence, and a readiness to listen and serve. During the *tama-matsuri* (ceremony/festival of the spirit/soul), when it was believed that ancestral spirits visited their living descendants' homes, the head of each household would offer meals and drinks, entertaining the visiting spirits as if they were still alive. This same motif of *matsurau* was present in the festivals for kami.<sup>6</sup>

In the first half of the twentieth century, the word *matsuri/matsuru* becomes the object of investigation of author, poet, and folklorist Orikuchi Shinobu 折口信夫 (1887–1953), a rather influential figure and a reader (and in part translator) of James G. Frazer's *The Golden Bough*,<sup>7</sup> who aimed to show the ritual origin of Japanese cultural practices.

<sup>5</sup> Aston, *Nihongi, Chronicles of Japan from the Earliest times to A.D. 697*, p. 102.

<sup>6</sup> Kitagawa, Joseph, *On Understanding Japanese Religion* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1987), p. 122.

<sup>7</sup> *The Golden Bough* circulated among notable Japanese scholars like Yanagita Kunio and Orikuchi Shinobu, influencing their studies on folklore and anthropology. Minakata Kumagusu, an influential naturalist and folklorist, recommended the book to Yanagita, who was deeply affected by it, and it eventually reached Orikuchi, shaping his approach to European folklore. Interested in the notion of ritual killing, Orikuchi translated the section on 'Killing the corn-spirit' in *Dozoku to densetsu* 土俗と伝説 (Folklore and Legends), 1/1 (1918). See also Orikuchi Shinobu 折口信夫, 'Kokumotsu no kami o korosu gyōji

In a short essay dated to the late 1920s, he interprets the term *matsuru* according to his theory based on the significance of oral incantations and spells in Shinto ceremonial offerings, and on the notion of ‘becoming kami’ through the ritual whereby the person chosen to proclaim the will of the kami is actually ‘kamified’:

In ancient times, the Japanese believed that the power of the *kami* responsible for empowering spells would be transferred to the person reciting the spell, thereby uniting that individual with the kami. The will of the kami was regarded as both a command and a guiding principle for humans. The recitation of spells served as a concrete manifestation of the kami’s will, functioning as a medium for communication and execution. Although the power of the kami could take effect independently of human action, inaccuracies in the recitation were considered highly significant. Consequently, individuals chosen as *mikotomochi*, who conveyed the messages of the kami, played a crucial role.

The root of the word *matsuru* is *matsu*, which is often associated with the sense of anticipation. It conveys a heightened form of expectation, sometimes even implying anxiety. The expression *matsu* (守つ) represented the will of the kami, as did *machi* for divination purposes (卜象). The term *machizake* referred to the act of waiting for the manifestation of the kami’s will and command, and was not merely an auspicious *sake*.<sup>8</sup>

Concentrating his attention on the word *matsuru*, Orikuchi also addresses one of the most important ceremonies, the *Ōnie matsuri* (the ceremony of the Great Tasting), later developed into the *Daijōsai* (Great Food Offering ritual; an enthronement ceremony), which, by the second half of the nineteenth century, came to constitute ‘the defining ritual of modern state Shinto’.<sup>9</sup> While illustrating the word *nie* にへ, Orikuchi makes a distinction between *nie* offerings and *ikenie* 生贄 offerings: it is interesting to note that in time the term *ikenie* came to be used in a wider sense, closer in meaning to the word *gisei*, which designates sacrifice but also scapegoat:

Let’s begin by discussing the *Ōnie matsuri*. *Nie* refers to offerings presented to the kami or the emperor. It specifically denotes prepared food and differs from *ikenie*, which refers to sacrificial offerings left alive so that they can be presented at any time. This applies to both animals and plants. In contemporary Shinto practices, when people mention *nie*, it generally includes raw offerings. However, the term specifically denotes prepared items. [...] Ideally, the offering should be something edible, and presenting raw living beings is not the standard practice.<sup>10</sup>

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Fureezā (shōyaku) 穀物の神を殺す行事ふれえざあ (抄訳); in *Orikuchi Shinobu Tennō ronshū* 折口信夫天皇論集, ed. by Andō Reiji 安藤礼二 (Tokyo: Kōdansha, 2011), pp. 121–37.

8 Orikuchi, Shinobu 折口信夫, ‘Hō to suru hanashi: matsuri no hassei, sono ichi hōto suru hwa- 祭りの発生その一’, in *Orikuchi Shinobu zenshū* (Tokyo: Chūō kōronsha 中央公論社, vol. 2, 1995 [1929]).

9 Breen, John and Mark Teeuwen, *A New History of Shinto* (Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010), p. 23.

10 Orikuchi, Shinobu 折口信夫, ‘*Daijōsai no hongi* 大嘗祭の本義’, in *Orikuchi Shinobu zenshū* 折口信夫全集 (Tokyo: Chūō kōronsha 中央公論社, vol. 3, 1995 [1930]).

According to Orikuchi, in the ancient Japanese worldview, all activities in the country were performed for the sake of the heavenly realm, and aside from ritual ceremonies for the kami, there was nothing else. All actions undertaken in the country were carried out according to the commands of the heavenly kami. In his formulation, essentially, the word *matsuru* means conveying these commands and faithfully executing them. However, over time, the meaning of *matsuru* evolved to include reporting back to the kami that their orders had been executed according to their instructions. The term *matsuri* (祭), on the other hand, was used in classical texts to describe rituals in which actions were performed in accordance with the kami's commands. Practitioners would then report to the kami, saying, "We have completed the actions as instructed by Your orders." This act of reporting was an integral part of kami rituals. Orikuchi highlights the deep-rooted belief in the power of incantations to bring about significant changes, particularly in rituals involving the kami. In his formulation, the emphasis on purification and preparation highlighted the importance of maintaining a connection with the divine. The ceremonial meal with the emperor symbolised the unity between the earthly and heavenly realms, reflecting the central role of offerings in honouring and appeasing the kami during these solemn events:

In the ancient Japanese belief system, it was thought that uttering a spell could bring about a new beginning for anything. Accordingly, during the Shinto ritual of Niiname-sai, a single incantation was recited, and the newly harvested rice was believed to undergo transformation. This practice was also observed during the Daijōsai and the Kamuimake ceremonies.

In the imperial court, this is known as Daiden-sai. It involves kami-people (*shinjin*) in disguise purifying the court at dawn on the day before the sacrificial ceremony, cleansing the grounds so that the ritual can take place. After the purification, the kami is believed to come to the great hall, where the emperor partakes in a ceremonial meal.

In all *matsuri* where the kami is expected to descend, the act of making offerings to the kami takes centre stage.<sup>11</sup>

Orikuchi's exploration of the term *matsuru/matsuri* provides, beyond its Chinese character 祭 and its translations as worship, offering, or sacrifice, a compelling example of how the term was imbued with cultural and religious significance in twentieth-century Japanese scholarship. Through Orikuchi's perspective, *matsuru/matsuri* was more than just a word; it was a vital element of Japan's cultural heritage, embodying the profound connection between the human and the extra-human realms that he believed characterised communal life in ancient Japan.

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11 Orikuchi, Shinobu 折口信夫, 'Daijōsai no hongi 大嘗祭の本義'.

## Sacrificing to a Foreign Spirit

Starting from the beginning of the eighth century, according to the *Shoku Nihongi* 続日本紀 (Chronicles of Japan Continued, 797), a foreign spirit was incorporated into the Japanese pantheon: the spirit of Confucius, who received a sacrificial offering for the first time in the archipelago at the Daigaku-ryō, the Bureau of Higher Learning (or University Bureau), established to train government officials.

The Confucius sacrificial ceremony, known in Japanese as *sekiten* 釋奠 (literally “placement of oblations on an altar,” also pronounced *shakuten*), was to be held on the first *Ding* (丁, *hinoto*) day of the second and eighth lunar months to honour Confucius. In ancient China, *sekiten* (in Chinese *shidian*) was a general term for the rites performed for former emperors and sages, but from the Later Han dynasty onwards, it came to specifically denote the grand ceremonies dedicated to Confucius and his disciples.<sup>12</sup>

In Japan, this ceremony was first conducted at the Daigaku-ryō in the first year of the Taihō era (701). The *Engi shiki* 延喜式 (Procedures of the Engi Era, tenth century), a Heian-period compendium of laws and regulations, describes the *sekiten* ceremony as comprising offerings at the Daigaku Temple, discussions, and a banquet at the capital hall. The core of the ceremony involved offering food and drink — which, along with the garments of the officiants, was provided by the government — to images of Confucius and his ten disciples.<sup>13</sup> The discussions, known as *kōron* 講論, began in the first year of the Jingo-Keiun era (767). These discussions followed a structured format in which topics were selected from seven classic Confucian texts,<sup>14</sup> a process referred to as the “rotation of the seven classics” (*shichikei rinten kōdoku* 七經輪轉講讀). After the discussions, all attendees participated in a banquet, followed by a secondary banquet exclusively for attendees of the fifth rank and above. During these gatherings, scholars and students from various disciplines engaged in debates and composed literary works. From the ninth century onward, it became customary to hold discussions known as *uchirongi* 内論議 the day after the autumn *sekiten*, hosted at the imperial palace.

The *Saikyūki* 西宮記 (Record of the Western Palace, c. 955–64) by Minamoto no Takaakira 源高明 (914–82) simplified the offerings to mere visits to the Temple and divided the general banquet into two parts: the *ryōkyō* 寮饗, or bureau banquet, and the *momodonoza* 百度座 at the capital hall. This shift marked a slight decline in

12 *Nihon kokugo daijiten* 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. 日本国語大辞典 第二版 Unabridged Dictionary of the Japanese Language (Tokyo: Shogakkan 小学館, 2000–2002). Online at JapanKnowledge Lib.

13 The ten disciples of Confucius refer to Yan Zi, Ziqian, Boniu, Zhonggong, Ziyou, Zigong, Zilu, Ziwo, Ziyou, and Zixia. These individuals are revered as exemplary figures within the tradition. The *Analects* of Confucius record Confucius saying, ‘Among those who were with me in the states of Chen and Cai, none could compare with the ten disciples. Yan Zi, Ziqian, Boniu, and Zhonggong excelled in virtue. Ziwo and Zigong were skilled in communication. Ziyou and Zilu were adept in managing affairs. Zixia and Ziyou were proficient in literature.’

14 *Xiao jing* (孝經, *Classic of Filial Piety*), *Li ji* (禮記 *Book of Rites*), *Mao shi* (毛詩, Mao version of the *Classic of Poetry*), *Shang shu* (尚書 *Book of Documents*), *Lun yu* (論語 *Analects of Confucius*), *Zhou yi* (周易 *Zhou Version of the Book of Changes*), and *Zuo zhuan* (左傳 *The Commentary of Zuo*).

the ritual's character as a purely Confucian rite and an increase in its prominence as a public ceremony. Despite the decline of the bureau following a great fire in the first year of Jishō (1177), the ceremony continued until the fifteenth century. It was later revived by the shogunate and various domains during the Edo period (1603–1868), when Neo-Confucian ideology gained momentum and the Yushima seidō 湯島聖堂, a Confucian Temple, was established in Edo (modern-day Tokyo).<sup>15</sup>

Kitamura Kigin 北村季吟 (1625–1705), a *waka* and *haiku* poet as well as a classical scholar, published books that became popular key references for ordinary people in the Edo period when composing poems. In 1648, he wrote *Yamanoi* 山の井 (Mountain Springs), a collection of 1,300 seasonal words accompanied by example poems. In 1663, he published *Zō Yamanoi* 増山の井 (Mountain Springs, Enlarged Edition), an expanded version of the earlier book, which included various seasonal verses. It is noted in this edition that 'the *sekiten* and *sekisai* ceremonies are held on the first 丁 (*hinoto*) day of the second month at the University Bureau to honour Confucius and the ten sages.'<sup>16</sup>

The *sekisai* 積菜 ceremony was a simplified version of the *sekiten*. In ancient China, instead of formal sacrificial offerings such as oxen and sheep, vegetables and other items were used to honour Confucius. This tradition was adopted in Japan during the Edo period at the Yushima seidō. The ceremony held in the second lunar month was called *sekisai*, while the one held in the eighth lunar month was referred to as *sekiten*.

James McMullen's recent volume on *The Worship of Confucius in Japan* (2019) provides a detailed and accurate guide through the complex history of *sekiten* in Japan, including the issue of meat and meat-free offerings. McMullen also explores the challenges posed by the initial encounter between the familiar spirits of the Japanese pantheon and the foreign spirit of Confucius, who was deeply associated with rich symbolism and a potent rhetoric of statehood and rulership, rooted in the approval of Heaven. His veneration required the use of a foreign language and a liturgy embellished with exotic paraphernalia and offerings, emphasising his distinct and foreign origin. Towards the end of the Edo period, the rise of the National Learning movement gave momentum to an anti-Confucian rhetoric. This criticism extended to the rituals dedicated to Confucius and, in some cases, advocated for the replacement of foreign Confucian spirits with purportedly indigenous Shinto 'gods of learning.'<sup>17</sup> In a way, representatives of the National Learning movement resented having to "sacrifice" local and national kami in favour of Chinese spirits. In the mid-nineteenth century, the scholar Hasegawa Akimichi 長谷川昭道 (1815–97) addressed the issue of which deity should be enshrined in schools, arguing that while Confucius and his ten disciples were revered as the founders of Confucianism, elevating them to

15 *Kokushi daijiten* 国史大辞典館 Encyclopedia of Japanese History (Tokyo: Yoshikawa kōbunkan 吉川弘文, 1979–97). Online at JapanKnowledge Lib.

16 *Nihon kokugo daijiten* 日本国語大辞典 第二版 Unabridged Dictionary of the Japanese Language 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Tokyo: Shogakkan 小学館, 2000–2002). Online at JapanKnowledge Lib.

17 McMullen, James, *The Worship of Confucius in Japan* (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Asia Center, 2019), p. 45.

the status of primary deities to be worshipped within the school would undermine the broader educational mission of cultivating practical knowledge and developing well-rounded individuals. He emphasised that the true purpose of education should be to nurture competent and productive members of society, rather than promoting a narrow veneration of Confucian figures. Akimichi argued against the necessity of having a principal deity in schools, but he acknowledged that if it became unavoidable to designate one, then Hachiman *daijin* 八幡大神, who embodied both literary and martial virtues, should be chosen. He further suggested that notable Japanese mythical and historical figures, such as Yamato Takeru, Takeuchi no Sukune, and Fujiwara no Kamatari, should be enshrined as secondary deities, since they were revered for their loyalty and filial piety and could serve as moral exemplars for students to admire and emulate in their daily lives.

After the Meiji Restoration (1868), the debate over the deity of learning in schools reflected the broader tension between preserving traditional Confucian practices and incorporating native Japanese elements into the educational system.<sup>18</sup>

### The 'human pillar': from the Construction of Bridges to the Class Struggle

Alongside the words *matsuru/matsuri* and *ikenie*, another Japanese expression referring to a specific form of sacrifice involving the killing (willing or otherwise) of a human being is *hitobashira* 人柱, meaning 'human pillar'.

On this subject, in 1918, Tsuda Noritake, Director of the Religious Affairs Division of the Imperial Household Museum in Tokyo, wrote an article for *The Open Court*, an American journal dedicated to the science of religion, the religion of science, and the extension of the religious parliament idea.

Tsuda, an influential yet somewhat enigmatic figure best known for his volume on Japanese art published in the 1930s, earned his Ph.D. from Tokyo Imperial University with a dissertation on mythology and religion from a sociological perspective. Influenced by renowned Japanese intellectuals such as Anesaki Masaharu (1873–1949), often regarded as the father of religious studies in Japan, Tsuda was deeply interested in explaining Japan to a foreign audience. During his years living in New York, where he worked at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, he combined his study of art with investigations into Japanese religion.

Tsuda begins his article, entitled 'Human Sacrifices in Japan', by stating:

It is remarkable that the tradition of human sacrifices was so widespread in old Japan that there is scarcely any old Japanese who has not heard some story or

<sup>18</sup> Toda, Hiroaki 戸田浩暁, 'Meiji ishin zengo no gakushinron ni tsuite 明治維新前後の学神論について'; *Rissho Daigaku Bungakubu Ronsō 紙掲載誌名立正大学文学部論叢 = The Journal of the Faculty of Letters, Rissho University*, 2 (1954), pp. 165–80.

another of human sacrifices known as *Hitomi-gokū* or *Hitobashira*. Such traditions arose very early in Japanese history.<sup>19</sup>

The word *hitobashira* is not attested in the *Nihon shoki*, but, according to Tsuda, some of its passages clearly reference the practice of using humans as pillars, particularly during the construction of dikes or bridges, and often in connection with the element of water.

Tsuda specifically mentions Book XI, which is devoted to Nintoku *tennō*. It recounts that in 323 CE, following the emperor's revelation in an august dream, two individuals — Kowakubi from the province of Musashi and Koromono-ko from the province of Kawachi — were identified and captured to be sacrificed to the kami of the rivers Kitakawa and Mamuta. The purpose of the sacrifice was to appease the kami and prevent the rivers from overflowing. While Kowakubi was sacrificed, Koromono-ko resorted to a clever stratagem: he questioned the river kami about his/its true identity, ultimately managing to save his own life.<sup>20</sup>

Occurrences of the word *hitobashira* (as well as *hitomi-gokū* 人身御供) are found in later periods. Tsuda highlights the connection between the practice of *hitobashira* and water deities. The term refers to the ritual of burying a living person at the bottom of a body of water or in the ground as a 'living sacrifice' to appease spirits, particularly in the context of challenging construction projects such as castles, bridges, or embankments.

One reason why water deities play such a significant role, as David Bialock has argued, lies in the expansion of marine trade during the medieval period. At that time, water deities, often depicted as dragons, gained prominence as tutelary divinities for travellers, traders, and those involved in entertainment and various commercial pursuits.

The following passage from the *Genpei seisūiki* 源平盛衰記 (Rise and Fall of the Taira and Minamoto, before fourteenth century) tells how the famous figure of Taira no Kiyomori 平清盛 (1118–81) undertook elaborate sacrifices to the Sea Dragon King (*kairyūō* 海竜王) after powerful waves destroyed his first effort to fortify Ōwada Harbour with a barrier island. The context in this case is also related to the power of Buddhist *sūtra* as offerings to ensure the Dragon King's cooperation and thus bring about diplomatic benefits:

The construction of Sutra Island (Kyōtō) at Fukuhara was not the act of an ordinary man. Awa no Minbu no Tayu Nariyoshi received orders and began construction of the island in the second year of Shōan (1172). In the following year, however, when a southerly gale blew up whipping the sea into white waves, the construction was smashed to pieces. Kiyomori *nyūdō* pondered the matter deeply. Realizing that human strength alone would not suffice, he decided that an offering should be made to the Dragon King. Putting a white saddle upon a

19 Tsuda, Noritake, 'Human Sacrifices in Japan', *The Open Court*, 12 (1918), p. 760. Available at: <https://opensiuc.lib.siu.edu/ocj/vol.1918/iss12/6>.

20 Tsuda, Noritake, 'Human Sacrifices in Japan'.

white horse, he mounted a youth (*warawa* 童) upon the horse, and cast him into the sea as a human pillar (*hitobashira* 人柱). In addition to this, he ordered that offerings be made by copying entire sutras onto the surface of the stones that were used in the construction of the island. Indeed, the Dragon King accepted the offerings, for afterwards there were no calamities. For this reason, the island is named Sutra Island. Ships now plied their trade without fear, loaded with the country's treasures and cargoes of the end age. The island's fame reached all the way to the Tang Emperor, who called Kiyomori the Taira Prince Wada of Japan and sent him diverse precious gifts. Not even the emperor received such gifts; it was a splendid honor indeed. *Genpei seisui*, *ge*, 23.<sup>21</sup>

Legends involving water deities and human pillars often feature women as protagonists. In the early twentieth century, Japanese folklorists explored these legends to emphasise the ritualistic, rather than secular, roles of women in premodern times. These scholars frequently portrayed women as inherently inclined towards acts of sacrifice, reflecting broader cultural narratives and beliefs about gender roles in Japan's historical and mythological traditions. In the 1920s, Yanagita Kunio 柳田國男 (1875–1962), widely regarded as the father of Japanese folklore studies, examined the story of Matsuura Sayohime, a tale preserved through numerous variants over time, focusing on the concept of *hitobashira*. Yanagita, who also included the story in his study *Imo no chikara* 妹の力 (The Power of Women), explicitly connected Sayohime to human sacrifice. He noted that the central figures in human-pillar legends were often a mother-and-child or a father-and-daughter pair. He concluded that this central pairing, linked to the worship of mother-child deities, might have originated from the ancient belief in a 'sacred virgin' and her extra-human child, as represented in the *hitogami* 人神 (man-kami) type of myth in Japan. Furthermore, when reporting the legends associated with *hitobashira*, Yanagita focused on the transmission of accompanying songs and stories, interpreting these songs as a means of highlighting the tragedy of the human pillars.<sup>22</sup>

If the naturalist and folklorist Minakata Kumagusu 南方熊楠 (1867–1941) in his essay on the *hitobashira* practice (*Hitobashira no hanashi* 人柱の話, 1925)<sup>23</sup> approached the human-pillar sacrifice in a more comparative perspective, drawing parallels with China, India and European countries, in the late 1960s, Hori Ichirō 堀一郎 (1910–74), a scholar greatly influenced by the phenomenological approach of Mircea Eliade, dwelled more specifically on the practice of human sacrifice in Japan. Uninterested in investigating whether this form of sacrifice had ever been historically practiced, Hori aimed to inscribe voluntary or involuntary heroes and heroines of self-sacrifice — the human pillars — within the wider context of redemption, stressing

21 Bialock, David T., 'Outcasts, Emperorhip, and Dragon Cults in *The Tale of the Heike*', in *Cahiers d'Extrême-Asie*, 13 (2002), 227–310 at pp. 281–82.

22 Yanagita, Kunio, 柳田國男, 'Imo no chikara 妹の力', in *Yanagita Kunio shū* 柳田國男集 vol. 9, (Tokyo: Chikuma shobō 筑摩書房, 1969).

23 Minakata, Kumagusu, *Zoku Minakata zuihitsu* 続南方隨筆 (*fukkoku* 覆刻) (Tokyo: Chūsekisha 沖積社, 1992). Online at: [https://www.aozora.gr.jp/cards/000093/files/43634\\_47041.html](https://www.aozora.gr.jp/cards/000093/files/43634_47041.html).

how such figures would, in death, be deified and enshrined to protect people against disasters.<sup>24</sup>

*Hitobashira* has also been used in modern times to refer to a person who dies as a sacrifice for a particular cause. One notable example of this usage is mentioned in the *Nihon Kokugo Daijiten* 日本国語大辞典 (*Shogakukan's Japanese Dictionary*), which cites a passage from the novel *Wata* 綿 (*Cotton*, 1931), written by Taniguchi Zentarō 谷口善太郎 (1899–1974), a Japanese author of proletarian literature (*puroretaria bungaku* プロレタリア文学), labour activist, and member of the Japanese Communist Party in the National Diet.

Considered autobiographical, *Wata* portrays the harsh conditions endured by poor labourers and the spread of capitalism into rural areas through the perspective of a boy born into a tenant farmer's family. His father works tirelessly for a landlord while tending a small piece of land. His mother labours in the cotton fields. His older sister, who works in a silk reeling factory, becomes the pillar of the family. She marries without informing her parents but is eventually persuaded to return home to continue financially supporting the family. She later takes a job at a spinning factory, but, after a few months, she dies from exhaustion and exposure to toxic substances.

The protagonist, Kawakami Genji, chooses to devote his life to the proletarian movement, becoming a committed militant worker. During this time, he marries a young woman from the same union. His mother, initially struggling to understand his involvement, eventually comes to accept it, enduring hardships and persecutions with the hopeful smile of a 'proletarian mother'.<sup>25</sup> While in prison, Genji learns that his young wife, who had been arrested and subjected to far harsher torture than he, has suddenly died. Upon hearing the news, he feels an overwhelming sense of calm: 'She had become a human pillar [*hitobashira* 人柱] of the class struggle. Oh, considering that, she was happier than my elder sister!'.<sup>26</sup>

## Sacrifice and Redemption: the interplay between national duty and Buddhist beliefs in modern Japan

民族は運命共同体といふ学説身にしみてわれら諾はむか

'The nation: a community of fate'. This theory has sunk in so deep. What can we do but give in?

Nanbara Shigeru 南原繁<sup>27</sup>

24 Hori, Ichirō 堀一郎, 'Three Types of Redemption in Japanese Folk Religion', in *Types of Redemption: Contributions to the Theme of the Study-Conference Held at Jerusalem 14<sup>th</sup> to 19<sup>th</sup> 1968*, ed. by Raphael J. Zwi Werblowsky and Claas Jouco Bleeker (Leiden: Brill, 1970), pp. 105–20, at p. 113.

25 Taniguchi Zentarō 谷口善太郎, 'Wata 綿', in *Nihon puroretaria bungaku taikai* 日本プロレタリア文学大系, vol. 5 (Tokyo: San'ichi shobō 三一書房, 1955), pp. 3–47, at p. 39.

26 Taniguchi Zentarō 谷口善太郎, 'Wata 綿', p. 39.

27 Yellen, Jeremy, and Andrew Campana, 'Japan, Pearl Harbor, and the Poetry of December 8<sup>th</sup>', *The Asia-Pacific Journal* | *Japan Focus*, 14/24, n. 3 (2016). Online at <https://apjff.org/2016/24/yellen>.

It would be remiss not to address a distinct type of sacrifice closely associated with the nation in its modern context. When written as 生贄, *ikenie* originates from the meaning of ‘keeping alive’ (*ikeru* いける) and denotes the offering of a living being to a deity while it is still alive, as previously discussed. The characters 犠牲, read both as *ikenie* and *gisei*, are primarily used to refer to someone who sacrifices his/her own life, fame, or fortune for a specific cause or person. This term encompasses acts of complete self-giving, whether voluntary or forced, as well as sacrifices resulting from accidental incidents or natural disasters.

In the context of modern Japan — which experienced numerous rebellions, civil wars, foreign invasions, and the Pacific conflict from the latter half of the nineteenth century until the defeat in 1945 —, *gisei* often refers to Japanese soldiers (and civilians) who offered their lives for the nation and the emperor. These individuals are literally *gisei*, ‘sacrifices’, for the sake of the nation (*okuni no tame*) and their spirits are enshrined in the internationally known and controversial Yasukuni Shrine 靖国神社 in Tokyo.

Similar to wartime propaganda posters in Nazi Germany, where the term *Opfern* appeared (e.g., ‘Nicht spenden, opfern’), Japan’s wartime posters also employed slogans urging civilians to emulate soldiers’ readiness to die by saving money and resources with utmost effort (*‘kesshi no shusse, hisshi no chochiku’* 決死の出征、必死の貯蓄). Such messages encapsulated the notion that sacrifices made on the home front were as crucial to the war effort as those made on the battlefield.

The words *nie* 贄 (offering), *gisei*, and *hitobashira* also appear in poems and passages written by Japanese prisoners detained at Sugamo Prison in Tokyo. Originally constructed in 1895, the prison became notorious in the 1930s for incarcerating political prisoners, including numerous communists and dissenters prosecuted under the Peace Preservation Law (*Chian iji hō* 治安維持法). During the Allied occupation, Sugamo was repurposed to detain suspected war criminals awaiting trial before the International Military Tribunal for the Far East, commonly known as the Tokyo Trials. This tribunal sought to prosecute individuals for war crimes and other offenses committed during the war. After the trials, Sugamo Prison continued to incarcerate and execute some of the convicted individuals. Hanayama Shinshō 花山信勝 (1898–1995), who served as a volunteer Buddhist chaplain at Sugamo, did not oppose the death penalty but sought to transform the prison from a site of punishment to one of liberation by utilising the ritual and narrative elements of Pure Land Buddhism. He aimed to provide the condemned with an opportunity to commit themselves to a different (spiritual) future, even in the face of death.<sup>28</sup> Pure Land Buddhism emphasises the idea of a Pure Land, where followers believe they can be reborn through devotion to the Buddha Amida. By integrating these principles into the prison environment, Hanayama sought to offer spiritual solace and the prospect of positive transformation to those facing execution. His role transcended

28 Curley, Melissa Anne-Marie, ‘Prison and the Pure Land: A Buddhist Chaplain in Occupied Japan’, *Journal of Buddhist Ethics*, 25 (2018), 147–83.

traditional chaplaincy, as he endeavoured to infuse hope and redemption into the bleak circumstances of the prison and the impending executions.

Hanayama observed the collective sentiment of twenty-seven young men facing imminent execution, poignantly captured in the statement, ‘I thought it was nothing to die in battle, but now...’. These individuals, including volunteer members of death bands and soldiers who had repeatedly braved mortal peril under relentless gunfire, unanimously reflected on the stark contrast between their former mindset — in which they were prepared to sacrifice both body and soul in the fervour of pursuing victory — and their current psychological state. Confronted with accusations of historical culpability, they found themselves in a prolonged period of peacetime, awaiting the inevitable and unrelenting approach of death. A shared realisation emerged: sacrificing one’s life in the context of war was far easier than doing so in times of peace.<sup>29</sup>

The writings of those facing the death penalty reveal a complex interplay of themes, blending notions of sacrifice, sacrificial offering, and being a human pillar for the sake of the nation and a god-like Emperor with Buddhist concepts of refuge and eternal peace through liberation from the suffering and challenges of the mortal world.

Doihara Kenji 土肥原賢二 (1883–1948), a general in the Guangdong Army, is remembered as one of the architects of the Manchurian Incident of 1931, which led to the military takeover of northeastern China. He played a pivotal role in negotiating the Doihara-Qin Agreement (June 1935), which paved the way for the establishment of a puppet state in Manchuria. After 1945, Doihara was indicted as a Class A war criminal and hanged at Sugamo Prison. Controversially, he was later enshrined at the Yasukuni Shrine. In a speech delivered to the Chinese Military Observation Commission regarding the ‘liberation of Oriental races from English, American, and Dutch domination and the establishment of a Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere’, Doihara remarked: ‘The relation between Japan and China has become much closer since your participation in the War, and I am very happy to be able to say that we are making strenuous efforts for the successful prosecution of the War in the spirit of “Life or Death together”’.<sup>30</sup> The ideal of a communal act of sacrifice for the sake of a strong Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere was transformed into a personal offering (*nie*) to peace in a poem Doihara wrote before his execution in 1948:

‘What is the suffering of the eight freezing hells or the eight burning hells to me [Buddhist hells]?’

I am an offering (*nie*) to peace’.<sup>31</sup>

Murakami Takuji expressed similar sentiments in his last poem:

<sup>29</sup> Hanayama, Shinshō, *The Way of Deliverance: Three Years with the Condemned Japanese War Criminals*, trans. by Suzuki Hideo (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1950), p. 36.

<sup>30</sup> The International Military Tribunal for the Far East, UVA. Digital Collection, <https://imtfe.law.virginia.edu/>.

<sup>31</sup> Hanayama, Shinshō, *Heiwa no hakken: Sugamo no sei to shi no kiroku* 平和の発見—巣鴨の生と死の記録, p. 191.

A human pillar (*hitobashira*),  
 Firmly guarding the foundation stone of the nation,  
 Taking refuge in the Buddha,  
 I will depart tomorrow, smiling.<sup>32</sup>

General Itagaki Seishirō 板垣征四郎 (1885–1948) and General Kimura Heitarō 木村兵太郎 (1888–1948), both of whom faced execution, also expressed their willingness to become sacrifices for peace. Itagaki stated:

‘As for the Declaration of Potsdam, I consider that we are sacrifices on the Altar of a Lasting Peace. In the words of Saint [*sic*] Nichiren, our throwing away our ugly physical beings for eternal peace means the turning of our common clay to gold — and so I can die content. As a Japanese, I will watch over the nation forever. I sincerely pray that our country may attain a speedy peace with other nations, complete its own rehabilitation, and contribute to a world-wide peace. I also pray for the prosperity of the Republics of China and Korea’.<sup>33</sup>

Kimura, in his final statement, echoed this sentiment:

My body as a sacrifice  
 To a lasting peace I offer.  
 And may I receive seven other lives  
 With which to serve the nation.<sup>34</sup>

For those who had been prepared to sacrifice their lives during the war for the descendant of the great Shinto kami Amaterasu, and who now faced execution by the Western Christian enemy, Buddhism offered solace. It did so either by providing the prospect of future reincarnations devoted to national service or, with striking irony, by promising a ‘Western’ salvation in the blissful, karma-free Pure Land of the West. The ‘West’ became a paradoxical symbol — both the source of mortal judgment and the realm of ultimate spiritual liberation.

32 Hanayama, Shinshō, *Heiwa no hakken: Sugamo no sei to shi no kiroku* 平和の発見—巢鴨の生と死の記録, p. 137.

33 Hanayama, Shinshō, *The Way of Deliverance: Three Years with the Condemned Japanese War Criminals*, pp. 240–41.

34 Hanayama, Shinshō, *The Way of Deliverance: Three Years with the Condemned Japanese War Criminals*, p. 245.



PART 2



# Religion and Politics



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