THE HISTORY AND MIRACULOUS EFFICACY OF THE BLACK AMIDA: ITS SIGNIFICANCE FOR ZŌJŌJI AND ITS ROLE IN THE DIFFUSION OF TOKUGAWA MYTHS

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In order to curb increasing anti-shogunate sentiments incited by proponents of the “Revere the Emperor, Expel the Barbarians” (sonnō jōi 尊王攘夷) movement, which had been fuelled by the signing of the Ansei Treaties in 1858, shogun Tokugawa Iemochi 徳川家茂 (1846–66) departed from Edo Castle on the thirteenth of the second month of 1863 to travel in great procession to the imperial court in Kyoto. It was the first time since Tokugawa Iemitsu 徳川家光 (1604–51) that a shogun made a trip to the capital, but apparently Iemochi’s support of the Union of Court and Shogunate Movement (kōbu gattai undō 公武合体運動) was necessary. In her diary, princess Kazunomiya Chikako 和宮親子 (1846–77), a younger sister of Emperor Kōmei 孝明天皇 (1831–67) and Iemochi’s consort since the previous year, writes that after Iemochi’s departure, she practised for seven consecutive days the ohyakudo 御百度 ritual in front of a talisman of the Kuro honzon 黒本尊 (Black amida icon) of Zōjōji 増上寺 to pray for her husband’s safe return. During his short life, Iemochi would travel to the capital two more times: again at the end of 1863, and in the first month of 1865. On both of these occasions, Kazunomiya prayed for her husband’s safety by venerating the Black Amida through the ohyakudo ritual. Ohyakudo (hundredfold pilgrimage) refers to a pilgrimage to a shrine or temple that extended to a period of one hundred days for the purpose of praying to a kami or buddha. In Kazunomiya’s case, the ritual focused on a tablet (o-fuda 御札) of the Black Amida that was placed on an altar.

1 In early modern Japanese sources, this icon is referred to as either Kuro Honzon (Black Amida icon), or as Kurō Honzon 九郎本尊 (Icon of [Lord] Kurō). According to these sources, the former designation came into use because the icon had a pitch-black hue due to the smoke of incense to which it had been exposed over the years; the latter designation derived from the legend that this icon had once belonged to the famous warrior Minamoto Yoshitsune 源義経 (1159–89) whose childhood name was Lord Kurō.

2 Seikan’in no miyako gonikki 靜寛院宮御日記 (Diary of Seikan’in no miya), vol. 2, pp. 142–45; Seikan’in is the name that Kazunomiya received when she took the tonsure after lemochi had passed away.

in a chamber of the inner palace, around which the princess walked a hundred times.

What was the significance of this Black Amida icon? What role did it play in the history of the Tokugawa shogunate? And, what was in this respect the position of Zōjōji, Edo's largest Pure Land temple? Before elaborating on these and related questions in more detail, I will first briefly consider their relevance in a broader context.

Soon after Tokugawa Ieyasu (1543–1616), founder of the Tokugawa shogunate, had passed away, his son and successor Hideyada (1579–1632), following the last will of his father, set into motion a process that resulted in Ieyasu's deification as Tōshō Daigongen 東照大権現. One year after his death, Ieyasu was deified and enshrined at the Tōshōgū shrine in Nikkō 日光東照宮. This symbolized the religious and royal authority of the Tokugawa shogunate and legitimized its rule over the realm. As W. J. Boot and others have shown, a pivotal role in the process of Ieyasu's deification was played by the Tendai priest Tenkai 天海 (1536–1643), founder of the Tōshōgū shrine. An indispensable instrument to strengthen and to perpetuate this religious and royal authority, was the creation of Tokugawa myths (Tokugawa shinwa 徳川神話). An exemplary text replete with such myths is Tōshōsha engi 東照社縁起 (History of the Tōshōgū shrine), written by Tenkai and others between 1636 and 1640. The Tōshōsha engi depicts Ieyasu, as the incarnation of a Buddha or bodhisattva who unified a country that had been torn by internal struggle.

Although Ieyasu's deification was based on the Tendai Shinto rites of Sannō Ichijitsu Shinto 山王一実神道 as expounded by Tenkai, both Ieyasu in his private life, and his ancestors, the Matsudaira clan 松平氏, had of old been devoted to the beliefs and practices of the Pure Land school. It is not strange therefore that, together with the composition of texts that propagated a Tendai style of “Tokugawa mythology,” similar texts but based rather on Pure Land thought were written as well: they identified Ieyasu with Amida or propagated the notion that Amida had bestowed on Ieyasu the rule of the realm. The most stunning appearance that figured in many of these texts was the Black Amida.

When did the figure of the Black Amida first appear in textual sources? The earliest source that connects Matsudaira [Tokugawa] Ieyasu, most of the Tokugawa shoguns, and their ladies of the inner palace (ōoku 大奥)

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