

Omachi and its Gods.

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No. IV.

THE GODS OF OMACHI.

In the lengthy but necessarily incomplete description which I gave in my last number of things "In Omachi," I purposely omitted all mention of the matters which a missionary would ordinarily devote most attention to, the objects of worship which are to be seen, the religious festivals, the attitude of the people toward Christianity, and so forth, because I wished to bring all these together in something of an orderly way in my closing article, my closing letter I should say, for these papers are intended to be of a most familiar tone, like the descriptive letters one sends from a far country to his personal friends. I have still many such friends, I trust, in all parts of the Provinces by the Sea, who will read these letters with an interest into which a personal element will enter, and as for the Gentle Readers who have not seen my face in the flesh, they also are my kith and kin, for I am of the seed of the Loyalists, of the clan of the Cape Bretonians, a Blue Nose of the Blue Noses. And while I cannot expect the Maritime Baptists to take that interest in things Japanese which they do in things Telugu, for where their money is put there their hearts will be,—and by that same token not a few of them have very little heart in Telugu land even, to judge by the reports of the mission treasurer—I may hope that all will remember that Japan is also a part of that "all the world," the evangelization of which the Master laid upon His disciples. We who are here from the Provinces do not seek to draw off men or means from your great and needy work in India, which may God abundantly prosper, but no Christian heart should be so narrow as not to embrace in its love and faith and prayer every nation of men which God hath made to dwell on the face of the earth.

May I correct one error in my last letter before taking up the subject of this. I said that the shade-roofs from the top of the first storeys, in the Japanese houses in Omachi, projected some ten feet out over the street. I found afterward that half of this roof is a roof of the forepart of the lower storey, which itself projects several feet farther from than that above, and that the shade-roof proper, overhanging the street, is but four or five feet projection. I fell into the error from looking at the roofs from above as I wrote. This is a trifling matter, but I mention it for the sake of veracity which is no trifle. For that same sake I will say that while I have taken pains to render my descriptions accurate, photographic as nearly as possible, I may have fallen into other errors of detail, but none I think that will render the picture as a whole misleading. I had simply to tell what I could see with my eyes and hear with my ears, right around me. In the present letter I will give the most faithful representation I can, but cannot vouch for its accuracy in all particulars, as the Japanese whom I interview for information do not always agree among themselves either as to facts or explanations. And in regard to religious matters in Omachi, as in regard to its social and domestic affairs, I can hope to give but a glimpse, for any full description of the temples, idols, festivals, etc., would need many letters much longer than the present one will be.

Who, or what, are the gods of Omachi? There is but one God, and He is God of Omachi, and God of all; but the gods of Omachi are many. The human population is about 5,000, but a census of the gods would foot up a much larger total. Each house has its little pantheon, or rather polytheon, and there are temples and temple gods not a few. The gods of Shinto, the native home made religion, are commonly spoken of as the "Eight Hundred Myriad Gods," but if we should take account of all the representations of the Shinto deities which are practically gods to their worshippers, we would need to add a good many myriads to this, and in addition to these there are countless images of the gods introduced by Buddhism from India, and still many other gods which have been borrowed on one pretext or another from China. The Japanese like to speak of their Sunrise Kingdom as Shinkoku, "the Country of the Gods," and if it is the number of gods that is in point, the phrase is an apt one, for as in Athens of old, there are more gods than men.

Let us look first at the household gods, after which if we have time we will consider those that stand out under sun and rain by the wayside, and those that sit in state in the temples. In my description of a Japanese dwelling I passed over the god-shelf, to which I must now invite my readers' attention. It is set up in a conspicuous place, usually well up on the wall of the kitchen-place and general living and work room, facing the entrance of the house. If you lift your eyes on entering the *doma* that serves for hall-way, you will notice on the opposite wall a substantial shelf upon which stand what will appear to you to be toy-houses, such as Japanese children might be expected to use for their dolls. There are several of these, usually three, and their size and elegance depend on the worldly estate of the householder, or possibly on the fervor of his piety. There are also a number of *fuda*, their tablets of wood covered with

paper, on which are inscribed, from top to bottom, a series of Chinese characters. In front of these and of the little houses are tiny saucers, cups, jars, and lamps perhaps. These doll-houses are really miniature temples, quite elaborately made, and in each of them, hidden perhaps by the lattice, dwells one of the household gods, or goddesses. He or she is represented by a *fuda*, which a Shinto priest has transformed into a god, or the visible sign of the presence of a god, by placing upon it in large Chinese characters the name of the said god, and offering certain priestly stamps and signs. This transformation is completed by the recitation, at the temple where the *fuda* are prepared, of certain prayers or sections of the sacred writings, by virtue of which the god in question enters in a measure and in a sense into each of the thousand or ten thousand *fuda* that have been made for distribution among the faithful. This is a good deal like the transformation the Roman Catholic priest is supposed to bring about in the holy wafer, but the Shinto priest is the more modest in his claims and only pretends to a spiritual presence of the deity, not a veritable corporeal transubstantiation. The *fuda* are sold to the people at very reasonable figures. Half a cent of our money will buy an ordinary one, and a cent and a half one of the more valuable. These are distributed new every year, those of the former year being preserved for a while as having still a certain sacredness, but finally cast away. In each of the little temples on the god-shelf is placed the *fuda* of the god whose shrine it is. The other *fuda* we see are either those of former years, or the *fuda* of other gods, for whom temples are not prepared. Before the shrines or *fuda* offerings are made at set times of rice, *sake*, lights, twigs of certain trees or plants, and so forth, and it is the cups, saucers, etc., used for these offerings which we see standing on the shelf. I suppose there is no Japanese family, except those that are Christian, that has not this god-shelf, however rude, and it is not easy always to persuade those who become Christians to abolish it, even though they refrain from making the offerings, and no longer believe in the gods. The god-shelf has been an heir-loom in the family, and an integral part of the home, so long, that they often wish to let it remain "just for ornament."

The deity enshrined in the largest of the three temples on the shelf, is Amaterasu-Oo-Kami, otherwise Ten-shō-kō Dai-jin-gu. The first of these is the Japanese reading of the characters on the *fuda* which represents the deity, and the second is the Chinese reading of the same. The literal translation is, "Heaven-Enlightener Sovereign-Great-God." This goddess, for it is a female deity, is believed by the Japanese to be the original ancestress of the nation. From her, in direct descent, is the line of the Imperial House, that line of Sacred Majesties who have held the throne in unbroken succession for ages eternal, and from her, in indirect or mixed descent, has sprung the nation as a whole. The Shinto gods, or Kami, who are only the apotheosized emperors and other notabilities of former ages are therefore also her offspring, and she is the great mother "of gods and men," at least of Japanese gods and men. Some, I believe, identify her with the sun, and her title of "Heaven-Enlightener" would agree very well with that view. The following legend would also seem to bear it out: "Now it came to pass, during the age of the gods, when they dwell upon the earth, that the younger brother of Amaterasu, whose manners and morals were most unbecoming, behaved with grievous rudeness to his elder sister, who in high dudgeon hid herself in a cave and refused to be propitiated. Thus the whole land was in darkness, to the consternation and affliction of all who dwelt thereon. At length, when all were in despair, a little circus or variety concert was extemporized in front of the cave, in the course of which a certain charming young goddess danced before the assembled gods and goddesses, even as the daughter of Herodias before Herod and his guests, and caused such merriment and won such applause that the sound thereof was heard even within the cave. Whereupon the feminine curiosity of the Sun-goddess prevailed over her indignation, and she peered forth to behold what might be the occasion of such mirth and clamor. Instantly an elder brother who was in readiness seized her hands and drew her forth from the cave, and a rope was stretched across its entrance to prevent her return. Thus the land had light again, and all who dwelt thereon rejoiced. And in the memory thereof is the straw rope hung at the caves of the dwellings of men at the great festival of the first moon. Howbeit, the younger brother was exiled to the island of Kyushu, where he delivered a fair maiden from a mighty dragon, and there his temple is unto this day. It will be seen from this that Amaterasu was 'only one of a large family. One must go back several generations of gods earlier, even to Izanagi-no-Mikoto and Izanami-no-Mikoto, for the original pair, the true original ancestor' of gods and men, but the gods before Amaterasu do not 'cut much ice' in Japanese worship, and practically Amaterasu fills that position. She is regarded as the Patroness and Protectress of the whole empire, and therefore is worshipped by all the people, and holds the first place in the national pantheon. Especially is she the Ancestress and Protectress of the Royal Family. Her chief temple at Isé, special sanctuary

of the imperial household. Every 20 years this temple, which dates back to the misty past, and which enshrines the most sacred heir-loom of the royal line, is taken down, and rebuilt in exactly the same style and proportions of the finest woods from the imperial forests in Shinshu, another name for Shinano. Part of this temple was destroyed by fire this spring, and the calamity was as much taken to heart by their magistrates as the destruction of Westminster Abbey would be by the people of England. Well, Amaterasu has her chief seat there, and every year in the 10th moon,—October—she holds a grand *duébar* or conference of all the Shinto gods. This month is accordingly termed *kaminashi-tsuki*, "the no-god moon," and it is useless then to spend time in prayer and worship. Only the god Kompica, who has his chief temple in the land of Sanuki, is not admitted to this *duébar* at Isé, because in the days when he was in the flesh, after he had abdicated the throne, he opposed the succeeding emperor, and was banished to Sanuki. Accordingly the 10th moon is the time for the festivals of the famous god Kompica. Of course the Buddhist and Chinese gods are still on duty during this month.

The temples of Isé, as the chief seat of the chief deity, are considered peculiarly sacred. "In 1887 Mori Seizōri, one of the most advanced Japanese new-lights, then minister of state for education, went on a certain occasion to the Shrines of Isé, and studiously treated them with disrespect. It was alleged, and apparently on good authority, that he trod with his boots on the mat outside the portal of the palisade, and then poked the curtain apart with his walking-stick. He was assassinated in consequence; the assassin was cut down by the guards, and then Japan rose in a body to do honor, not to the murdered man, but to his murderer. Even the muffled press managed to hint on which side it was, by some as curious editorials as were ever penned. As for the people, there were no two ways about it; you had thought the murderer some great patriot dying for his country. Folk by thousands flocked with flowers to his grave, and pilgrimages were made to it, as to some shrine. It is still kept green; still today the singing-girls bring their branches of plum blossoms, with a prayer to the gods that a little of the spirit of him who lies buried there may become theirs: that spirit which they call so proudly the Yamato Kokou, the heart of old Japan."

While the chief temple of Amaterasu is at Isé, there are many of less importance in all parts of the land. That in Omachi is very small. It stands beside a narrow alley, back from the road, just opposite the house of one of the Christians. In a small enclosure, surrounded by a high paling fence, is a plain wooden building, perhaps 10 feet square, and 10 or 12 feet in height. Her temples are I believe always small and unpretending, and placed in secluded spots. In addition to these out-door temples are the shrines sacred to her on the god-shelf, whether we must now return. The household worship consists in placing on the shelf before her shrine, a small quantity of *saké*—rice brandy, the national beverage, a light, usually a small wick burning in a saucer of rape-seed oil,—and leaves of the Sakaki. These in the case of the very devout are offered each morning, but the less zealous are content to observe this duty on the 1st, 15th and 28th of each month, the sabbaths of Shinto. The offerings are made usually by a servant, but after they have been presented the head of the house offers his prayer for the welfare of his family, the increase of his posterity, and the peace of the land at large. The rice and *saké*, after being left a while for the deity to inhale their essence, are removed and eaten, when it is noticed, as a proof that they have been accepted, that their taste has sensibly deteriorated.

In one of the smaller shrines on the god-shelf, flanking that of Amaterasu, is the *fuda* of the second in importance of the Shinto pantheon, Ichi-no-Miya, the patron deity of the province, for each province has its special god, chief of the gods resident therein, as the Ichi-no-Miya indicate. These provincial chief gods are usually deified members of the royal line, of a past age, or other great men who have been promoted to the rank of the Kami. Such an one becomes the Ichi-no-Miya of a certain province, by virtue of having lived therein, performed certain exploits on its behalf, or allowed his august bones to be interred in its soil. The people of the province may elect him to his high position, but it is from the Emperor he must receive his rank, and his election confirmed. The Emperor, by the way, is himself a deity, and while on the throne is the head of all the deities, as well as of the nation of corporeal men. Perhaps Amaterasu, as the Mother of the Gods, and Jimmu Tenno, as the first of the line of emperors, should be considered as apart, and as of equal or greater rank, but with those exceptions the Mikado is at the head of the pantheon. He alone, of all mortals, save the priests, may enter the most holy place in the temple of Isé. It is within his power, if sufficient reason be forthcoming, to deprive one god of his rank, and bestow it upon another more deserving. For example, a certain Ashikaga managed to get the better of his rival, Kusunoki, a faithful vassal of the crown, and usurp a high position, as Shogun perhaps, which remained in his family for 13 generations. He became a Kami of course, after death, and had a fine temple at Kyoto, and an image. But in the 13th generation the fortunes of his family turned, and not only was their power taken away, but Ashikaga, after having enjoyed the rank of a god for 13 generations, was degraded by command of the Emperor, and his image and temple destroyed, a temple to the faithful Kusunoki, who had dropped all this time in obscurity, being erected instead, at the Minotagawa.

The patron god, or Ichi-no-Miya, of Shinshu, and therefore the one worshipped at Omachi, is called Suwa Myojin. Suwa is the name of a lake in the province, and a town beside it. Here is the chief temple of this god, and from it he gets the first part of his name. The latter part, Myo-Jin, means, to guide by the Chinese characters, the shining God or, the illuminating God. He is of the imperial lineage, but when he flourished, or what was his name when in mortal form, or what led to his adoption as the head Shinto god of this province, I have not been able to learn. Probably he performed deeds of martial prowess, for he is worshipped as a god of war, and while the Chino-Japanese war was in progress his temple at Suwa was a place of much resort, especially for those whose friends were in the army. Two festivals are held yearly in his honor, spring and fall, at which times Suwa is doubtless thronged with worshippers. At Omachi these festival days are only observed in a

moderate degree this god in the commonly credited. For instance it celebration of the at Suwa, there a superhuman age. Until this number proceed. It was heads are seen of the priests re the heads are re unusual amount time. It is said in the winter, it the god has ind are. He does n rivers and harb effective fash issues from the whether because he has I cannot say, gl ing an unmistak of safety lies. than Myo-jin hi Snakes and di religion. In H a temple to Ha worshipped in J over the entran Dragon." At o of this province serpent which r rice. This he human observ the spirit or e substance to the sects. It is told saint Nichiren, serpent in a ca just north of Sh exiled to the isla Echigo, walked serpent came fo intoning of the which thencefo servitor. Now daughter of an the sacred book his original form close by Nichir from his lips, were much dis priests are swor had taken very sex, whom all exhorted to leav and some other. But Nichiren v one day when a woman sitting incantation ch before whom a scandal was sile Nichiren and th temple unto th Echigo, unto th

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