

FRITSCH, INGRID. *Japans blinde Sanger im Schutz der Gottheit Myōon-Benzaiten*. Munchen: Iudicium Verlag, 1996. 311 pages. Illustrations, bibliography, index. Paper, DM 62; ISBN 3-89129-311-9. (In German)

In recent years traditional terms used for persons suffering from a physical handicap have increasingly come in for criticism as being discriminatory and, therefore, have to be banned from official usage and replaced by supposedly neutral or objective terms. Together with concrete measures taken by public and private institutions to integrate handicapped persons as much as possible into ordinary social life, these developments signal a significant change of attitude in Japanese society towards the handicapped. However, while these measures proscribe older linguistic usage as offensive and undesirable, they also highlight once more “traditional” views and attitudes towards members of society with a physical deficiency. According to such views, people with a physical handicap such as impaired or lost eyesight, or the lack of an eye or leg, were easily considered to be merely a burden to the rest of society, but because of their impaired humanness they might also be thought of as beings “between two worlds” or as messengers from and to another world. They were ambiguous members of society, surrounded on one side by an aura of unease or even fear because of their assumed closeness to the world of spirits or divine beings, and despised and ridiculed on the other as being not only an unproductive member of society but also exhibiting a kind of behavior that was often markedly different from that of the healthy. And yet this ambiguous position in the eyes of society allowed certain categories of handicapped people to fulfill a specific social and, in particular, religious role. In a world where suffering lent itself to interpretation as karmic or divine retribution for a person’s earlier shortcomings, those afflicted by a handicap might have been a living reminder to able people to mind their behavior. Among the categories of handicapped, the blind have occupied a special position, perhaps not least owing to their somewhat peculiar situation of being able-bodied and yet deprived of freedom of movement. Furthermore, because of their lack of physical eyesight they were often (and sometimes still are) believed to “see” what is hidden to those with normal eyesight.

In the same year as Fritsch’s volume on Japan’s blind singers Klaus E. MULLER’s study (1996) of how societies and cultures of the world categorize people with a physical defect or those considered to be in some sense “abnormal” appeared. In his work he draws attention to the symbolic, religious, and social roles attributed to such people from a wide-ranging and global perspective. While the general framework of the two studies is quite similar, Fritsch’s study offers the advantage of describing with great historical detail and meticulous analysis how such categorization functions in Japanese society. She singles out the blind in order to trace their role as a category in Japanese tradition, and in order to do this she applies a twofold approach. She approaches the topic historically to show the fate of and changes in the image of the blind as singers and religious practitioners, and at the same time she offers an analysis of the structure of their organizations. She stresses the fact that these blind singers and religious practitioners are professionals with their own professional organization, but that the first reason for their membership in the organization is not a specific skill but rather their physical condition of being blind.

Their professional activities justified (in the eyes of society) supporting them and therefore guaranteed to some extent their livelihood; but even so, their blindness remained a source of ambiguity. Fritsch describes how the blind have been pushed to an existence at the margins of society and how this is partly due to a belief that physical disability is a sign of divine or karmic retribution. But she also shows that these same people were held to possess magic powers, such as guaranteeing a good harvest or good fortune in general. The problem of the ambiguity of the blind is, as Fritsch demonstrates perceptively, addressed in their oral

traditions about the origin of their status. It is striking that this marginalized category enjoys certain privileges that were often a puzzle or even a scandal in the eyes of ordinary society. In their traditions these privileges were traced back to an imperial descendant struck by blindness whose high social status prompted a change in the general attitude towards the blind, guaranteeing their humane treatment and providing them with an income through the establishment of a lasting exclusive professional organization. In some cases the imperial child may even have been considered to be the avatar of a merciful deity intent upon redeeming those afflicted with blindness. The deity is Myōon-Benzaiten, who became the tutelary deity for these professional groups and the object of their group rituals.

The author aims at presenting a comprehensive picture of these groups that integrates three areas: their legends of origin, their social organization and activities, and their rituals for their divine protector. According to Fritsch, Myōon-Benzaiten is the Japanese transformation of Sarasvatī, goddess of wisdom and patroness of ritual and liturgy (13–14). Ever since the aristocratic *biwa* musicians of Kyoto enshrined this deity as their divine protector, Myōon-Benzaiten has remained in some way or other the object of veneration of the various groups of blind musicians that have taken over from the court nobles. The author follows the historical development of successive groups of blind musicians who have taken over the *biwa*, and to some extent also the musical tradition from the nobles, and transmitted both, but now on the lowest level of society. She describes the *biwa-hōshi*, the specialists in the recitation of secular Heike stories and their strong hierarchical organization, the *tōdō-za*, then the *mōsō* of Kyushu as ritual performers, and finally the *goze*, the blind women performers of northern Japan and their rather different sisters, the *itako*. Fritsch succeeds in finding even small bits of tradition that at least hint that even a group like the *itako*, who do not have a musical tradition, still shares the same world. It is particularly interesting to see how these groups explain the reason for their existence and their activities by referring to similar etiologic legends and founding personalities, but interpret them differently in order to make them fit the individual circumstances of each of these groups.

The topic of this book may seem to lie at the margins of research about Japan, but it locks in with growing interest among Japanese scholars in regard to those sections of society that for too long have been ignored by official historiography. It would be too much to expect that the author would cover all aspects of the fate of the blind in Japanese society, but she certainly succeeds in showing the significant social and symbolic functions those of the blind who were organized into professional groups fulfilled in their long history. In doing this, she offers a look at an aspect of Japanese society in which the socially lowest are intimately linked with the highest to perform, with the latter's symbolic support, an important social task only the former can perform.

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MOERAN, BRIAN. *Folk Art Potters of Japan: Beyond an Anthropology of Aesthetics*. Richmond, Surrey: Curzon Press, 1997. xiv + 272 pages. Maps, photographs, figures, charts, bibliography, index. Cloth US\$45.00; ISBN 0-7007-0605-4.

In 1927, Yanagi Sōetsu, founder of the *mingei* or folk craft movement in Japan, saw an unpre-