‘Erotic Gifts’: The Votive Role of Sexual Objects

Shintō provides a rich symbolic environment where the worshipper interacts with the kami in the two-way process of asking for help and then giving thanks when the desire is granted. Since the time of the myth of Mitoshi no Kami the phallus has been the symbol of choice for matters involving fertility, with the object becoming ‘an erotic gift to a deity craving it’.1 The vast majority of phalluses seen in today’s shrines are performing this votive function, and when agricultural fertility is the goal a large phallus is presented to the kami during a festival. The desire for human fertility is usually expressed on a more personal and individual scale, and over the years many thousands of phalluses have been donated to gods as requests for help with match-making, marital harmony, the cure or avoidance of sexually transmitted diseases, successful conception and the safe delivery and nurture of children. Rarer votive intentions exist, including one legendary instance of the samurai general Minamoto Yoshitsune (1154–1189) praying for victory to a phallic symbol at the Ōmononushi Shrine in Amagasaki (Hyōgo Prefecture) before pursuing the Taira family along the Inland Sea.2

The achievement of conception has always been the most important request associated with these most sexual of objects, and this was probably the intention lying behind the behaviour witnessed in 1864 by a Victorian traveller to Japan called Dr Sinclair Coghill:

The male symbol was the only object of veneration, apparently; in various sizes, some quite colossal, more or less faithfully modelled from nature, it held the sole place of honour on the altars in the principle hall and subsidiary chapels of the temple. Before each, the fair devotees might be seen fervently addressing their petitions and laying upright on the altar, already thickly studded with similar oblations, a votive phallus, whether of plain or wrought cut wood from the surrounding grove or of other more elaborately prepared materials.3

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1 Naumann 2000, pp. 79–80.
2 No items of a phallic nature are now present at the rebuilt shrine (from a personal observation made on 24 October 2012). This is probably why was omitted from the 1981 version of Kokonoe’s guidebook. It may be found only in his first handbook (Kokonoe 1976a).
3 Stone 1927, pp. 110–111.
In 1895 Buckley stated that at one place known to him, ‘a phallus is offered to produce (depending upon the intention) a husband or a son, and a kteis if the intention is to acquire a wife or a daughter,’ but there is no evidence of this taking place nowadays. In addition to the offering of phalluses, loan phalluses may be taken away from shrines on a temporary basis to be prayed to in the home, and the most efficacious examples are borrowed time and time again. The phalluses at the Ōhata Konsei Daimyōjin in Aomori Prefecture are borrowed overnight. In most other places the objects are retained until conception occurs and the shrine’s collection is then augmented by a further gift.

The phalluses donated to a shrine are usually arranged neatly on shelves around the goshintai, but because old phalluses are not thrown away the accumulated numbers can be quite staggering, although it is only at the most remote shrines where they now appear to be stored indefinitely. At the Akaiwa Konsei Shrine in Okayama the tightly packed piles of old phallic symbols fade into the darkness of the separate building set aside to preserve them, and at another shrine in Chiba Prefecture large piles of dusty phalluses are stacked in cardboard boxes. The process is slightly different at the very popular Mara Kannon near Tawarayama Onsen (Yamaguchi Prefecture) where the custom is to purchase a ceramic phallus and write one’s intentions on it with a felt-tip pen. They are then placed at the shrine. There were about 300 donated specimens visible within the honden in March 2014, but thousands more were packed into an adjacent shrine that acted as a repository. It was almost full and many more were arranged neatly on the ground outside.

The Nagomi Shichirōjin as a Case Study

In order to observe how the pattern of borrowing and donating phalluses might operate, one shrine was monitored over a period of six years through five visits to the site. The place chosen was the shrine known simply as the Shichirōjin 七郎神. It lies in Nagomi, a rural district of northern Kumamoto Prefecture. Its kami was once Sanaga Shichirōemon, a priest of the Aso Shrine who went to the area about 800 years ago to teach agricultural technology to the villagers.

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4 Buckley 1895, p. 28.
5 From a photograph of the sign displayed at http://www11.atpages.jp/ruisho/myweb3_04444.htm.
6 From a personal observation made on 8 July 2013.
7 From a personal observation made on 4 March 2014.
8 The visits were made on 2 June 2010, 10 February 2011, 11 April 2012, 30 May 2013 and 8 February 2015. For a video tour see https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=S6tZprsT-p8.