

“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.

The Benzaiten and Dakiniten mandalas: A Problem or an Enigma?

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

(one red rooster face, two green demonic faces, and two female bodhisattva-like faces, crowned by smaller buddha-heads). The attributes held in eight of the twelve hands are slightly different (two astral disks, a sword and a lace — traditional attributes of Fudō — as well as a tray and a tripartite jewel, a vajra and a vajra-bell), while the four others are joined in two *gasshō*.

The four fox-riding acolytes are distributed in the same fashion, and hold similar attributes, but their faces seem more friendly. The male figure on the left of the main deity holds a brush and a sheet of paper, in a gesture that denotes a certain joviality. The main fox is smaller, less impressive, and it has a smaller fox head above its head, and a jewel in its mouth. A snake is coiled around its neck, and it has a vajra at the tip of its tail. A geometric shape is also visible, which may be the form of a constellation (although it looks slightly different from the usual representation of the Seven Stars). The group is set on a red, irregular lotus leaf, which is itself set on a cloud and some geometric pattern.

c. A development of that model can be found in the next exemplar. Here, the presence of a coiled snake with an old man face (Ugajin) above the central figure seems to identify it as Benzaiten (but perhaps that was already the case in the previous example). However, next to the faces of Shōten and Dakiniten, with their solar and lunar disks, on the sides are two more figures, that of a lion and of an eagle. Again, on the left of Ugajin is the large head of a goat, and the two figures are surmounted by two small buddhas. Likewise, small figures appear on the heads of the lion and the

eagle. Next to them are two of the four fox-riding acolytes, placed here by the strange perspective that puts the main fox's hind legs and tail on top of the picture.

The attributes held by the main deity also vary somewhat (for instance, the sun and moon in the upper hands have been replaced by a key — a characteristic attribute of Benzaiten) and a dharma-wheel). As noted above, the figures of the four acolytes and their foxes are much smaller. The main fox has jewels, but also vajras and dharma-wheels at its extremities. There is also a three-pronged vajra surmounted by a jewel at the tip of its tail, while a constellation pattern is clearly visible on it.

A line drawing of the Three Devas from the Nōman-in collection (Rokkaku-dō) shows the face of Shōten as the center. The deity's lower hands hold Shōten's traditional attributes, a kind of cake and a *daikon*, while its other hands hold three jewels and a sword, a trident and a key, a wheel and a jeweled staff, a bow and arrows. Two hands are also joined in *gasshō*. Unlike paintings of the same type, no sun and moon are visible above its head(s). Its mount, a fox, has a snake coiled around its neck. It is flanked by two fox-riding youths, facing each other, their hands also joined in *gasshō*. The cartouche calls this figure "Jade Woman deity" (*gyokujo-shin*), which suggests a Yin-Yang influence.

Another typical element in these representations is the frontal position of the fox, which is seen in plunging view, as if the viewer was placed slightly above the scene.

This feature is accentuated by the unusual form of the lotus on which (or above which) the god and his mount are set: in the various exemplars, the four petals of this lotus surround the subject, according to changing perspectives that correspond to the ideal elevation of the viewer's viewpoint. This lotus is lined with a fringe of clouds, which indicates that the scene takes place in the sky. The cloud trailing behind the fox legs gives a sense of great speed. In most cases, the fox is drawn in a frontal fashion that gives its body a massive and somewhat unnatural appearance. In some cases, however, it is represented sideways, plunging toward the lower right of the painting — although the deity standing on it still faces the viewer. When Shōten is the central figure, he shows a kind of uncanny smile or grin. The astral symbolism of the sun and moon is reinforced by the schema of a constellation (usually the Northern Dipper).

In the Dakinīten scroll of the Clarke Museum (Nanbokuchō period), the deity has only one head and two arms; it holds a sword in its right hand, a jewel in its left, like in some representations of Benzaiten. It rides a white fox that has snakes coiled around its legs. It is flanked by two warrior-like tengus, like in some representations of the three-faced deity. In the Dakinīten mandala of the Osaka Municipal Museum, for instance, one bird-tengu holds a spear, while another, with a red face and wings, holds a sword. They are usually identified as acolytes called Ton'yūgyō and Suyochisō, two names referring to their swiftness.

Various details reinforce the strangeness of the scene. We have already noted the snakes are coiled around the legs of the fox, whose extremities rest on small dharmawheels and vajras. The feeling of uncanniness increases by several degrees in the

Dakiniten mandalas. That feeling, also produced by the proliferation of snakes, foxes, and other animals, side by side with auspicious symbols (jewels, treasures), also seems to introduce a dimension of trouble — and almost of threat — in a painting whose main motivation seems to be to bring good fortune.

Let us first mention a few relatively simple cases in which the deity is simply flanked by four fox-riding acolytes. In most instances, three of these acolytes are female, the fourth one is a male wearing a black hat. In the mandalas, these four acolytes grow smaller, and are placed on the lotus near the main fox, the deity's mount, even sometimes on its legs. As noted above, they are known as the "Four Princes." In a painting analyzed by Shirahara Yukiko, the four-armed deity and its four attendants are represented, flying on their fox mounts against a mountainous background of mountains that seem to represent Mount Inari, a place traditionally associated with foxes. In this case, the deity seems to have been identified with Inari Myōjin.

B. The Dakiniten mandalas are more complex works, in which the number of retinue members tends to increase. Their atmosphere is quite surreal. Despite the diversity of the surroundings, the main image remains basically the same (frontal vision, deity riding a fox, on a large lotus lined with clouds), except for one significant detail: the central face can be that of any of the three devas. In addition to the multi-headed deity and the four princes, all or part of the following elements can usually be found:

1. Two attendants, at the feet or in front of the main deity: according to an oral tradition, they are the devas Suiten (Skt. Varuna) and Katen (Skt. Agni).
2. Two goddesses bringing offerings, flanking the main deity. They are identified as Kichijōten (Skt. Śrī) on the left and Kariteimo (Skt. Hārītī) on the right.
3. Fifteen or sixteen divine youths (dōji, Skt. kumāra), disposed in rather linear fashion on each side of the main deity. They clearly represent — or are patterned after— the “children” or acolytes of Benzaiten. In one case at least, one of them seems to be Myōken Bosatsu. Most of them ride animals (crane, horse, ox, deer, fox, snake) and hold specific attributes.
4. In some cases, we find only eight youths, who are the acolytes of Dakiniten rather than those of Benzaiten. They are described in the *Keiran shūyōshū*, and their names are given in the *Betsugyō giki*. In the Fushimi Inari mandala, we find seven youths and an old man.
5. At the bottom of the image, two armored generals — of the bird-tengu variety — are visible, and they seem to be running toward the viewer.

One of these representations is a Kasuga mandala preserved at the Boston Museum of Fine Arts. On the upper part of the image, a deer, messenger of the Kasuga deity, can be seen standing at the foot of Kasuga Mountain. Below it are two goddesses with offerings (Kariteimo, on the right, is surrounded by children; Kichijōten, on the left, rides what looks like a phoenix). Below, the three-faced honzon, riding a white fox, is flanked by two female acolytes, who are also riding foxes. Despite its alleged name (Dakiniten), its central face is that of Shōten, while the two lateral faces are those of

Benzaiten and Dakiniten. Although the details are not too clear, it seems to have a coiled Ugajin over his heads.

The other acolytes, however, are more unusual, and the group they form constitutes an epitome of medieval Tantric iconography: below the main deity is a representation of the dual-body Kangiten. It is flanked by two unidentified figures (the one on the left could be Myōken). Below it is a representation of Aizen Myōō in a fiery circle, on a vase. On the left is one of the tengu that usually accompany Dakiniten. On the right, however, is a black figure, Mahākāla, standing, holding an elephant-skin over his head. At the bottom, or in the forefront, various food offerings are arrayed, like in the Tenkawa Benzaiten mandala.

Another particularly fine exemplar is a mandala dated to the Nanbokuchō period, and belonging to the Osaka Municipal Museum. The main figure is a three-faced, twelve armed deity. Its central white face is that of Benzaiten, the left red face that of Dakiniten, the right one that of Shōten. Above the central face is Ugajin, the composite figure of a snake with an old man's face that usually appears in the images of Uga Benzaiten. Above the Dakiniten face is the lunar disk, above the Shōten face the solar disk; above these, the Seven Stars of the Northern Dipper are visible. This mandala lacks the attendants and the two gift-bearing goddesses. The deity is surrounded by sixteen dōji, some of them riding foxes or other animals; also present are the two tengu and the four fox-riding acolytes. But the main characteristic of that scroll is the presence below (or in front of) the main deity of a hybrid couple: the man

is red in color, and wears a black hat; the woman white, and she holds what looks like a jewel. Both are naked to the waist. Even more striking: the male has a fish tail, the female a fox tail, and two foxes are shown, plunging toward these appendices and apparently biting them.

The Tenkawa Benzaiten mandala

This strange couple of divinities, whose presence remains unexplained, provides a bridge to a second iconographical series, which at first glance seems unrelated to Dakiniten, since it is a variation on the theme of the so-called Tenkawa Benzaiten mandala. As noted above, the Tenkawa Shrine near Yoshino is one of the cultic centers of Benzaiten, to which we will return. This representation is known through various scrolls, the best known being a set of two scrolls preserved at Nōman-in, a *tattō* of Hasedera, and a single scroll preserved at Shinnō-in. The central subject of these mandalas is another three-headed deity. This deity has the appearance of an elegant Chinese lady. This appearance, however, is belied by the three serpent or dragon heads that emerge from the neck of her sumptuous dress. Their mouth emits clouds of dark vapor, in the midst of which three wish-fulfilling jewels (*cintāmaṇi*) are visible.

This striking image, said to be based on a vision, has no textual counterpart, nor any equivalent in Japanese iconography; it is not found either in Indian or Chinese iconography, although Indian *nagīs* are sometimes represented with snake-hoods

emerging above their head. The closest representation I have found is that of the dragon-goddess Fude (Fude longnū) is the so-called Long Scroll of the Dali kingdom. This nagī was identified with the Dali kingdom deity Baijie, who is said to be the consort of Mahākāla. She is also identified with Hārītī and Śrī. Benzaiten is also paired with Daikokuten (Mahākāla), and in the Tenkawa mandala her two female attendants are Kichijōten (Śrī) and Kishimojin (Hārītī). I have, however, no clue as to how a Dali image might have resurfaced in the vision of a monk of the Muromachi period.

The three-headed deity is shown standing instead of riding a fox, as in the Dakiniten mandala, although numerous foxes appear in the picture. The sixteen dōji are represented, however, in the two Nōman-in scrolls (although not in the Shinnō-in scroll), as well as three snake-headed guardians, which an oral tradition calls the Three Princes. But another striking element, next to the rather uncanny snake-heads of the deity and its acolytes, is found in one of the Nōman-in scrolls, with two half-naked, half-human half-animal couples, whose animal legs call to mind the fauns of ancient Greece. In the first couple, male and female stand facing each other, on snake skins. They are both half-naked. The female has four arms, and holds what looks like sugar cones in three of her hands; the male holds a plate of what looks like fruit. She has a small brown fox above her head, while he has a snake. A white fox tail is visible under her dress; he has bird legs.

In the second couple, the male, wearing a black hat, holds the female by her waist. She has a fox tail, while he has bird legs. She holds what looks like a *pain de sucre* in

her two hands, he holds what looks like an open fruit. They are flanked by two foxes flying down in the same attitude as Dakiniten's foxes. This painting is attributed to Takuma Hōgen. According to the colophon at the back of the first painting, it was drawn in 1546 by Rinke, a painter (e-busshi) from Nara. These two couples look very much like the one in the Dakiniten mandala of the Osaka Museum, but they are represented in amorous postures that give the scene a resemblance with Bosch's Garden of Delights.

These two mandalas form a set, and they differ by their color. In the first one, the dominant color (and in particular the color of Benzaiten's dress and of the three snake/dragon heads) is green, whereas the second one brown tones are more important. This set could be related to specific spring and autumn rituals. This interpretation is reinforced by another common characteristic of these mandalas, the presence of large-size ritual objects, among which vases that seem filled with jewels that call to mind the image of Aizen Myōō. According to the catalog's legend, these objects evoke the seven treasures of the cakravartin king. Another significant detail is the proliferation of wish-fulfilling jewels (cintāmaṇi). In one scroll, the two snake-headed guardians on top of the picture are connected by an arc of jewels that seems to emanate from their mouths and that gives the impression that they are juggling; likewise, the "treasures" just mentioned are outlined by cintāmaṇis. At the top of the picture, the three mountains in the distance, themselves crowned by large cintāmaṇis, probably represent the three peaks of Yoshino, with Misen (abbreviation of

Shumisen, that is, the cosmic Mount Sumeru), the mountain behind Tenkawa Shrine, at the center; Kinpusen on the Yoshino side, and Ōmine on the Kumano side.

The mandala of Shinnō-in has a simpler structure. The central deity is not surrounded by dōji. According to the *Jūppi Benzaiten shidai (kuketsu)* (Kōyasan), a text attributed to Kūkai's disciple Shinga but more likely dating from the early Muromachi period, the two deities on whose hands she stands are Suiten and Katen (Varuna and Agni, the Water and Fire Devas), the two goddesses making offerings ate Kichijōten (Lakṣmī) and Kariteimo ("Mother" Hārītī).

For the sake of comparison, let us mention another Tenkawa Benzaiten mandala, that of the Nezu Museum in Tokyo (Muromachi period). Its central deity is an anthropomorphic figure, the traditional eight-armed Benzaiten, surrounded by the fifteen dōji and Daikokuten. The two protectors found on the top in the other Tenkawa mandala scrolls have been replaced by Zaō Gongen (on the left) and En no Gyōja (on the right), two mythical figures of Yoshino Shugendō. No snake-headed deities are visible. The dōji are grouped in a more natural way and do not ride animals. Although this picture was produced around the same time and place, it entirely lacks the unsettling characteristics of the other pictures described above.

Another particular example that forms an interesting contrast to these paintings is that of the Tohachi Bishamon mandala of Shinnō-in (Muromachi period), already

mentioned. This four-headed, ten-armed Bishamonten wears a lion headgear above which two small seated buddhas are visible. In this case, however, the honzon's four faces are alike. He holds a spear and a stupa in his two upper hands, a key and a jewel (the usual attributes of Benzaiten) in the next two hands, and eight swords in the remaining hands. Under his feet are two tortoises (emblems of the North). He rides a lion, which stands on four lotuses. That lion's frontal view is strikingly similar to that of the fox in the Dakiniten mandala. We also find here the same small fox-riding acolytes that we noticed in the Dakiniten mandala, and Bishamonten's representation is clearly influenced by those of Dakiniten and Benzaiten. As noted, he holds some of Benzaiten's attributes, and several of the sixteen deities around him seem to belong to the retinues of Benzaiten and Dakiniten. Several of them are riding foxes, and seem very to be variants of the "Four Princes" of Dakiniten. Some carry on their shoulder a large bag that calls to mind Daikokuten — although the latter usually does not ride a fox. Indeed, as one of the figures suggests — a youth holding a ball of rice above his head (also found in the Dakiniten mandala) in the same way as one of the six manifestations of Daikokuten — we may have here a variant of the so-called "Six Daikoku." Also worth mentioning are two red wrathful deities, one holding bow and arrows like Aizen, the other holding two spears; the latter also appears in some Dakiniten mandalas; finally, two warrior-like tengu —perhaps the same ones that flank Dakiniten; a naga-king holding fruit; and a man wearing a hat, and holding two bundles of rice stalks (a motif usually associated with the Inari deity).

I insisted on the detail of these paintings, not only because “the god is in the details,” but also because these motifs reveal what one could call the “interpicturality” (the iconological version of “intertextuality”) that presided to the composition of these pictures. Many things in them remain incomprehensible, and perhaps some of them have no “signification” in the strict sense of the term, but are merely here to create or reinforce a certain atmosphere. The viewer is immersed in an oneirical or visionary milieu that does not quite have the same meaning than the “pragmatic” reduction of various deities to their common function of gods of fortune (as in the case of the Three-faced Daikoku) — even if, in the last analysis, it is the same circulation of symbols, transfer of attributes, a network of identifications, that allowed the two particular instances (cas de figure) of the “Three Devas in one” and the Three-faced Daikoku to develop.

What is striking in the cases of the Dakiniten and Benzaiten mandalas is the symbolic proliferation they achieve, and the fluidity of identities that unsettles them. Indeed, the viewer is no longer sure of knowing, for instance, if he or she is dealing with Dakiniten or Benzaiten — with a Dakiniten surrounded by fifteen dōji and by snakes, or with a Benzaiten riding a fox.

Every viewer selects specific motifs in a painting on the basis of his/her own neuronal library. The detail that struck me the most is perhaps the half-naked hybrid couple in the frontstage. As Yves Bonnefoy points out, when a detail invades the front stage of a scene — for instance the horse in Carravagio’s painting in the “Conversion of Saint Paul,” “it is no longer a detail, its status changes, it expresses some unavoidable necessity.”

Without denying the register of symbolic/ritual relevance, I want to emphasize here a “non-interpretive interpretation” that resonates with Michel de Certeau’s discussion of Bosch’s “Garden of Delights.” Here, I would argue that, after paying due attention to ritual and historical contexts, the interpreter must take the risk of committing an anachronism. It could be that “the painting organizes, aesthetically, a loss of meaning,” which no interpretation (historical, socio-economic, mythological, ritual, psychological) can come from without to fill in. Like Bosch’s Garden, the Tenkawa Benzaiten mandala may not be reduced to univocity, to some kind of narrative. Perhaps precisely “it not only establishes itself within a *difference* in relation to all meaning; it produces its difference in *making us believe that it contains hidden meaning.*”

There is no denying that a lot of iconographic, mythological, and ritual elements in this painting make sense. But perhaps that sense, if not purely illusory, is merely at the level of conventional truth, while the painting conveys, not a deeper doctrinal truth, but a more immediate affect, namely, its uncanny feeling, obtained by the merging of the divine, human, and the animal registers, and of the auspicious signs of wealth, the natural sexuality, the ugly, threatening reptilian presence. As Certeau argues, “the painting seems both to *provoke* and *frustrate* each one of these interpretive meanings.” “It does not cease *withdrawing*, thanks to the *secrecy effect* it produces.” In other words, it would be already too much to ascribe this painting “the status of an enigma, a statement that tells ‘the truth’ to the extent, and only to the extent, that it means what we make it say.” Perhaps its

aesthetics “does not consist in generating new lights for intelligibility but in extinguishing it.”

While recognizing the importance of the aesthetic and ritual levels, I want to suggest here in passing the possibility that we need temporarily to withdraw from our conventional interpretive mode in order to yield to the fascination that this representation (or more exactly, “presentification”) exerts on us, and to realize that this uncanniness, in the Freudian sense, brings us closer to the reality of the Devas than any hermeneutic rationalization, any doctrinal or cultural recuperation.

What led medieval Buddhists to worship the Three Devas as a single composite deity?

The grouping — within a single ritual (or parallel rites) like the “joint ritual of the Three Devas” — of several deities perceived as having functional similarities and symbolic affinities may have been part of a strategy for obtaining greater ritual efficacy.

But why do we have “*three devas*,” and why these three in particular? The first question seems easy to answer. As we have had many occasions to note, the number three has a particular symbolic value in esoteric Buddhism. It symbolizes the Three Jewels, the Three Truths of Tendai, The Three Mysteries of Shingon, the Three Bodies of the Buddha, and similar doctrinal rubrics.

Symbolically, the triangle represents the fire of *goma* rituals, and in particular the shape of the hearth used for subjugation rituals. It is also evokes the “three dots” of the Siddham letter I, which plays an important role in Tantric ritual, and the three eyes of the

Śiva, a god that, in his Buddhist forms as Mahākāla and Maheśvara, is the paradigmatic representative of the Deva category. The triangular form is also that of the Three Jewels or “triple” cintāmaṇi (sanben hōju). This threefold cintāmaṇi is associated with many medieval deities, among which Benzaiten, whose three main cultic centers are represented as three connected jewels forming a triangle.

The iconography thus merely expresses and brings the associative logic to its conclusion. To understand this logic, we must understand each of these devas in its complex singularity, and realize that, beyond their similarities and constant permutations, it is their differences and their own dynamics that have allowed the Three (or Four) Devas to coexist and to resist their reduction to one single “personality.” Admittedly, however, the boundaries between them are at times blurred. By passing through the three-in-one stage, each of the Three Devas was enriched by a variety of features that contributed to its rise in the medieval pantheon.

The development of the Three Deva paradigm cannot be explained simply by the role of individuals, groups, or institutions. It represents the interconnection of several orders of reality: ideas like the hongaku teaching and the theories on duality and nonduality, texts, objects (mandalas, zushi, shikiban, relics, jewels) and technologies, myths, legends, icons, and symbols (three jewels, the triangular shapes symbolizing fire, the tripod stove, the three-legged solar crow, etc.).

Why did it take three centuries for this paradigm to flourish, when its image was already present at Tōji at the end of the eleventh century, and the model of the “combined ritual of the three worthies” was already fully developed by then? There is no clear answer to that question in the present state of the documentation. In the case of the Tenkawa Benzaiten mandala, a circumstantial reason has to do with the fact that it is only after the Nanbokuchō period that the Tenkawa Shrine, which had sided with the Southern Court, was able to flourish again as a pilgrimage center. The mandala drawn by Rinkei in 1546 represents the ultimate point of a long process.

However, the figure of the Three Devas is not simply, as one might think, the combination of three clearly defined deities, but rather the progressive convergence or emergence of bundles of features, the concentration of a nebula into the semblance of a core resulting from the mangle and tangle of ideas, men, myths, symbols, rituals. We never obtain a neat structure à la Lévi-Strauss, but a mangle, and a tangle that leaves the viewer himself tangled, that is, confused, in a state of bewilderment. The networks of associations and permutations determine a field of potentialities, within which a precise and composite image becomes fixed.