

Nembutsu Odori

By

ELISABETH MORIARTY

The practice of reciting Nembutsu was first brought from China by Ennin (793–864) as part of the *Jôgyô-jôza-sammai Samadhi* (常行 常座 三昧)¹ and quickly became one of the most popular practices of Buddhism. Contemplation of Amida with the repetition of the words 'Nama-Amida-Buddha'² was believed to be one of the ways of attaining salvation in Amida's Pure Land. However it was Kuya Shônin (903–972) who first introduced Nembutsu Odori as a ritual dance and recitation of Nembutsu to obtain salvation, and who, for this purpose, travelled all over the country instructing the people.

The Nembutsu of Kuya may still be seen in some parts of Japan, notably in Aizu district. There the story is told of how Kuya came to Tokizawa in Aizu and was surprised and saddened by the people's ignorance of Buddhism. He stayed in Hachioji and tried to help people of all ages reach salvation by faith in Amida. When he preached to the children, he asked them to chant Nembutsu, almost without thinking. If they did this, he promised to give them *nishiki-e* (錦絵)³ and to dance for them. Thus began Nembutsu Odori. Kuya danced with a small drum, *mame-daiko* (豆太鼓), while reciting Nembutsu because he wanted to attract the children to this religious practice. The dance was not formal, in fact he tried to make it amusing for the children and encouraged them to do the same. This was the simple dance-ritual that

1. *Jôgyô* means a practice done while incessantly walking round, and *jôza* means practice done while sitting immobile. This *samadhi* method was also called *in-zei* Nembutsu (sing-song); or *fudan* (incessant chanting); or Yama-no-Nembutsu (mountain) because it came from Enryakuji on Mt. Hiei. See: *Ennin's Dairy: The Record of a Pilgrim to China in Search of the Law* (Trans. E. O. Reischauer); *Folk Religion in Japan*, I. Hori.

2. The daily practice of Tendai monks was the recitation of the Lotus Sutra (*Hokke-zammai*) in the morning, and the *Nembutsu-zammai* in the evening which they called *Yu-Nembutsu*. See Hori, *op. cit.*, p. 96.

3. A form of holy-picture of Buddhist teaching.

he taught in his wanderings all over Japan.⁴

How is this Nembutsu Odori performed in Tokizawa today? The people first gather in a *sesshu-kô* (撰取講)⁵ and, facing the Buddha, they chant seven kinds of *o-kyô* (經)⁶—*zangebun* (懺悔文), *sanki* (三帚) and *sankyô* are very short sentences each chanted three times, then *jusan-hotoke* (十三佛) or the thirteen names of Buddha, and *komyôshingon* (光明真言) are each chanted three times after which *Kannon Uta* (観音歌) is read. All then face the big drum and say *ekô* (回向) or prayers for the dead. While the drums beat in a very definite pattern 72 times and the people do a simple Nembutsu Odori dance, stamping and moving rhythmically, the *sharikyô* (舍利經) is chanted.⁷ The dancers do not wear special clothes, though sometimes they may wear very bright *yukata* (浴衣). They count the rhythm with the help of *yotsutake* (四つ竹) or two bamboo sticks, and dance with small drums.⁸ This whole section of dance, drum and chant is repeated three times.

Then they divide into two groups, one group beating drums while the other chants *Yohogatame-no-ekô* (四方堅めの回向)⁹ which speaks of the various Pure Lands of Buddhism and explains that if you become

4. Honda Yasuji: The Diffusion of Dengaku (田楽, 風流, 本田安治著, 木耳社, 三念仏踊 (→)会津の念仏踊) p. 106.

5. 同上 a *sesshu-kô*: a prayer group to get the spirit of Buddha.

6. *Zange-bun* (lit. confession sentence). *sanki*: return to *nirvana*. *sankyô*: the atmosphere of the Buddha, the Law, and the Monks. *kômyô-Shingon*: lit. Bright-light-Shingon. The thirteen Buddha: Namufudo, Shaka, Monju, Fugen, Jizo, Miroku, Yakushi, Kannon, Seishi, Amida, Dainichi, Kokûzô, Abin. See: Japanese Buddhism, Sir C. Eliot, Ch. 4, p. 117 ff.

7. The drum-beats are carefully divided into several parts. Each part has a special name and a definite number of beats: *shitachi dori* (下) (10), *Ô-okuri* (大) (3), *hidari sode* (左袖) (13), *migi sode* (右袖) (4), *U-achidori* (上) (3), *yoi yoi* (ヨイヨイ) (4), *naka-musubi* (5), *hidari-musubi* (5), *migi-musubi* (2), *suriage* (6), *yama-goshi* (山越し) (8), *uchi-kiri* (9). See: Honda (above note 4), p. 1018.

8. The usual instruments for Odori Nembutsu *hayashi* or accompaniment are: *Taiko* or large drum, *Mame-daiko* or small drum, flute, *yotsu-take* or bamboo sticks, two kinds of bells, the *uchi-kin* and *in-kin*, and sometimes the *shô* and the *hichiriki* two special wind instruments. See: Honda, l.c., p. 1019.

9. *Yohogatame* means 'keeping things safe in four directions'. Each of these directions represent a Pure Land or *Jôdo*, and has a special colour. East is blue and is the heaven which belongs to Yakushi-juni-shin-ruri-ko-Nyorai. West is white or gold and is the heaven of Amida-sanzon. South is red and is the *Jôdo* or heaven of Myokan-zei-on-Bosatsu. North is black, the *Jôdo* of Shaka-ben-ni-Butsu. The centre is the earth, the *Jôdo* of Chûô-Dainichi-Nyorai. The five directions symbolize the *gogyô* or five lines between heaven and earth, the five elements, five spirits, all is formed from wood, fire, earth, water and metal. See: Honda, l.c., p. 1018, 1019.

a disciple of Shaka, it does not matter to which sect you belong, for Shaka will protect you. Again the drums beat 72 times while Nembutsu Odori is performed. This may be repeated several times. The dance is not formal at all, mostly stamping and rhythmic body movements, and may be followed by a comical play. *Zuii-no-ekô* (随意の回向) follows during which anyone may say a prayer. Each prayer is followed by Nembutsu intercession and dance to the beat of drums. A very short prayer, *Naka-iri-ekô* (中入回向), ends with the remark: Because drummers and bell ringers are tired, shall we stop here for a while? All then partake of a meal and quiet rest, after which they return to their places for more *Zuii-no-ekô* if desired. *So-age-ekô* (相上回向) ends the ritual with the words: It is a pity to stop, but already the sun is setting, so till next year we shall say goodbye. The steady beat of the drums and frequent stamping movements are typical shamanic techniques to produce ecstasy, so it seems clear that Nembutsu Odori of Kuya continued the shamanic tradition of Japanese folk religion.

As we see in this ritual, not only is Nembutsu recited and danced as Kuya suggested, but *ekô*, or prayers for the dead, are also recited. As such prayers are now an integral part of Nembutsu Odori, we need to investigate their origin. The first written record of Japanese life comes to us from the Chinese Kingdom of Wei where we read, about their mourning customs: "The head mourners wail and lament, while friends sing, dance and drink liquor."¹⁰ From earliest times it seems, Japanese people have expressed their belief in the spirits of the dead by dancing and singing. The basic concepts of Japanese folk religion, namely those of *uji-gami* (氏神) and *hito-gami* (人神)¹¹ have interacted over the centuries, but the *hito-gami* concept seems to be the one that specifically concerns us here. The *hito-gami* system was based on the close relationship between a *kami* and a charismatic person or shaman who could also become a *kami*, either in life or after death. Man and *Kami* are interdependent in Shinto belief. Outstanding personalities were, in these early times, deified by a wide circle of believers forming as it were a super-clan, whereas the *uji-gami* were clan ancestor *kami*. These *hito-gami* performed special functions in protecting their clients, reflecting the

10. *Wei Chih*, c.A.D. 297, from *Sources of Japanese Tradition*, Vol. 1, W. T. De Bary, p. 7.

11. *Uji-gami* were deified ancestral spirits who were worshipped by their descendants only. It was a special 'in-group' in village life, and those who worshipped were called *uji-ko*. *Hito-gami* belonged to the super-clan. Only nobles or important religious figures could become such. See: Hori, pp. 30-34.

work they had performed during life, often showing magico-religious power, as well as their socio-political and economic situation.

With the coming of Buddhism, Confucianism and Taoism by the sixth century, the belief in *hito-gami* was transformed into *goryô-shin* (御霊神).¹² Originally *goryô* were believed to be angry spirits of nobles who had died tragically and whose malevolent activities were often explained to the people through shamanic trance.¹³ Gradually all social and personal crises were attributed to them during what Hori calls the *Goryô-shin* Age from the eighth to the twelfth century.¹⁴ Three kinds of magic developed to appease these angry spirits, Nembutsu, Shugen-dô¹⁵ and Onyô-dô.¹⁶ Though Nembutsu was originally directed to the practice of reciting Amida's name in order to be saved in Amida's Pure Land, by the end of the eleventh century it was mainly a negative magic against *goryô*, with shamanistic forms to give security against fear of these spirits. This concept of *Goryô* therefore incorporated animistic and *hito-gami* beliefs, as well as shamanism and Mantrayana magic.¹⁷ Gradually the possibility of becoming a *goryô* or deified spirit extended to the common people. At the moment of death, the will of the person was considered most effective in becoming a *goryô*. So too, in Nembutsu practice, this moment was stressed as decisive for attaining Amida's Pure Land.

After Kuya's death, Genshin (948–1017) developed Nembutsu, not only with dancing, but with drama in the Mukae-kô service in which was enacted the descent of Amida and many Bosatsu to welcome the

12. *Goryô* were well established by the end of the eighth century (Nara period).

13. By 863 five major *goryô-shin* deities were worshipped, and a *Goryô-e* festival was held to appease their anger which people thought was causing plague. However Sugawara-no-Michizana (845–903) was the most famous of these deities. He had died tragically, many catastrophes occurred within the next few years, until a shamaness, possessed by Sugawara's spirit, revealed that he was causing these troubles. He was promptly deified and given a shrine, Kitano-jinja in Kyoto, whereupon their troubles ceased. *Genji Monogatari* and other Heian literature frequently mention *goryô*. See Hori, p. 112 ff. Also *The World of the Shining Prince*, Ivan Morris.

14. Hori, p. 72.

15. *Shugen-dô*: Buddhist asceticism mixed with Shinto, Buddhism, Taoist and popular Shamanism. Hori, p. 52.

16. *Onyô-dô*: Religious Taoism mixed with primitive shamanism. *Ibid.*

17. *Mantrayana*: Tantric Buddhism found its way into China in the eighth century where it is called Chen-yen (true word) or Mi-chiao (secret teaching). In Japanese Chen-yen became Shingon, however Tendai also practised some of its esoterism.

spirits of believers to the Pure Land.¹⁸ As a result many holy men or *hijiri* (聖),¹⁹ who practised Nembutsu, could be found in the cities, in village communities, and in the mountains, encouraging people to do the same. On occasions, during plagues or other disasters in Kyoto, it became "Nembutsu madness", so popular was it, and so frenzied did the crowds become.²⁰ By the twelfth century, Ryônin (1072-1132) was preaching that Amida had revealed to him; "Nembutsu recitation was infinitely more meritorious if repeated on behalf of others than for one's own selfish ends. It brings salvation not only to him who utters it, but to the whole human race, and if a man teaches others to repeat it, their merit will become his own."²¹ This period was considered the Mappô Age, the age of complete degeneration, which Saicho had warned people about centuries earlier.²² While Nembutsu Odori degenerated into magic in the villages, the latter part of the twelfth century saw the renewal of Buddhism under Hônen (1133-1215), the founder of the Jôdô Sect, who tried to purify and restate the doctrine of Amida and Nembutsu practice.²³ His disciple Shinran (1173-1262) continued his work,²⁴ but soon another charismatic figure was to be seen who would re-vitalize Nembutsu practice as never before. This was Chishin, known popularly as Ippen Shônin (1249-1289), the founder of the Ji Sect.²⁵

Ippen's wandering life was a very dramatic one, judging by the famous scrolls, *Ippen Hijiri-e* (一遍聖絵). After some early scenes of his childhood, where even then he is travelling to far-off Tsukushi Province, we see him as a monk, visiting Kôya San and then moving on with his followers to Kumano Shrine where he receives a divine revelation

18. Genshin was the first patriarch of the Amidist school. His book *Ôjôyôshû* (往生要集) which Hônen later read, introduced this patriarch to Zendô, who was supposed to be the incarnation of Amida in China. Ennin had brought his writings back with him from China.

19. *Hijiri*: Holy men who established common or folk Buddhism outside the orthodox ecclesiastical system, stressing the essentials of faith and unworldliness according to the needs of the age. The Amida-*hijiri*, like Kûya, Genshin or Ryônin were evangelistic, while those of the Lotus Sutra, Like Zoga and Shoku, were individualistic and self-perfectionistic.

20. A shamanistic atmosphere.

21. Eliot, p. 253.

22. See Hori, pp. 101-105; Eliot, p. 184.

23. See Eliot, p. 260, 363.

24. *Ibid.*, p. 360 ff.

25. Hori, p. 127-132. Ippen called his group the *Ji* or the Time Sect, because he maintained that his teaching was the proper one for the times in which he lived. Eliot, p. 274.

concerning Nembutsu, through a shaman there.²⁶ In the fourth scroll we have a quiet country scene at Odagiri village in Shinano, where Ippen begins the practice of Nembutsu Odori by teaching a few astonished and happy farmers how to dance. It is a very rustic scene with farmers clapping hands or striking two wooden sticks together, as they sing Nembutsu, and stamp and jump around the fallow fields. By the sixth scroll he is travelling along the beach at Katase with grey or brown-clad farmers dancing Nembutsu Odori in a frame-like building on stilts, with a few sturdy beams holding up a floor, and a simple bamboo roof with planks laid irregularly on the bamboo slats to keep them in place. The floor space is packed with happy, dancing farmers, but many of them, now, are beating small drums as well as using wooden sticks for the rhythm. Around this open 'chapel' the scene is delightfully chaotic. A few carriages have arrived with the local gentry and their lovely ladies in gay kimono, a *biwa* player gazes in amazement while his dog waits patiently beside him, a heavily laden pack-horse trudges past while his driver looks on in amusement, dogs fight, a crow tries to steal some food from a very emaciated man, country women chat in excitement and evident pleasure as they watch Nembutsu Odori. This makeshift 'chapel' was the only kind Ippen ever used, and we see it often in these paintings. Another scroll shows the same kind of 'chapel', filled with dancing figures. Small boys are clinging to some of the construction beams, while around the building, carriages of the gentry are crammed in riotous confusion. In between can be seen colourful noble ladies, suitably impressed, gentlemen in court dress gazing in astonishment or engaged in arguments over their restless horses or oxen, while monks with large umbrella-like hats seem to be lost in contemplation, or just bored by the commotion. One group with more initiative than the rest, have erected a special 'grandstand' some yards away, and, protected by large umbrellas, are gazing in admiration at Nembutsu Odori. Everywhere it seems, men and women were searching for security and the happiness of Amida's Pure Land, and wanted to experience mystical prayer by these stamping dances which could induce ecstasy. By the time he arrives in Kyoto, as depicted in the seventh scroll, and teaches in the Shaka-dō at Kyogoku there is a

26. This is the height of *Ryōbu* Shinto (twofold Shinto) phenomena, by which Buddhism mixed with Shinto, religious Taoism or Yin-Yang magic, and in this case shamanism. Ippen was also influenced by Zen which was very powerful in this Kamakura Era. He said, "When I repeat Nembutsu, there is neither myself nor the Buddha but simply the invocation." And again, "Singlemindedness is when one discards all thought of the body and is absolutely one with the Nembutsu." Eliot, p. 274.

real traffic jam, to such an extent that it looks quite impossible to dance Nembutsu Odori in such confusion of carriages and people. But everywhere he goes there is music and dancing and joy. Men have hope in a future life in Amida's Pure Land as they dance Nembutsu Odori throughout the whole country.²⁷

Such was the revival of Nembutsu Odori in Ippen's day. He did not teach a special dance form, but gradually it became formalized in different ways in different parts of the country. A fairly typical *Rokusai Dai Nembutsu* (六齋大念仏)²⁸ may be seen today in Mushono Akiyamura, Yamanashi Prefecture. Mushono is a village of only 47 families, facing the old Kamakura Kaidô (road) with *stupa* along the sides of the road,²⁹ as well as *dôsojin* (道祖神)³⁰ to protect the inhabitants from devils. About 2,600 people live in the area and, until recently, they were all farmers, charcoal burners or sericulturalists.

The Dai Nembutsu takes place on January 16th each year, and for this the village is divided into two, *kami* (upper) and *shimo* (under),³¹ conveniently on either side of the Akiyama River. A *tôya* (当屋)³² is chosen for each division, and it is in these two houses that Nembutsu Odori takes place. This honour comes to each family in turn. All are invited to perform in the dancing, there is no limitation of age or sex.

The ceremony begins in the *dôjo-iri* (道場入り), that is the house of the *Tôya* which is decorated outside with bamboo branches and *shimenawa* (注連縄) like a Shinto shrine at festival time. The *hachijô*, the room used for the ceremony, has bamboo poles in each corner, and one thick bamboo *oya-hashira* (親柱)³³ in the middle. *Shimenawa* connect all corners with each other and with the centre. Six *gohei* (御幣) are hung from the *shimenawa* on each side of the room, and seven hang from the centre. On top of the *oya-hashira* are straws, *gohei* and *mamori fuda* (守札).³⁴ The *gohei* are coloured according to their position in

27. 「一遍聖絵」

28. 無生野の六齋大念仏調査報告.

29. *Stupa* are connected with the dead, or with *Shugen-ja* (修験者) who were priests of Shugen-dô, a mixed school of Shinto, religious Taoism and Buddhism. The gradual cohesion of Nembutsu practices with practices based on the Lotus Sutra, centering in the Tendai Sect, brought about a union of Nembutsu practitioners with *shugen-ja* ascetics.

30. *Dôsojin*: Pebbles, or large stones on which are carved characters or forms of people, as a talisman against evil spirits.

31. *Kami* (upper), *shimo* (lower).

32. *Tôya*: The master of the host house where the festival takes place.

33. *Oya-hashira*: (lit. parent-pillar) a phallic symbol.

34. *Mamori-fuda*: A tablet or paper on which is written the name of a

the room: east, green; south, red; west, white; north, black; and yellow in the centre. On each gohei is written the name Ryu-Ô, or dragon king, because of the nature of the *o-kyô* and dance which, we shall see, is to dispel demons. All participants are in very simple white *kimono* or ordinary clothes. Three persons stand in front of the entrance, and the one in the middle, the *kyô-shu* or leader, says *o-kyô* in old Japanese: "Dôgen Zenji,³⁵ who came from China, did this so we are doing it too. I am one of his followers." The *dôjo-kiyome* or purification is then performed as they enter and scatter pebbles and salt around the *dôjo*, after which the drums, *shô* and flute play, with no formal rhythm, as the *hom-butate* begins. Then there is silence while the *kyô-shu* reads the *o-kyô*. This prayer speaks of the purity of heaven and earth, of man and says, "In the water of the pure river I will wash my body and meditate on *Shoshin Shobutsu* (gods and Buddhas)³⁶ after purifying myself." Then the origin of the *gongen* (権現) or lion mask is explained: "In India, on Myo-Ô³⁷ is a famous tree called *Heihaku* (平白) with only three branches, all magically powerful. The first branch, called *Uji Dôji* (雲寺童子), can chase away *kokufu*,³⁸ the second branch, called *Higen Dôji*, can dispel *mononoke* (物の怪);³⁹ while the third, *Genmyô Dôji*, can get rid of *akuma*."⁴⁰ Seven *hotoke* or Buddhas, five *Nyorai* (如来) and three *Kami* (神) are welcomed to the *dôjo* (道場) which now becomes *Takamagahara* (高天原) or the Heavens. The people are then reminded that the *gohei* and bamboo are symbols of *Kami*, that the sword represents Monju⁴¹

deity, distributed to the faithful by a shrine. Made of paper or wood. Generally regarded as a symbol of the god, enshrined in the *kami-dana*, or god-shelf, and revered morning and night to pray for divine aid. The number of these on the *oya-hashira* corresponded to the number of families in the *Nembutsu-kô* or association, and would be distributed to each family after the festival.

35. Dôgen Zenji (1200–1253) introduced the Sôtô Sect of Zen to Japan after studying it in China.

36. *Shoshin Shobutsu*: all the *Kami* and *Hotoke*.

37. Myô-Ô were originally personifications of magic formulae, imported into Shingon from late Indian Tantric Buddhism. They correspond to the manifestations of Siva in Brahmanism, and, though of terrible appearance, they are benevolent. It is interesting that they should give a mountain such a name.

38. *Kokufu*: evils of the nation.

39. *Mononoke* (物の怪): also called *Oni* or *Tamashii*. A fearful spirit causing illness and other disasters, often used to avoid saying 'devil'. Means something mysterious.

40. *Akuma* (悪魔): devil.

41. Monju or Manjusri: a great Bodhisattva, the personification of wisdom and intellect, and is usually depicted with the sword of knowledge and a book.

and that the board^{41a} can chase away devils (*akuma*) (悪魔).

The *shô* is then played and two persons beat the big drum while chanting *sharikyô* (舍利經). *Shari* (舍利) is an Indian word meaning 'bones' of *hotoke* or spirits. *Hotoke* originally referred to Buddha, but now it also means the spirits of the dead. This *sharikyô* reminds the listeners that through the good influence of others (*konshu*), one trains oneself in Buddhism to lead a virtuous life. They are reminded that the *sharito* (舍利塔) or bones of holy persons are in the pagoda, or *bushari* (仏舍利).⁴² So they chant the *sharikyô* three times.

Two sword dances follow to the music of the flute, *shô* (鉦) and the beat of the big drums. In the *Ippon Dachi* (一本 太刀) two persons appear and sit facing each other, one with a sword, the other with a small drum. Taking these in their hands they dance round the big drum which is in the centre of the room. Then appears another person with a long bamboo pole, held in the middle, which he twirls as he twists his body from left to right. While the tempo of the music is slow, *tadamaki*, the sword is held parallel then raised up right and down left, or up left and down right, as if cutting something; when the tempo becomes very quick, *chirashi*, the dancers circle the drum rapidly in time with the music. Both *tadamaki* and *chirashi* are repeated in turn four times. In the *Nihon Dachi* (二本 太刀) the instruments and music are the same; but the sword dancer holds a sword in each hand and crosses them frequently in the *chirashi* part.

Buparai (ぶっ払い) is held in the room next to the *dôjo*. Here are prepared *futon* and blankets, where a sick person, in need of prayers, lies in bed. Beside it is a small table on which are nine *gohei* and straws tied together like stooks of hay. The *kyô-shu*, or leader, kneels beside the bed, pulls out *gohei* one by one, and touches the body of the sick person with each, while saying *Kyôshu-no-kitô* (教主の祈禱).⁴³ Meanwhile the sword dances continue in the *dôjo*, then they come into this room and dance, stamping and leaping lightly here and there in *Nembutsu no Futa* (念仏の蓋). They return to the *dôjo* and continue to dance Nembutsu Odori, while all join in with small drums, leaping, stamping and singing Nembutsu, with obvious enjoyment. The villagers say the origin of this dance goes back to the Kamakura period. Daito-gu was killed on July 16th in Kemmu 2⁴⁴ and at that time his son, Tsuzure-no-Ô, was only

41. *Akudara no ita*: a board used by Akudara, one of the Buddhas.

42. *Bushari*: the contracted form of Butsu Hotoke *Shari*.

43. *Kyôshu-no-kitô*: lit. leader of a prayer.

44. Kemmu Period: 1334–1336.

six years old. Princess Hinezuru, when she heard of the tragedy, brought the head of Daito-gu to Akiyama village where, on December 29th, she gave birth to a son by him, but both mother and child died. When Tsuzure-no-Ô heard his father's head was at Akiyama, he went there, found the other two dead, and so began the Dai Nembutsu for them.

Lastly, in the *Okuri Dashi*, or sending away, the leader prays quietly himself while the people chant; then they go down to the *doma*⁴⁵ where he says another prayer, "I can chase away the *mononoke*," and he shakes the sword three times, then prays to the *Hotoke* in a special *Sharikyô*, called *Sharireibun*, which is used at Zen funerals. There is a Zen temple in the village.

This Rokusai Dai Nembutsu has come a long way from the simple stamping and leaping dance of Kuya or of the dance we see in the scrolls of Ippen's life. There seems to be less emphasis on Nembutsu to attain salvation for the living, and greater stress on appeasing spirits of the dead and obtaining salvation for them. Within the ritual can be seen elements of animism, shamanism, Shinto, Tantric Buddhism. Perhaps because of its syncretic and loosely defined characteristics, Nembutsu Odori is found as a normal part of other festivals, such as the famous Gion festival in Kyoto, or in some areas at the time of the O-Bon to appease the hungry spirits of those who have no relatives to give them spiritual benefits. Today in many places, Nembutsu Odori has lost its religious character almost entirely, and in others, in times of village crises, it is requested and performed by villagers, saying a million Nembutsu prayers to the accompaniment of drum, gong and flute, under the leadership of a Nembutsu-*hijiri* or of a village elder, to drive away insects, plague, or as a prayer for rain.⁴⁶ The recitation of a million Nembutsu seems to be part of ritual magic to obtain what is desired, as the villagers dance to the trance-enticing accents of the drum, just as they have done throughout the centuries in rural Japan.

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45. *Doma*: a room with an earthen floor, usually used as a kitchen in ancient times.

46. Hori, p. 137.