

“The Benzaiten and Dakiniten mandalas: A Problem or an Enigma?”
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Toward the end of the Heian period, an esoteric Buddhist text referred to a strange three-faced deity called Yakṣa or Matarajin as the protector of Tōji, the headquarters of the Shingon school. Its three faces were those of the devas Dakiniten, Benzaiten, and Shōten (or Kangiten), three major figures of medieval esotericism. Unfortunately, no representation of that deity remains. It is only some three or four centuries later, during the Muromachi period, that a series of painted scrolls representing the Three Devas as one composite fox-riding deity surrounded by its acolytes became popular. These paintings present affinities with another type of representations known as the Tenkawa Benzaiten mandala. This paper is trying to address the iconological problems raised by such paintings and their cultic background.

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The Three-faced Deity of Tōji

The *Gyōki*, a ritual text compiled around 1179 by the imperial priest Shukaku (Shukaku Shinnō, 1150-1202), contains an interesting passage concerning the image of the protecting deity of Tōji, the headquarters of the Shingon school. This image, unfortunately no longer extant, was that of a Yakṣa (yashajin) called Matarajin, who is described as a “strange deity” (*kijin*) with three faces and six arms. Its central face (golden in color) was that of Shōten, while the right (red) face was that of Benzaiten, and the left (white) face that of Dakiniten. This Yakṣa is said to be a messenger of the Inari deity, and he was believed to predict future events, eliminate calamities, and bring good fortune. He was also allegedly extremely compassionate and free of resentment, a statement that sounds more like a pious wish given the general reputation of the yakṣas. According to the priest Gōhō (1306-62), he was actually a kind of ogre, whom people attempted to placate by consecrating their children to him.

While the protecting deity of Tōji is specific to Shingon, the composite deity later known as the Three Devas — Shōten (or Daikokuten), Dakiniten, and Benzaiten — fitted quite naturally the ternary logic of Tendai doctrine. These Devas were said to represent the Three Truths of Tendai, corresponding to the Womb Realm, the Vajra Realm, and the Realm of Realization (*susiddhi*), respectively. The Three Devas were also worshiped on the margins or outside of Buddhism, in religious trends that came to be known as

Onmyōdō, Shintō, and Shugendō. The importance of the fox at Inari, and the role of the “Three Foxes” in apotropaic rituals, have perhaps paved the way to the representation of the Three Devas as a fox-riding deity.

Iconology and Interpicturality

The Three Devas are represented as one single deity in a series of painted scrolls often called “Image of Dakiniten” or “Dakiniten mandala.” Only one of them, preserved at Hōju-in, is actually called “Image of the Three Devas.” These representations flourished between the Nanbokuchō and the Muromachi periods, and they were still produced during the Edo period and even after.

The “Dakiniten mandara” usually represents a three-faced deity riding a fox. While its three faces are those of Dakiniten, Shōten, and Benzaiten, their disposition may vary. The deity is usually identified as Dakiniten because its mount, the fox; in some cases, however, if we consider the central face to be the main one, it would perhaps be just as appropriate to speak of Benzaiten or Shōten. Sometimes, additional faces — human or non-human — are visible on the sides. Some of the deity’s attributes are characteristic of the eight-armed Benzaiten.

A) Let us begin with the simplest case, that in which the deity is represented alone or with only a small number of acolytes. It is represented by three painted scrolls.

a. The first one is a painted scroll dating from the Muromachi period, and preserved at Hōju-in. This painting, commonly known as “Three Devas riding a fox,” is strongly reminiscent of Shukaku’s description of the *yakṣa* of Tōji. The distribution of the three faces (with that of Shōten at the center) is the same. Although the color symbolism that characterized the Tōji figure has disappeared (a fact due perhaps to the wearing out of colors), other symbolic elements are visible. The deity is winged, and snakes are coiled around its neck and arms — a feature reminiscent of Gundari Myōō, one of Shōten’s tamers. Shōten’s mouth breaks into a large smile (or grin), while the two other figures look serene and dignified. Above their heads are three disks. The red solar disk above Shōten displays a three-legged bird, the white lunar disk above Dakiniten’s head on the right contains the legendary hare-in-the-moon; on the left, the disk above Benzaiten’s head, while empty, is partly filled by the head of the snake that adorns her head.

The twelve-armed deity holds various attributes (different types of jewels, a small shakujō staff, a small vajra staff, a lace, a vajra bell, a five-pronged vajra), and two pairs of hands (one in front of its chest, the other in front of its navel) are joined in añjali mudrā (J. *gasshō*). Near the legs of the fox (so close as they seem to be standing on them), four small figures (three female, one male) are represented, also riding foxes. As noted above, they are usually the acolytes of Dakiniten.

The *Hōju-in monjo* contains a section entitled “The four bodies of the Three Devas” that seems to be a textual counterpart of that scroll, although the latter is by no means

merely the illustration of a text. It gives a metaphysical explanation of the four bodies in question — namely, the body of self-nature (*jishōshin*), the function body (*juyōshin*), the metamorphosis body, and the assimilation body (*tōrūshin*). This list represents an expansion of the traditional Three Bodies of the Buddha. In principle, the Three Devas should represent the lowest type of hypostasis, the assimilation body. Here, however, they seem to be at the center of the classificatory scheme. Thus, in terms of the self-nature body, Shōten is said to correspond to the Dainichi of the Vajra realm, symbolized by a solar disk; Dakiniten, to the Dainichi of the Womb Realm, symbolized by a the lunar disk; and Benzaiten, to the Dainichi of the Susiddhi [Realm], symbolized by the wheel of Venus. In terms of the function-body, Shōten corresponds to the Bodhisattva Kannon, Dakiniten to the bodhisattva Monju, and Benzaiten to the bodhisattva Kokūzō; in terms of the metamorphosis-body, Shōten corresponds to a three-legged bird (traditional symbol of the sun), and it is called “heavenly fox” (*tenko*), Dakiniten to a fox, and Benzaiten to a white snake; finally, and somewhat surprisingly, in terms of the assimilation body, Shōten corresponds to thunder and lightning, Dakiniten to a bird, and Benzaiten to a bee or a wasp. The latter equivalences remain enigmatic to me.

b. In the second exemplar, the central (white) face of the deity seems to be that of Dakiniten, the left one (pink) that of Shōten, the right one (white) that of Benzaiten. No animals are visible in the solar disk above Shōten and in the lunar disk above Benzaiten. The deity also holds two disks in its upper hands, which seem to represent the sun and moon. It also wears a strange headgear, in which several faces appear

