

# A STUDY ON THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN JAPANESE ARISTOCRACY AND THE FOUR GODS BELIEF IN MEDIEVAL AND PRE-MODERN TIMES

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**Abstract:** *This paper analyzes the relationship between the Four Gods belief and Japanese aristocracy, and focuses on the development of ceremonial items (flags and staffs with sculptures on top) representing the deities in medieval times and in the pre-modern Edo period. The Four Gods belief refers to a Chinese faith in four mythological animal-beasts, each representing a cardinal direction: Blue Dragon of the east, Red Bird of the south, White Tiger of the west, Black Warrior of the north. Based on textual study, picture study and fieldwork, I would like to present my conclusions on how and why the role of the Four Gods changed gradually to modern days.*

**Keywords:** Four Gods, ceremonial item, aristocracy, flag, staff

## **Introduction**

This paper analyzes the relationship between the Four Gods belief and Japanese aristocracy, and focuses on the development of ceremonial items (flags and staffs with sculptures on top) representing the deities in medieval times (Muromachi and Sengoku period) and in the pre-modern Edo period. Based on textual study, picture study and fieldwork, I would like to present my conclusions on how and why the role of the Four Gods changed gradually to modern days.

The Four Gods belief refers to a Chinese faith in four mythological animal-beasts, each representing a cardinal direction:

1. Blue Dragon of the east (Qinglong 青龍)
2. Red Bird of the south (Zhūquè 朱雀)
3. White Tiger of the west (Baihu 白虎)
4. Black/Dark Warrior of the north<sup>2</sup> (Xuanwu 玄武)

The association between the Four Gods and the cardinal directions has a long history. It already appears in the Book of Burial; however, the relationship of the present deities had not been settled until the Han

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<sup>2</sup> Despite its name, it is depicted as a huge tortoise entwined together with a smaller snake.

period.<sup>3</sup> After Daoism had become popular in China, these mythological creatures were synthesized into the Daoist tradition's Five Elements theory<sup>4</sup>, which can be used to describe the movement and the relationship between different elements and all phenomena in nature. All five deities had a corresponding season, color, element, virtue, etc.<sup>5</sup> This system was introduced to Japan through the Korean peninsula by scholars in different time periods between the 6-8<sup>th</sup> centuries and thus every activity in life and after death was subject to this combined theory. In Japan, the Chinese guardians were renamed as Seiryū, Suzaku, Byakko and Genbu.

Remarkable examples of this intercultural exchange process are the ceiling and wall decorations of burial chambers and other ancient burial artifacts decorated with the Four Gods' motif. (Donohashi 2013) The importance of the Four Gods belief represented by wall paintings and bronze mirror patterns has significantly diminished from the 9<sup>th</sup> century, but instead of slowly vanishing from Japanese culture, the belief was incorporated into other concepts such as *yinyang* divination, geomancy, studies based on the observation of nature and city planning. This new process had started as early as the 7<sup>th</sup> century and reached its peak in the Heian period. (Ooms 2009)

### **The relationship between the Four Gods belief and the Japanese imperial court**

The Japanese emperor and the court have had very clear religious obligations since the Asuka period; ceremonies that had to be carried out meticulously to make sure that the *kami* looked after the Japanese people. These imperial state ceremonies (such as the imperial accession and the New Year's Day ceremonies) have become part of the administrative calendar of the Japanese government from the 7-8<sup>th</sup> centuries.

According to written sources from the Nara and Heian periods, such as the Shoku Nihongi, Dairishiki, Gishiki or Engishiki, there were seven special ceremonial items (these were about nine-meter high poles with figures on top) among other flags that had to be treated with respect at the enthronement and the New Year's Day ceremonies: the Moon Banner (月

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<sup>3</sup> Later Chinese records with references of the deities, Huáinánzi (The Masters/Philosophers of Huainan") and Lizi (Book of Rites) should also be mentioned.

<sup>4</sup> It explains the interactions and relationships created in phenomena that consist of fire, water, wood, metal and earth and lead to life, death, change and rebirth. It was combined with the yingyang theory during the spring and autumn periods in China and was developed into a comprehensive and logical view of the cosmos, which could be applied to every field of human society. (Inada, 2003)

<sup>5</sup> The Blue Dragon of the east is associated with spring, the green color and the wood element. The Red Bird of the south is associated with summer, the red color and the fire element. The White Tiger of the west is associated with autumn, the white color and the metal element. The Black Tortoise of the north is associated with winter, the black (or dark) color and the water element.

像), the Sun Banner (日像), the Bird-shaped Staff (鳥形幢), and the Flags of the Four Gods (*shijin* flags 四神旗). These ritual items were placed in front of the Daigokuden Ceremonial Hall, or later in the Shishinden Ceremonial Hall. From colored drawings in an illustrated scroll (文安御即位調度図) from 1444 documenting an earlier imperial accession, we know how these ritual items looked like. The four directional animals are multivalent signs: based on mostly Daoist theories, they can signify the Heaven (the cosmos), the emperor and his imperial and divine power, or the four seasons of Japan. (Ooms 2009:169)

Although these *shijin* flags had military usage in China and the Korean peninsula (they were carried during the procession of soldiers), it was considered to be a peaceful tradition in ancient Japanese culture, sending a strong message of imperial power. The significance of the four cardinal deities displayed at imperial ceremonies changed over time. (Yamamoto 2012)

Emperor Kōmei's enthronement ceremony was the last time when the four *shijin* flags were used by the Japanese imperial court (1846). After the Meiji Restoration, instead of using the seven ceremonial items, new flags and banners were created, which were positioned on the left and right side of the Ceremonial Hall. Since the Meiji government wanted to eliminate all possible foreign elements from the enthronement ceremony, it was no longer acceptable to use the *shijin* flags in any form. The last imperial *shijin* flags were destroyed by government order.

### **Remaining preserved flags from the Muromachi period to the Edo period**

During my research (readings of old records and scrolls, collecting picture data, conducting fieldwork and interviews), I had come to realize that something remarkable happened with the ritual objects of the Four Gods in the medieval period and the pre-modern Edo period. During my fieldwork in 2014-2015, I visited several places in Eastern Japan where actual ritual objects of the Four Gods had been preserved.

The medieval period was a time of transition, when sacred imperial flags of the Four Gods and new ritual items of the Four Gods were used for different purposes by different ranks of society. The four flags of imperial state ceremonies, having been sacred ceremonial items, represented the emperor, the ancient capital, a sacred connection with all *kami* and imperial ancestors, and the state events that could be observed only by those few who belonged to the highest rank of society. With this change in the application and in the cultural role of the Four Gods belief, the deities rapidly became well-known guardian *kami* protecting the feudal aristocracy and later the common people.

In this chapter, I would like to outline my findings about the remaining preserved flags from the Muromachi period to the Edo period, and examine these valuable sources, which would hopefully demonstrate that unlike in other Asian cultures, the *shijin* flags had many different ritual roles in medieval and pre-modern Japanese culture.

### **Sansho Shrine (三所神社), Ibaraki Prefecture, Kasama city**

- dating to the late 15th century
- painted on silk, with black silk frame
- artist: unknown
- full size of flag: length 130cm, width 50cm
- size of the painted material: 113cm x 36cm
- calligraphy 「遠阻長門守藤原綱久より相伝の御品」
- designated Cultural Property

Kasama was a castle town of Kasama Domain in the 15<sup>th</sup> century. According to the calligraphy written on the back side of the fabric of the Genbu Flag, Fujiwara Tsunehisa (藤原綱久), the captain of Kasama Castle donated all four flags to the shrine when it was rebuilt in 1477 by his order.<sup>6</sup> The design of the deities on these flags shows no similarities to those which are known to be used at enthronement ceremonies or at the ancient New Year's Day ceremony in Kyoto.

### **Ii Art Museum<sup>7</sup> (井伊美術館) Kyoto Prefecture, Kyoto**

- dating to the late 16th century
- painted on silk with black ink, each flag depicts two descending dragons
- colored silk fabrics: blue, cream white, red, yellow
- artist: unknown
- calligraphy presumably written by Jiro hōshi (次郎法師) = Ii Naotora (井伊直虎)

This unique set of colored silk flags belonged to Ii Naotora (died in 1582), who was a female feudal lord (*daimyō*) of the Sengoku period.<sup>8</sup> Before Naotora became the nominal head of her clan, she was a Buddhist nun at Ryōtanji, and was named Jiro Hōshi.<sup>9</sup> Although, the history of

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<sup>6</sup> Mentioned both in „Sansho daimeishin engi” (三所大明神縁起) and „Kasamajō-ki” (笠間城記) documents. (Both currently in the private collection of the Ninpei family in Ibaraki Prefecture.)

<sup>7</sup> Ii Museum is a private art museum of Japanese armors and arms in Kyoto.

<sup>8</sup> The Ii clan governed the Tōtōmi region of Eastern Japan.

<sup>9</sup> However, a recent study of Ii Tatsurō suggests that -based on newly found sources- Ii Naomori's daughter, Jiro hōshi remained a Buddhist nun all her life, and Ii Naotora, who later became the head of Ii clan, was actually a man adopted from the Imagawa family. (Press conference at Ii Museum, Kyoto, December 15, 2016)

Naotora’s shijin flags are not stated clearly or in detail, according to the family records of the Ii clan (井伊家傳記), she ordered the making of these items for the sake of her adopted son’s (Ii Naomasa’s) success. It is believed that the four Daoist chants placed vertically on the ink paintings were written by her. (Tachibana-kai 2000)

A chant translates as follows:

color	Original text	Translation
blue	青龍東天木德諸神降臨 急急如律令	„ <u>Seiryū</u> , guardian god of the <u>Eastern Sky</u> , and various deities of „ <u>tree</u> ” <u>nature</u> ” <sup>10</sup> descend to Earth! Quickly, quickly, in accordance with the statues!”
cream white	白虎西天金德諸神降臨 急急如律令	„ <u>Byakko</u> , guardian god of the <u>Western Sky</u> , and various deities of „ <u>metal</u> ” <u>nature</u> ” descend to Earth! Quickly, quickly, in accordance with the statues!”
red	朱雀南天火德諸神降臨 急急如律令	“ <u>Suzaku</u> , guardian god of the <u>Southern Sky</u> , and various deities of „ <u>fire</u> ” <u>nature</u> ” descend to Earth! Quickly, quickly, in accordance with the statues!”
yellow	勾陳中天土德諸神降臨 急急如律令	“ <u>Kōchin</u> , guardian god of the <u>Center Sky</u> , and various deities of „ <u>earth</u> ” <u>nature</u> ” descend to Earth! Quickly, quickly, in accordance with the statues!”

Although each silk flag portrays two black dragons, connections to the Four Gods and the reason why they are called “*shijin* flags” are readily apparent in the text of the chant and the colour of the fabrics. The text calls on Seiryū, Byakko and Suzaku, as astral guardian deities. The first problem with the set is that the Genbu flag is missing or, as Ii Tatsurō (the 18th generation head of the Ii family of Yoita and the director of the Ii Museum) believes, it was never made.<sup>11</sup> Can we call them autential *shijin* flags, if the guardian deity of the North is missing? Was it left out intentionally or because of Naotora’s lack of knowledge? What if it was only destroyed or lost at some point? Were they made for an actual ritual, just like the imperial flags? Did they want to copy the imperial tradition? More scholars need to confront this complex problem.

<sup>10</sup> *Toku* (Jp.) or *de* (Ch.) is a key concept in Chinese philosophy. Translating 德 into English is problematic, however, it is usually translated as "virtue" in Confucianism (both in the sense of inherent quality and in that of moral excellence) or “nature, character” in Daoism and Buddhism. (Boodberg 1979:32)

<sup>11</sup> Ii Tatsurō. December 15, 2016. Press conference presentation. Research on newly found private documents of Ii clan. Kyoto, Ii Museum.

Since there is no detail in the family records on the number of the pieces (only that they belonged to Naotori and she kept them at her main residence), Ii Tatsuō proposes that the original set consisted of four pieces. He also suggests that they were presented to Ii Naomasa and as inheritable items, they remained in the family, and were never used as actual ritual items.

I would like to suggest, however, that in order to understand the symbolic meaning and possible usage of these flags it is necessary to look beyond the family records and other sources in the collection of the Ii Museum. First, I would like to examine the chant texts written on the silk fabric.

Instead of Genbu, the text calls on a new deity. Kōchin is the Daoist guardian deity of the “center” direction and one of the Twelve Heavenly Commanders (十二天將) used by Japanese *yinyang* masters in *rokujin shinka* (六壬神課) divination rituals from the Heian period. As stated in the fourth chapter of *Senji Ryakketsu* (占事略決), one of the texts written by the legendary *yinyang* master Abe no Seimei, Seiryū, Byakko, Genbu, Suzaku and Kōchin (among others) are important “heavenly commanders”, and one needs to summon them when performing a divination ritual. (Murayama, 1981) Moreover, in the chant text, there is a key sentence, which suggests the fact that these flags once were used in an actual ritual. The injunction “*kyūkyūnyoritsuryō*” (急急如律令) is a common formula used for the conveyance of Daoist petitions to deities and for ensuring their efficacy (Como 2015:32). Even in modern-day Japan, Shintō priests use this formula when creating household amulets or talismans.

In ancient times, Daoism was present as a series of fragments; Daoist and cosmological elements have inspired and framed cultural (and political) development in pre-modern Japanese history since the 7th century<sup>12</sup> (Ooms 2015:37). By the end of the Heian period, the *yinyang* thought, the Five Element Theory, the Indian-derived astrology and other elements had been increasingly assimilated into esoteric Buddhist discourse, Shintō traditions and popular traditions such as *onmyōdō* (陰陽道) divination.<sup>13</sup> (Richey 2015) From the tenth century, the growth and spread of *onmyōdō* rites have mostly occurred as a result of their increasing popularity among the nobility and people, who used *onmyōdō* as privately sponsored rites, rites directed toward celestial bodies as invocations of success and longevity, or rituals meant to invite good luck or ward off misfortune. (Murayama 1981; Kohn 2000)

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<sup>12</sup> Both *yinyang* lore and astral cults enjoyed deep and prestigious connections with the rulership by the time that they were introduced to Japan.

<sup>13</sup> *Onmyōdō* has been practiced by *yinyang* masters (*onmyōji*) employed by the imperial dynasty from the 6th century onward.

Furthermore, by the chaotic Sengoku period, Shintō, Daoist and esoteric Buddhist traditions have often come up with providing different names or characteristics to what were essentially the same cosmological concerns. (Murayama 1981) In this particular case, the Four Gods are presumably identified as “indigenous” guardian kami or heavenly beings, heavenly commanders protecting not only the emperor, but also the feudal aristocracy and the common people.

When these four flags were made, *onmyōdō* rites were known mostly by *yinyang* masters and Buddhist monks. I would like to suggest that due to the fact that the state patronage of *yinyang* masters had been lost completely from the medieval period, compelling them to leave Kyoto and to belong to one of the large nearby monasteries such as *uranai-shi* (占い師) or *kitō-shi* (祈祷師), it is possible that Ii Naotora consulted a *yinyang* master or another skilled Buddhist monk at Ryōtanji (which is relatively close to Kyoto). In this case, it is difficult to imagine that a *yinyang* master or a skilled monk, who most probably would have a deep knowledge of divination rituals and the Five Element theory, would have intentionally left out Genbu, the warrior god of the North. It would have been illogical to do so, especially in such a period of Japanese history, which was marked by near-constant military conflicts. I would like to propose that originally, there were five flags in this set and they were probably used at least once in a divination ritual as talismans for the sake of Ii Naomasa’s success or for the sake of Ii Naotora herself.

### **Inada Shrine (稲田神社) Ibaraki Prefecture, Kasama city**

- painted on silk
- artist: Sakurai Saijiro (桜井才次郎) also known as Sakurai Tadashige (桜井忠重)
- full size of flag: length 120cm, width 72cm
- designated cultural property

As stated in the shrine’s records, Tokugawa Tsunayoshi (1646-1709) shōgun ordered Tokugawa Mitsukuni, the feudal lord of Mito domain<sup>14</sup> to go to Edo and reside there for months.<sup>15</sup> It is reported that during his trip, he made the first shrine visit of New Year at Inada Shrine in 1694 and decided to offer new equipments to be used in Shintō rituals, as well as other items. In 1698, he sent four ceremonial flags of Suzaku, Seiryū,

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<sup>14</sup> Ruled by one of the Three Tokugawa Branch Families, Mito Domain (modern-day Ibaraki prefecture) was one of the most prominent domains in Edo period Japan.

<sup>15</sup> The *sankin-kōtai* (参勤交代) system was a Tokugawa Shogunate policy, which regulated and controlled the territorial lords of Japan. Under this system most of the daimyō were required to travel biennially from their domains to the capital (Edo) and to spend alternate years in personal attendance at the shogunal court.

Genbu and Byakko, which became the shrine's hidden treasures as they were not actually used for rituals. Since then, these items have been considered to be sacred flags that ward off evil spirits or drive away demons.

### **Inamura Shrine (稲村神社) Ibaraki Prefecture, Hitachi-ota city<sup>16</sup>**

According to Shinpen Hitachi Kokushi (新編常陸国誌) edited by Nakayama Nobuna *kokugaku* scholar in the Edo period, a set of four *shijin* flags and other ritual goods such as mirrors and banners were donated to Inamura Shrine by Tokugawa Mitsukuni in 1693. (Nakanaya 1970) It is unknown whether or not the flags are still being preserved in the area, since Inamura Shrine and Ibaraki Prefecture Shrine Agency have no information regarding the whereabouts of the original flags.

### **Ookuni-tama Shrine (大国玉神社) Ibaraki Prefecture, Sakuragawa city**

- designated cultural property

According to the data gathered from Ibaraki Prefecture Shrine Agency (茨城県神社庁)<sup>17</sup>, Tokugawa Mitsukuni donated a new set of ceremonial items to Ookuni-tama Shrine in November, 1699. The offering consisted of four flags with motifs of the Four Gods and two banners of the “Sun and Moon”, crafted with a spearhead on top. The artist is unknown. This is the only shrine in Ibaraki Prefecture where records show that not only flags of the Four Gods were donated to a shrine but also banners decorated with the Sun and Moon symbols. This detail made the author think that in the 17<sup>th</sup> century, Tokugawa Mitsukuni might actually have got his inspiration for the soon-to-be donated new ceremonial items from the official equipment of the ancient Japanese enthronement ceremony and the New Year's Day ceremony.

Mitsukuni (popularly known as Mito Kōmon) was known as a benevolent ruler who actively promoted Shintō tradition. He was the driving force behind the compilation called Dai Nihon-shi (大日本史) started by *mitogaku* scholars in 1657, a comprehensive rewriting of Japanese history from the country's ancient origins to the 14<sup>th</sup> century. His movement helped establish Neo-Confucian philosophy in Japan and also promoted the re-awakening of Japanese nationalism and loyalty to the chrysanthemum throne. He ordered the destruction of many Buddhist temples and the construction of at least one Shintō shrine per village. (Bocking 1997)

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<sup>16</sup> Hitachi province was in modern-day Ibaraki prefecture.

<sup>17</sup> Ibaraki Prefecture Shrine Agency <http://www.ibaraki-jinjacho.jp> (2014)

Giving financial support and building a number of new shrines (Shizuka Shrine, Yoshida Shrine, etc.), renovating old shrine buildings, recreating and donating new ceremonial items to various shrines (Inada Shrine, Ookuni-tama Shrine, Inamura Shrine) within his domain were part of his movement in which he put an end to kami-buddha combinatory practices and promoted Shintō tradition in Eastern Japan. (Tokoro 2001)

Numerous Japanese and Chinese scholars from all parts of the country were invited as historians of Mitsukuni's Shōkōkan institute.<sup>18</sup> During the compilation of Dai Nihon-shi, envoys were sent to different domains to collect and copy historical texts and emperor-related illustrations. It had been recorded by Asaka Tanpaku (安積澹泊 1656-1738), that a fellow scholar named Sassa Munekiyo (佐々宗淳 1640-1698) was sent to Kyoto several times during the last years of his life, from where he sent back original or copied documents to the Shōkōkan, such as illustrated books and scrolls of old enthronement ceremonies.<sup>19</sup> (Tokoro 2001)

To the best of the author's knowledge, Sansho Shrine has by far the oldest *shijin* flags in this Eastern region of Japan (1477), but the artist who made them is unknown, so are his sources regarding the design of the deities. Since its graphical characteristics are not similar to those which were used at enthronement ceremonies, it is possible that the artist intentionally created a totally new design and composition himself. Two hundred years later, in the 1690s, Tokugawa Mitsukuni ordered reproductions of the imperial *shijin* flags and the Sun and Moon banners for local Shintō shrines.

I examined several preserved documents and illustrations that were in the collection of Shōkōkan institute and are now stored in Shōkōkan Bunko library<sup>20</sup>, which is located in the premise of The Tokugawa Museum of Mito city. According to the records of Suifu Keisan (水府系纂)<sup>21</sup>, Mitsukuni invited a then 18 year old painter, Sakurai Saijiro (桜井才次郎) also known as Sakurai Tadashige (桜井忠重)<sup>22</sup> to Mito Domain, who made 3 sets of *shijin* flags for Yoshida Shrine (in modern-day Mito

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<sup>18</sup> This group later formed the Mito School.

<sup>19</sup> For example, 「行事官調進物四神之旗・高御座之図・御即位庭上之図」 and 「大礼御装束幀図」第一卷 were sent to Mito Domain in 1698 by Sassa Munekiyo. All of them are now in the collection of The Tokugawa Museum.

<sup>20</sup> In the Pacific War, during the carpet bombing of Mito city area in 1945, thousands of pieces of the collection were destroyed.

<sup>21</sup> It records and introduces the ancestry of the elit families of Mito Domain.

<sup>22</sup> The original text uses a different surname, but the only professional painter with the same last name who is known to had been working for Mitsukuni at the Shokokan institute at the time is Sakurai Saijiro. (Ouchi 1998)

city), for Shizu Shrine (in modern-day Naka city) and for Inada Shrine (in modern-day Kasama city) in 1695.<sup>23</sup> (Ogawa 1989)

There is a high possibility that

1, Mitsukuni saw the *shijin* flags of Sansho Shrine (and/or an unknown shrine), and hence, the idea of re-introducing the items as Shintō-promoting ceremonial flags was born;

2, The artist(s) in the late 17<sup>th</sup> century was/were probably inspired by old illustrations and reports that were sent back to the Shōkōkan by scholars, such as Sassa Munekiyo, about the enthronement ceremony.

### **Another transition period: Edo and the new role of the Four Gods**

The Edo period was a time of internal peace, political stability, and a profound transition period for economic and cultural growth under the shogunate founded by Tokugawa Ieyasu. Ieyasu achieved hegemony over the entire country by balancing the power of *tozama*, *fudai* and *shimpan daimyō*. As a further control strategy beginning in 1635, Ieyasu's successor required the feudal lords to maintain households in the new capital of Edo and reside there for several months every other year. Another important aspect of the period is the cultural and political emphasis that was put on Edo, which grew, from what had been a small place, into a metropolis with an estimated population of one million by 1721. (Gordon 2003)

The emperor and the imperial family were still living in Kyoto, the imperial *shijin* flags were still used at the enthronement ceremony in Kyoto, but the actual capital and center of political power was now Edo. Tokugawa Ieyasu was continuously trying to surpass the strong historical and cultural image of Kyoto, while on the other hand, he helped the imperial family recapture their old glory by having rebuilt their palaces and having granted them new lands. He encouraged an increase in artistic, cultural and social development in Edo. One of his key concepts was picking up famous old customs and cultural elements from Kyoto, rearranging and integrating them with Edo culture through sharing them with the masses. One well-known example of this process was the integration of city-planning. The urban designers used all resources available to them, including divination – the philosophies of *yinyang* and *shijin-sōō* that had been a natural part of urban design since ancient times. "Defensive lines" were constructed to recreate Kyoto's auspicious features. In the northeast of Kyoto, an inauspicious direction, Enryakuji watches over the city, while in the northeast of Edo castle, Tōeizan Kaneiji was constructed in Ueno. (Lazar 2018)

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<sup>23</sup> 「元禄八年乙亥正月十九日、義公、西山忠重（才次郎、十八歳）ヲ召テ、吉田、静、稲田ノ三社へ奉納ノ四神ノ旗ヲ画キ、且諸画ヲ献ズ」

A not so well-known example, the tradition of ritual flags symbolizing the Four Gods was also integrated into Edo's culture. With this further change in the application and in the cultural role of the Four Gods belief, the deities rapidly became well-known guardian *kami* or heavenly beings protecting the common people and their everyday life in Edo. The Tokugawa shogunate made the previously unapproachable emperor and imperial customs more accessible for the population in a Shintō spiritual sense, while making life in Edo more stable and organized by providing the new protective deities for the population.

In recent years, while Japanese scholars have confronted the complex topic of traditional *shijin* flags used at imperial state events, there is surprisingly little research being conducted about the newly made *shijin-boko* (四神鉾) or *shijin-ken* (四神劍).

As an initial effort to address this complicated topic, with the help of old records and book illustrations<sup>24</sup>, in the latter part of this article, I shall endeavor to investigate the new ritual items that were reportedly used only in the procession of very important Shintō festivals in Edo and in the neighboring area.<sup>25</sup> They seemingly do not have any connection to the *shijin* flags that have been preserved in shrines of modern-day Ibaraki prefecture. During my fieldwork in 2014-2015, I visited several places in Kantō and Tōhoku region where actual ritual staffs of the Four Gods (*shijin-boko*) have been preserved, and I conducted personal interviews with many shrine office members and Shintō priests.

### **Kanda Shrine (神田明神)Tokyo Prefecture**

Kanda Shrine was an important shrine to both the warrior class and the commoners of Japan, especially during the Edo period. San-ō festival, Kanda festival and Ten-ō festival are major state festivals held by the Kanda Shrine in Tokyo, started in 1600 by Tokugawa Ieyasu to celebrate his decisive victory at the battle of Sekigahara. Each of them had highly decorated *mikoshi* (portable shrine for the *kami*) which were paraded down the main streets of Edo in the summer. According to the *ukiyo-e* woodblock prints and some guide books of the time, the newly-made ritual items decorated with colorful sculptures of the Four Gods (*shijin-boko*) were used in the Ten-ō festival's procession and when the traveling *mikoshi* was taking a rest at a certain district for a couple of days, people put *shijin-boko* on full display.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> These records are mainly documenting Ten-ō or Shinkō festivals held in the late Edo-period.

<sup>25</sup> However, here I only discuss my main findings; the entire list of the examined data exceeds the limits of this article. For further examination in Japanese, see Lazar, 2018.

<sup>26</sup> When one of these areas was holding their main Ten-ō festival, the other would only hold a small 'shadow' festival (*kagematsuri*) and not an extensive one.

- ①Oodenma district Ten-ō festival: 5-8 June<sup>27</sup>
- ②Minami-denma district Ten-ō festival: 7-14 June
- ③Kobune district Ten-ō festival 10-13 June

Utagawa Yoshitomi's *ukiyo-e* woodblock print, titled Ryōgoku-bashi gion-e no zu (两国橋祇園会之図)<sup>28</sup> is one of the most famous prints that portrays the procession of „Gion-e” of Kobune district Ten-ō festival of 1861. Paying attention to the very small details, there are four colorful sculptures in the procession that resemble the Four Gods' animal images (a white tiger, a green turtle, a red bird and a green dragon). The only difference is that the turtle does not have the snake entwined to its body. The small sculptures are riding on a long spear-like ceremonial staff, that also has a red flag hanging from it. Utagawa Sadahide documents the same festival in his Ten-ō gosairei miyade no zu (天王御祭礼宮出之図)<sup>29</sup> woodblock print from the late Edo period. In the background, four small animal sculptures and a long spearhead leading the procession in the far distance can be discovered.

Several books document the Ten-ō festival of Kanda Shrine as follows:

- Morisada Mankō (守貞漫稿)<sup>30</sup> Vol 27. Summer and Winter<sup>31</sup> (1837) Edo Gozu Ten-ō festival, held on May 5<sup>th</sup>:  
In the procession, (the people were walking) with ceremonial drums, a big *sakaki* tree, with the sacred staff of Genbu, Byakko, Suzaku, Seiryū, Sun and Moon. After them, drums and the head of a *shishi* sculpture and a *mikoshi* follow.
- Edo Funai Ehon Fūzoku Ōrai (江戸府内絵本風俗往来)<sup>32</sup>  
...Ten-ō festival of Oodenma district: Every year, on June 5<sup>th</sup>, (after the opening ritual) the *ni-no-gu mikoshi* of Kanda Shrine departs the shrine and the procession goes to Oodenma district to reach the designated resting place for the traveling *mikoshi*. It will return to Kanda Shrine on June 8<sup>th</sup>. In the procession, (the people were walking) with ten banners, ceremonial drums, a *sakaki* tree with the *kami-boko* and *shijin-boko*. After them, drums follow again, and head of two *shishi* sculptures, a *nusa* (wooden

<sup>27</sup> ①②③ are lunar calendar dates.

<sup>28</sup> In the collection of Edo Tokyo Museum.

<sup>29</sup> In the collection of Edo Tokyo Museum.

<sup>30</sup> From the database of Diet Library Digital Collections: <http://dl.ndl.go.jp/info:ndljp/pid/991466>

<sup>31</sup> Edited by Kitagawa Morisada.

<sup>32</sup> Edited by Kikuchi Kiichirō.

From the database of Diet Library Digital Collections: <http://dl.ndl.go.jp/info:ndljp/pid/767856>

wand decorated with many zig-zagging paper streamers), small drums, the *ni-no-gu mikoshi* and a *kami-ki* (small ritual table) follows. Two members of the shrine office end the procession on horseback.

... Ten-ō festival of Minami-denma district: The *ichi-no-gu mikoshi* departs the shrine on June 7<sup>th</sup> and the procession goes to Minami-denma district to reach the designated resting place for the traveling *mikoshi*. It will return to Kanda Shrine on June 14<sup>th</sup>. The procession is similar to the one of Oodenma district. However, this time, the *shijin-boko* was placed near the resting place, without being added to the procession.

... Ten-ō festival of Kobune district: The *san-no-gu mikoshi* departs the shrine on June 10<sup>th</sup> and the procession goes to Kobune district to reach the designated resting place for the traveling *mikoshi*. It will return to Kanda Shrine on June 13<sup>th</sup>. The procession is similar to the one of Oodenma district.

- Tōtosajiki (東都歳時記)<sup>33</sup> Vol 2. Summer<sup>34</sup>  
(1838) After the opening ritual at Kanda Shrine, the *ichi-no-gu mikoshi* (carried by people) departs the shrine and the procession goes to Minami-denma district to reach the designated resting place for the traveling *mikoshi*. It will return to Kanda Shrine on the 14<sup>th</sup> (of June). Originally, this Ten-ō festival is believed to start on June 7<sup>th</sup>, 1623. The procession is similar to the one of Oodenma district. However, this time, the *shijin-boko* was placed near the resting place, without being added to the procession.  
The *ni-no-gu mikoshi* departs the shrine on June 5<sup>th</sup> and the procession goes to Oodenma district to reach the designated resting place for the traveling *mikoshi*. It will return to Kanda Shrine on June 8<sup>th</sup>. In the procession, (the people were walking) with ten banners, ceremonial drums, a big *sakaki* tree, with the “festival-staff” and *shijin-boko*. After them, drums follow again, and head of two *shishi* sculptures, a wooden wand decorated with many zig-zagging paper streamers, small drums, the *ni-no-gu mikoshi* and a portable table follows. Two members of the shrine office end the procession on horseback.

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<sup>33</sup> From the database of Waseda Daigaku Toshokan: <http://dl.ndl.go.jp/info:ndljp/pid/8369318>

<sup>34</sup> Edited by Saitō Gesshin, illustrated by Hasegawa Settan

The current structure of Kanda Shrine and most of its old ritual items (including *shijin-boko*) were destroyed in the Great Kantō earthquake (1923). However, the main building was rebuilt in 1934 of concrete, and all ritual items were replaced with new ones. According to Kanda Shrine's office members, the ritual items of the Four Gods have not been used since the Meiji Restoration, however, they became the shrines's designated treasure (*shinpō*). They are not accessible to the public.

### **Matsudo Shrine (松戸神社) Chiba Prefecture**

- Red silk flag and animal sculptures are attached to the upper end of the staff

Matsudo shrine's *shijin-boko* have a very special history among others. There is no record about the origin of the sacred items, but they are said to had been dedicated to the shrine in the first half of the Edo period. In 1739, all four items disappeared in a big fire. After the fire, the shrine and all ceremonial items were replaced with new ones, but due to the regulations of the Meiji government, the shrine could not use the *shijin-boko* for a very long time. Instead, they hid them as the shrines's designated treasures and even their existence was slowly forgotten. 1941 was the last year when a main Shinkō festival was held (without the Shijin staffs). In 1989, a citizen of Matsudo city found an old box in a mikoshi warehouse of the city which surprisingly enough, contained the four old sculpture animals from the late Edo period. Nobody knew how to use them as there was noone who could remember the original Shinkō festival procession and there were no records about the festival. According to Mr. Tokiwa Akihiko, the *negi* priest of the shrine, they sent the old sculptures to Nikkō for restoration. Later on, they started to collect information from shrines nearby Chiba Prefecture (such as Rokugo Shrine, Hakone Shrine, Kanda Shrine) on how to use the staffs, but only the written sources could help them revive the old procession and its sacred items. At last, the reconstructed Shinkō festival was held in 1990 again after a very long time, and the most important ceremonial item in its procession was reportedly the *shijin-boko*, which has been in use since then, in every four years.



**Illustration 1.** Shinkō festival procession at Matsudo Shrine

## Senju Nakamachi Hikawa Shrine (氷川神社) Tokyo Prefecture

- Size of the black staff without the sculpture: length 4 m, width 12 cm

The four and a half meter long shijin-boko set of this shrine belonged to Senjushuku inn town of Edo. It was dedicated to the Kiyokawa Shrine in 1833. The shrine was rebuilt in 2010 and all of its old ceremonial items were repaired and repainted in gold.<sup>35</sup> It is open to the public during the main festival, every five years.

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<sup>35</sup> Size of the animal sculptures:

Suzaku (bird): width 55 cm, length 75 cm, height 51 cm

Seiryū (dragon): width 30 cm, length 90 cm, height 33 cm

Byakko (tiger): width 30 cm, length 63 cm, height 50 cm

Genbu (turtle): width 33cm, length 75 cm, height 33 cm

**Illustration 2.** Shinkō festival opening ritual at Hikawa Shrine



### **Rokugō Shrine (六郷神社) Tokyo Prefecture**

Tōtosaijiki (東都歳時記) mentions the biggest festival of Rokugō Shrine, the Rokugō Hachiman Sairei from 1838: „People are walking from Haneda to Daishigawara district in a procession with ceremonial ornaments such as the Shijin staffs and the Moon and Sun spear.”<sup>36</sup>

According to Rokugō Shrine’s official records (六郷神社誌), the ritual staffs of the Four Gods have not been used since the Meiji Restoration, however, the animal sculptures became the shrines’s

<sup>36</sup> From the database of Waseda Daigaku Toshokan: <http://dl.ndl.go.jp/info:ndljp/pid/8369318>

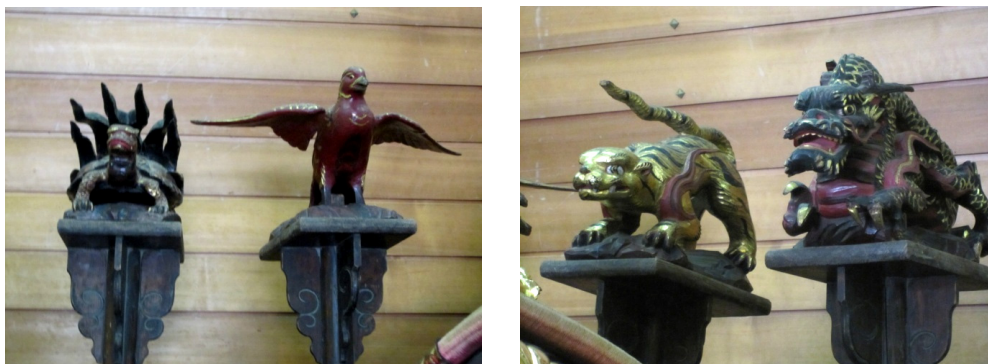
designated treasures and are preserved in the main hall. They are not accessible to the public.

### **Ōkunitama Shrine (大國魂神社) Tokyo Prefecture**

- Red silk flag and animal sculptures are attached to the upper end of the staff
- The items were not repaired since 1861

Ōkunitama is now known as one of the five major shrines in Tokyo. There is no information about the origin of this shrine's *shijin-boko*, but as it is stated in the shrine's official records, the sculptures were repaired in 1861. The animal sculptures became the shrines's designated treasures and are preserved in the treasure hall. They are put on display during the main festival season.

**Illustration 3.** Shijin-boko of Ōkunitama Shrine



### **Hakone Shrine (箱根神社) Kanagawa Prefecture**

Hakone Shrine's old sculptures from the Edo period are very similar to the set I found in Matsudo Shrine in Chiba Prefecture. However, due to the lack of records, it is not known who donated them or why they are so similar. It is also interesting that while the Matsudo Shrine proudly uses its restored *shijin-boko* during its main festival, Hakone Shrine did never attempt to revive this custom. It holds its own Shinkō festival, but it keeps the ritual items as sacred treasures inside the main residence of the shrine. They are not accessible to the public.

Whereas the following list obviously cannot presume to be exhaustive, in the table below, I list my findings about the main shrines where *shijin-boko* were (or supposedly were) used during the Edo period in Shintō processions.<sup>37</sup>

<sup>37</sup> Data were collected during the author's research trips in Honshū, Japan (2014. 9.; 2015. 9.).

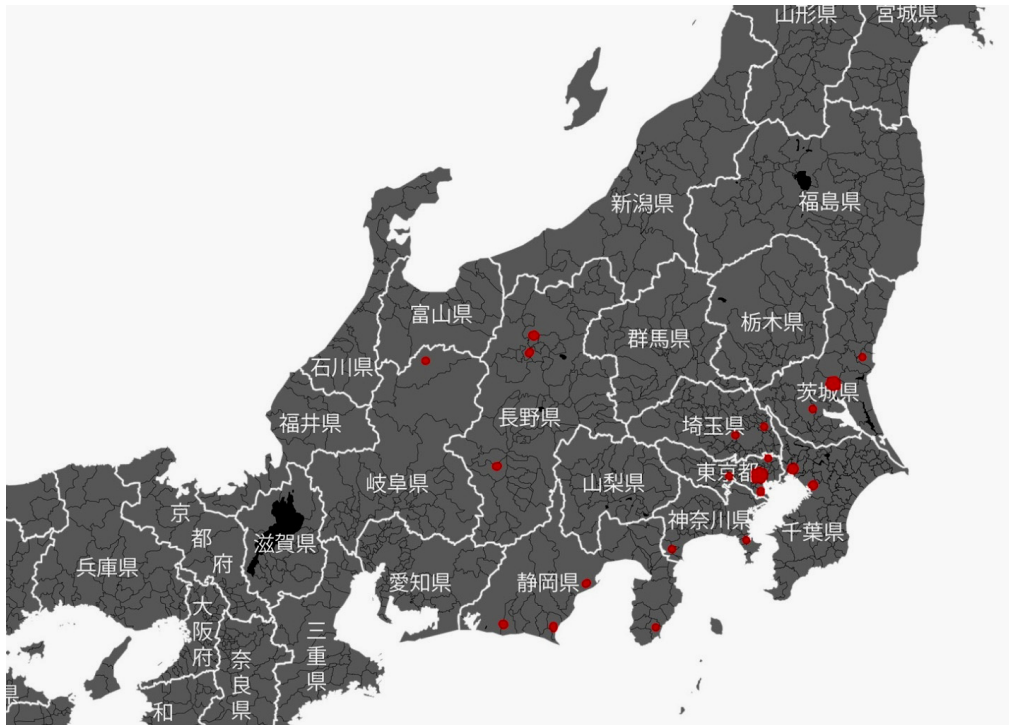
**Table 1: Shrines in Japan where actual ritual staffs of the Four Gods (*shijin-boko*) have been preserved, or were reportedly used in the past (mostly in the Edo period)<sup>38</sup>**

Number of Four Gods-related objects	Prefecture, city	Property of	Festival procession where <i>shijin</i> -flags were used	Time period
4 staffs	Ibaraki Kasama city	Kasama Inari Shrine	Not used in procession.	Edo period. Still preserved.
4 staffs	Ibaraki Kuji District	Kanasa Shrine	Not used in procession.	Edo period. Not preserved.
4 staffs	Ibaraki Jōsō city	Hachiman Shrine	Main Festival	Unknown, made before Shōwa period. Still preserved.
4 staffs	Saitama Kawagoe city	Kawagoe Hikawa Shrine	Main Festival	Edo period. Not preserved.
4 staffs	Saitama Koshigaya city	Hisaizu Shrine	Main Festival	Unknown, made before Shōwa period. Still preserved.
4 staffs	Chiba Chiba city	Matsudo Shrine	Main Festival	Edo period. Still preserved. Got repaired in 1990.
3 staffs * Genbu-boko is missing	Chiba Chiba city	Kemigawa Public Hall Kemigawa Shrine	Main Festival	Unknown, made before Shōwa period. Still preserved.
4 staffs	Chiba Narashino city	Kurita Shrine	Main Festival	Unknown. Still preserved.
4 staffs	Tokyo Ōta ward	Rokugō Shrine	Not used in procession.	Edo period. Still preserved. Got repaired in 1987.
4 staffs	Tokyo Chiyoda ward	Kanda Shrine	Ten-ō festival	Edo period. Still preserved. Got repaired in the Heisei period.
4 staffs	Tokyo Adachi ward Senju Nakamachi	Hikawa Shrine	Main Festival	Edo period (1833). Still preserved. Got repaired in 2010
4 staffs	Tokyo Fuchū ward	Ōkunitama Shrine	Main Festival	Edo period. Still preserved.

<sup>38</sup> However, the table is not containing data of *shijin* flags (imperial flags or flags used by feudal lords in medieval times and in pre-modern Edo period)!

2 animal sculptures	Tokyo Minato ward	Azabu Hikawa Shrine	Main Festival	Edo period. Still preserved.
4 staffs	Tokyo Shinjuku ward	Suga Shrine	Gozu Ten-ō festival	Edo period. Not preserved.
4 animal sculptures	Tokyo Hakone	Hakone Shrine	Not used in procession.	Edo period. Still preserved.
4 staffs +1 spear	Kanagawa Yokosuka city	Yakumo Shrine	Main Festival	Unknown, made before Shōwa period. Still preserved.
4 staffs	Nagano Okuwa village	Suhara Kashima Shrine	Main Festival	Unknown, made before Shōwa period. Still preserved.
4 animal sculptures +1 spear	Nagano Nagano city	Takei Shrine	Main Festival	Unknown, made towards the end of Edo period. Still preserved.
4 animal sculptures +1 spear	Nagano Nagano city	Sarashina Yokota Shrine	Main Festival	End of Edo period. Still preserved.
4 animal sculptures +1 spear	Nagano Nagano city	Nagaike Shrine	Main Festival	End of Edo period. Still preserved.
4 animal sculptures +1 spear	Nagano Chikuma city	Haruta Shrine	Inariyama Gion Festival	End of Edo period (1865). Still preserved. Got repaired in the Heisei period.
4 staffs	Gifu Takayama city	Hida Shrine (Tōshōgū)	Main Festival	Edo period (1818). Still preserved.
4 staffs	Shizuoka Shimoda city	Hachiman Shrine	Main Festival	Unknown, made before Shōwa period. Still preserved.
4 animal sculptures	Shizuoka Shizuoka city	Shizuoka Sengen Shrine	Not used in procession.	Edo period. Still preserved.
4 staffs	Shizuoka Makinohara city	Kashima Shrine	Main Festival O-fune ritual	Unknown, made before Shōwa period. Still preserved.

## Distribution map of shijin-boko that were reportedly used in Edo period<sup>39</sup>



### The Meiji Restoration

Meiji Restoration in 1868 brought a sudden change in Japan: Shintō was reorganized, was separated from Buddhism, and brought within the structure of the state administration.<sup>40</sup> With this change, the Meiji government eliminated all possible ‘intruding’ elements from Shintō festivals that were not originally ‘Japanese’. (Beasley 2006) It was no longer acceptable for the Four Gods neither to participate in Shintō festivals nor to appear in any form. Shrines were cleansed of every trace of imagery deities, spirits, and rituals of foreign origin. The ceremonial flags and spears were completely removed from the shrines, only some of them survived, such as the ones I am listing in this paper and perhaps some others not yet located. However, interestingly enough, they were preserved quite well. Many of them were restored to their original form and glory, and have been used as ceremonial items in famous Shintō festivals through the country.

<sup>39</sup> Map is made by the author.

<sup>40</sup> Kuroda (1981), Beasley (1972)

## Conclusion

Further study is required to trace and document these items; however, so far the information revealed demonstrates that unlike in other Asian cultures, the Four Gods belief, and the symbolic ritual item called 'Flag of the Four Gods' has had many different roles in Japanese culture since ancient times up to modern times. Among other things, the Four Gods were associated with the Japanese Imperial Court and the emperor, because they were uniquely used at state ceremonies as special ceremonial flags. In the 15-17<sup>th</sup> centuries, many Shintō shrines in present-day Ibaraki prefecture had custom-designed *shijin* flags dedicated by a powerful feudal lord of the area. Since Tokugawa Mitsukuni, the feudal lord of Mito Domain was known as a ruler who actively promoted Shintō tradition, it is quite possible that he witnessed the *shijin* flags of local shrines, and hence, the idea of re-introducing the items as Shintō-promoting talismans was born. In the 17<sup>th</sup> century, it is likely that artists could be inspired by old illustrations and reports that were sent back to the Shōkōkan institute of Mito Domain by scholars about the enthronement ceremony.

However, the Edo period brought along an important change in the deities' roles and applications: ceremonial flags gradually disappeared and *shijin-boko* was intentionally created by the Tokugawa shogunate to provide the people with old yet new protective spirits. After the Meiji Restoration, the flags and staffs were mostly removed from the shrines, but some of them were preserved and were used throughout the country, which played an essential role in keeping the belief in the Four Gods alive. Although they have lost their original attributes as cardinal deities, they still belong to modern Japanese culture.

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