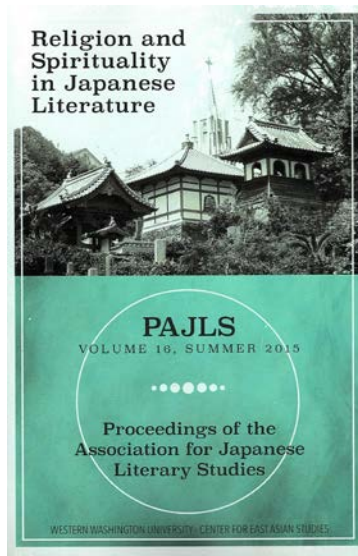


“Furui Yoshikichi’s *Hijiri*: Spiritual Traditions Engulfed by Modernity”

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***Furui Yoshikichi's Hijiri:  
Spiritual Traditions Engulfed by Modernity***

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In his 1975 novel, *Hijiri*, Furui Yoshikichi transposes the traditional figure of the *hijiri* or holy man into a modern secular setting. He covers a range of issues relating to traditional views of death and mediation of the passage to the afterlife, all of which benefit from investigation in relation to their liminal characteristics.

The *hijiri* of tradition were men of lowly status who travelled from village to village raising funds for temples and other such projects. They often fulfilled a religious function in the communities they passed through. Their activities often included religious services such as preaching, divination and exorcism. These itinerants ranged from men who took the religious life seriously and may even have lived ascetic lives as hermits, to those who were in reality no more than charlatans and criminals. As travellers, they were clearly outsiders to be tolerated only at the very margins of village society. In addition, their duties in connection with the dead were a source of pollution, an additional ground for marginalisation.

In Furui's *Hijiri*, a young mountain climber from Tokyo, a 24-year-old student, who as the novel's narrator refers to himself only as "I," *watashi*, is forced by the weather and a sprained ankle to shelter overnight in an abandoned hut on the outskirts of a village at the foot of the mountains. After discovering that the hut is actually attached to a small temple dedicated to the bodhisattva Jizō, he tries to get some rest despite the cold, wet and hunger he is feeling. With the beginnings of a fever and plagued by headache and the pain in his leg, his sleep is restless and broken, and he wakes several times during the night.

In the middle of the night the Jizō faces were lit by a faint light and looked down at me as one. As I was still thinking that, compared with the daytime, their facial features had become livelier, they disappeared again into the darkness. ...

After a while, I opened my eyes again. I felt a strong pressure in my groin. Again the six Jizō faces hung in the air and looked directly down at me. Then they disappeared, as if they had been carried away in the direction of my feet. The same thing was repeated several times. The dim light was obviously coming through the screens. At first there was just a hint of light, then enough

to suddenly make the six faces clearly visible, and then the rays glided diagonally downwards, becoming slowly fainter. It must have been the lights of a car in the distance. ... The Jizō were indeed looking at me. In the daylight it had looked as if they had been carelessly erected and had been more or less set up facing the front. In reality, however, there seemed to be a very subtle arrangement. One in which the gazes of the six statues did not focus on the person worshiping in front of the screens, but on the area of the chest to the lower body of the person sleeping before them. Someone had set it up quite deliberately in such a way. Some other man had slept here alone from time to time. I felt this in a strangely direct physical way.<sup>1</sup>

This physicality is symbolised by the fact that he feels sexually aroused, coupled with an indeterminate sense of foreboding, of anxiety. The fascination and undercurrent of insecurity are epitomised by the ambiguity of the expressions of the Jizō statues. As with a static Noh mask, the expression of emotion is dependent on the angle of vision and light quality in which it is seen.

Waking again late the next morning with the sun already high, the student crosses the suspension bridge over the nearby stream to fetch water, where his impression of the previous day that a skull is lying in the water is confirmed. Catching sight of a beautiful young woman coming towards him, he tries to avoid her by doubling back through the long grass to the bridge and rushing to the hut to hide. His jacket, left forgotten at the entrance to the hut, gives him away and he is questioned by the woman, Sae, herself recently returned to the village from several years spent in Tokyo.

She asks him to stay on a couple of days longer.

“In this village, why?”

“No, here in the hut. My grandmother is dying.”

“I’m not a medical student!”

“She’ll be dead in two or three days.”

“So, what do you want of me?”

“You only need to stay in this hut. It’s enough if you’re seen mornings and evenings from the upstairs window of my house. If you’re bored, during the day you can climb in the mountains or visit the town. I’ll give you money, I’ll bring you food and sake, too. Look at it as rescuing someone. I implore you – it’s for the afterlife!”<sup>2</sup>

Sae’s impassioned entreaties arouse the young man, and he asks more

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<sup>1</sup> Furui Yoshikichi, *Hijiri*. In *Furui Yoshikichi sakuhin V* (Tokyo: Kawade shobō, 1983): 10-11.

<sup>2</sup> Furui (1983): 16.

about the reasons for her request.

“Grandmother saw you from the window of the weaving room upstairs. Sometimes she crawls as far as the window.”

“And then what...”

“She began to shriek ‘The holy man has come’ and didn’t take any notice of us. She can’t tell the difference between the past and now any more.”

“A ‘holy man’ – isn’t that a monk who follows ascetic practices?”

“No, just a normal beggar, a tramp. Well, he would have learnt to read one sutra.”

I was shocked at how derogatory the woman’s tone had suddenly become, and without thinking I assumed a defensive posture. The previous night in the little temple came to mind. I’d had the feeling that someone must have lived here in the past.

“He lived here in the hut, right?”

“It was more than ten years ago, the last one.”

“The last one – that means there have been many over the years...?”

“Everyone who settled here disappeared from the village again after about fifteen years. And until the next one happened along, the hut was empty for a few years. This was the time when you couldn’t die, even if you wanted to – that’s what grandmother says.”

“What did he have to do, this beggar?”

“Usually look after the Jizō and the graves.”

“So he was supplied with food? But why was he called ‘holy man’? What else did he have to do?”

“Everyone who died was taken care of.”

“But that’s the duty of the priest!”

“The care after that.”

“After...?”

“Right at the end they came down the hill, along this path, and were carried by the holy man past the Jizō, then across the suspension bridge. I saw it myself as a child.”<sup>3</sup>

Although he has strong and indefinable misgivings about staying, and an unmistakable warning from Sae that “Tramps who force themselves on the village women are killed,” his sexual arousal leads him to attempt to overpower her, which she is able to ward off by wielding a stick. In the aftermath of the struggle, they do, in fact have sex. Thus, he is persuaded into staying on by Sae, whose aim is to enlist him as an *ersatz* “holy man” or *hijiri*, so that her ailing grandmother can die with peace of mind, knowing that the age-old tradition of the corpse being carried across the river to the “other side” can be honoured.

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<sup>3</sup> Furui (1983): 16-17.

In the past, the task of burying the dead of the village had fallen to a succession of men who were generically known as the *saemon-hijiri*. Referred to as *saemon* under normal circumstances, such a man was simply a beggar who lived in the small hut adjoining the small Jizō temple and went around the village begging for food. However, whenever a death occurred in the village, he was transformed into the *hijiri*, or “holy man,” who was responsible for carrying the corpse to the burial ground on the other side of the river, and burying it.

The old woman has caught sight of the young man shut up inside the temple and her memories of the *saemon-hijiri* are rekindled. The reader learns of past happenings in the village through Sae’s recounting of her grandmother’s tales. Thus the young man remains resident in the hut, with food and alcohol brought to him regularly by Sae, and in him, the *saemon-hijiri* tradition temporarily comes to life once more. Of course, this *saemon-hijiri* is not authentic, but a convenient fiction. While waiting for the grandmother to fully accept the return of the holy man and allow herself to die, a relationship of sorts begins to develop between the young man, “I,” and the young woman, Sae.

In earlier times, the recurrent framework of events came to a close when the *saemon-hijiri* overstepped the boundary of what was expected of him. Young women of the village were often fascinated by his “otherness,” and one thing led to another. In the short term or the long, pregnancy was the inevitable outcome, and thus marked the beginning of the end of that particular *saemon*’s presence in the village. When the young woman gave birth, she and the child, as well as the *saemon*, were considered polluted beings and driven away. Seen as a polluting presence from the time of his arrival, the *saemon* was tolerated for the sake of the essential services he rendered, so long as the potential for defilement was not blatantly manifested. The birth of a child, physical evidence of pollution from outside, necessitated the removal of the sources of pollution – the *saemon*, the mother and the child – in order for the village community to continue as if nothing had happened to unsettle the status quo. Traditionally, when the *saemon* begins to cultivate his own crops, he comes too close to being an insider, and therefore of no use to the villagers, who need an outsider to take care of the unclean tasks of burial.

The similarity of the names of the young woman, Sae, and the dual personae inherent in the role assumed by the young man, *saemon* and *saemon-hijiri*, are indicative of the ambiguous and symbolic nature of these

characters. In particular the identities which the young man has taken on in assuming his new role overlap and blend apparently seamlessly into one another. This blending of archetypal characters and modern day individuals heightens the reader's confusion and sense of being a party to something outside the ordinary, with connection to something outside the rational world of modernity he is accustomed to.

The mountain climber-cum-holy man represents the power and uncertainty inherent in the outsider. His function is as a mediator between this world and the next, represented by the spatial distance of the bridge across the river, linking the village and the burial ground. Previous holy men had ambiguous roles, arriving as tramps or outcastes, and gradually transformed as the need – the frequency of deaths – arises, into holy men capable of ensuring the safe transition of the deceased into the other world. These men were truly marginal, existing in a liminal state, both physically and metaphorically.

There is a clear distinction between behaviour which is acceptable from the *hijiri* and forbidden to the *saemon*, and vice versa. Spatial limitations are also made. The *hijiri* was forbidden to enter the village, and if he did, he was driven off with sticks. Only the young woman from the afflicted home was permitted to supply food and drink to the *saemon* in a symbolic indication that the presence of his alter-ego, the *hijiri*, was required. Again, no one but the *hijiri*, and of course the deceased, was allowed to cross the suspension bridge to the graveyard on the far side of the river.

The references in the novel *Hijiri* to the culture of death and the spirituality surrounding it, both Buddhist and from earlier animist traditions, are numerous. So too are the images which continually appear. As he approaches the river, the young man is initially surprised to see a skull, washed into the river by a landslide. When he later asks Sae about this, she explains that the tradition of burial rather than cremation lingered on in this valley long after it had disappeared in other areas. It was still a custom within living memory.

“They're graves.”

“Oh, right - from long ago.”

“No, right up to when I was a child.”

“Graves of people without relatives, or those who died on the road, perhaps?”

“They're the village graves. Everyone from the village goes there.”

“Cremation...”

“It was burial.”

“And a temple?”

“It has nothing to do with a temple!”

“Why not?”

“What do you mean, why not? It’s the custom here.”

“But isn’t it awful to let them decay like that?”

“It’s been like that here, since long ago.”<sup>4</sup>

Furui goes on to describe the reasons behind the young man’s macabre find.

There had been a temple in the village since time immemorial, with a priest; and a substantial cemetery to go with it. But by no means had the graves on the other side of the river been relocated there. The village therefore had two cemeteries. The corpses were buried in the cemetery on the other side of the river; it was known simply as “across the river.” There were no gravestones over there and apart from the holy man Saemon, no one dared to cross the suspension bridge and set foot there. The coffin was first brought from the village by the shortest possible route, carried around the village and down a gentle incline near Sae’s house, and placed in front of the temple. The men called out in loud voices, “Holy man, holy man!” and ran away without once looking back. After a while the drunken holy man appeared, staggering and chanting a sutra.<sup>5</sup>

The village burial practices correspond with what anthropologists call the “double-grave system” (*ryō-bosei*), whereby each individual has two graves: the “burial grave” (*umebaka* or *sutebaka*), where the physical remains are buried, and the “ritual grave” (*mairihaka* or *matsurihaka*), marked by a gravestone in a different location, usually in easily accessible temple environs.<sup>6</sup>

In the village in question in *Hijiri*, the family members do not visit the burial grave, preferring to leave everything to the holy man. Such a practice represents less of a threat or source of pollution for the family, and the relative safety of the physical location of the ritual grave as opposed to the burial grave is symbolic of the spiritual safety it represents for the family.

This dual system provides the villagers with the surety that the corpse has been correctly disposed of, by a “professional” in a quasi-religious ceremony, and in a way that allows them to avoid much of the pollution involved. In addition, they can continue to pay their respects in the unthreatening and pure

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<sup>4</sup> Furui (1983): 15.

<sup>5</sup> Furui (1983): 22-23.

<sup>6</sup> Matsuda (1993): 43.

surroundings of the Buddhist temple in the heart of the village. The temple and its priest conform with the accepted system of religious order, whereas the holy man's behaviour is unpredictable and uncontrollable.

The young man's initial reaction is one of revulsion, reflecting the modern urban perception of burial as opposed to cremation. For the grandmother, on the other hand, the thought of anything other than a traditional burial, in particular the idea of cremation, is repulsive. For those who have lived in this village all their lives, the maintenance of custom is essential, despite the difficulties of carrying it out in the present day, in a society which has moved on and is generally disapproving towards such practices. "Grandmother says she can't die if she's going to be burned to ashes with petrol."<sup>7</sup>

Sae had also felt revulsion when she first heard of the old practices from her grandmother. The juxtaposition of modern and traditional perceptions of death is evident when Sae recalls the evening her grandmother first talked about the graves over the river and the role of *saemon*. "I want to die and I can't," were the grandmother's words.<sup>8</sup> Sae's reaction was one of shock and outrage, but she eventually acquiesced to her grandmother's wishes.

That there had been such a custom in her village was something that Sae found simply revolting and shocking. "I won't let you go to such a place, Grandmother!"...But the old woman replied in an angry bitter voice: "A crematorium is awful! When the iron door closes, and inside the hissing and spitting rings out – oh no, I don't want that. I want to slowly become earth, and when I've become earth, I'll be washed downstream by the river. And the holy man will take care of everything."<sup>9</sup>

The advent of World War II and the military authorities' disapproval of what was seen as the undignified burial of fallen heroes is given as the reason why the custom actually changed. The change was one artificially imposed from outside, ordered by a military hierarchy which pretended to know how best to honour the souls of the fallen sons of the village. The modern system of efficient, non-contaminating disposal of the remains of the dead would take over from the traditional system which guarded against the possibility of pollution for those who remained. The rational had triumphed over the spiritual and irrational. With

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<sup>7</sup> Furui (1983): 17.

<sup>8</sup> Furui (1983): 34.

<sup>9</sup> Furui (1983): 34-35.



this, the services of the *hijiri* were no longer required, except for the occasional death. His disappearance from the village went unnoticed and unregretted. (Later we find out that the first harbingers of change had come with an act of protest by one family against the seduction of their daughter by the *saemon*.) Smith notes that cremation has only become widespread in relatively recent times.<sup>10</sup>

Both the name of the young woman, Sae, and the persona Saemon are closely connected to the Sai-no-kami, or in an alternative pronunciation, Sae-no-kami, the Shinto deity of the boundary. According to Maeda Ae, “It is no coincidence that the name *Sae* is connected to the *sae* of *saemon-hijiri*. It is a name which is related to the *Sae-no-kami* (*dōsōjin*) which is worshipped at boundaries such as village borders, mountain passes, bridges and slopes.”<sup>11</sup> By its very location on the boundary, the concept *sae* and its various connotations with both the young woman and the role of the facilitator for the dead reaching the other side is clearly a liminal entity. Ohnuki-Tierney draws attention to further liminal attributes of the deity associated with transitional spaces and sexuality.

This deity, always represented by a large rock, is believed to stop evil spirits and devils at a crossroad; hence the term *sai*, whose original meaning is “to block.” ...[O]ver time its symbolic meaning also has become associated with male and female sexual organs – the body parts that form both the boundary line and the meeting place between the two sexes. ... [T]he deity has become closely associated with matters of reproduction, having the power to oversee marriage, fertility, pregnancy, and childbirth, as well as to heal illnesses of the sexual organs. In particular, it has become the guardian deity of children.<sup>12</sup>

Marilyn Ivy offers another etymological derivation, originating from the place *Saiin* on the western border of Kyoto. Since dry riverbeds often delineated village outskirts, the term *Saiin no kawara* (dry riverbed on the western outskirts) metamorphosed into *sai*, meaning difference.<sup>13</sup> Whatever its origins, the close association of the term *sae* and its cognate *sai* with the spatial liminality of the boundary is unmistakable.

The identification of the *Sae-no-kami* as the guardian deity of children leads to a further interesting and relevant link which is of importance in *Hijiri*: that of the figure in the Buddhist pantheon most often associated with relieving

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<sup>10</sup> Smith (1974): 76.

<sup>11</sup> Maeda (1986): 421.

<sup>12</sup> Ohnuki-Tierney (1984): 163.

<sup>13</sup> Ivy (1995): 156.

the suffering of dead children, Jizō.

Originally worshipped as part of the esoteric Shingon belief, Jizō was venerated deep in the mountains. He came to be conflated with the fearsome judge of dead souls, Enma, and from this arose the belief that Jizō could save one from the torments of hell. Further Buddhist connections associated Jizō with rebirth. Full of compassion, Jizō would emerge from the mountain depths to burial or funeral sites to aid in the reincarnation of the dead. Such sites were located outside the settlement boundaries, and once again a further association was added to the already symbolically laden figure of Jizō – that of a deity of the border, between worlds, as a “mediator who can cross the line between life and death.”<sup>14</sup>

The concept of the dry riverbed, *kawara*, plays an even more pivotal and complex function in *Hijiri*. Its symbolic value is not only as the border separating this world from the next, but as the locus where the bodhisattva Jizō intervenes to alleviate the suffering of those striving to cross into the next world. The tradition has a folkloric origin, which lent itself to an association with the Buddhist concept of the intervention of the bodhisattvas on behalf of those seeking rebirth in the Western Paradise. Ivy describes the resultant conflation of the folkloric and Buddhist elements thus:

In the commonly known Japanese narrative of Sainokawara, dead children pile up stones on this dry riverbed to make memorial stupas (*ekō no tō*), but at night demons (*oni*) from hell come and knock over their accumulated labors. In this scenario dead children are engaged in a Sisyphean labor, a cycle of meaningless accumulation and disaccumulation in a liminal wasteland, a place which is neither heaven nor hell, but is nevertheless a place for the dead. Into this infernal round Jizo intervenes. He walks over the riverbed at night and gathers the sobbing children under his sleeves, saving them from their torments.<sup>15</sup>

From the above discussion it can be seen that the figures of *Sae-no-kami*, *Jizō* and *dōsojin* have themselves over time become conflated and their delineation ambiguous and practically impossible to separate. They have accumulated a mass of symbolic meanings, both folkloric and religious. The role of Jizō developed through such conflation to one of complexity and multiplicity. The figure of the bodhisattva is itself a marginal one. One who attains

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<sup>14</sup> Ivy (1995): 157.

<sup>15</sup> Ivy (1995): 156.

enlightenment, but forgoes entry into Nirvana and the benefits of escape from the endless cycle of rebirth, the bodhisattva is caught on the threshold by his own volition, arising from his desire to help others who are suffering.

Thus the liminal stage of the dying process may be extended to include the period immediately following death itself – the stage of the “freshly dead.” Only through the rituals associated with the “freshly dead,” that is the funeral rituals, can the mourners pass on to the next, postliminal, clearly defined stage of their lives. Ohnuki-Tierney goes to explain the link between the “freshly dead” and the threat of pollution.

“The freshly dead” hover at the margin of culture and nature, the point at which the latter threatens the former. ... They are at the borderline between culture and nature, between the world of the ancestors and the world of the living, just as cultural germs are found at the marginal space that marks the borderline between culture and nature. Japanese culture is rich in its elaboration of this liminal period of death; there are several stages through which the freshly dead become the truly dead... Once the dead become truly dead, Japanese culture reintroduces them into the cultural universe.<sup>16</sup>

After death memorialisation rites (*kyūō*) are carried out with an “aim to pacify the dead by remembering them through offerings, prayers, and recitations of scripture.”<sup>17</sup>

In the days when there was still a *saemon*, the villagers were careful to follow the traditional customs to protect themselves from any possible threat of pollution, either from the wrath of the *saemon* himself, or from the spirits of the dead who may have felt themselves neglected and not accorded the proper mourning rites.

On the twenty-fourth of every month, the day of Jizō, and on the anniversary of the death the villagers came to the temple, brought offerings and thus supplied *saemon*. Apart from that, they came when they’d had a dream of the deceased that was too fresh and vivid. For the actual graveside visit, the villagers went rather to the normal village temple. They believed that this was where the souls of the dead came.<sup>18</sup>

Although the villagers perform their major memorialisation rites in the

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<sup>16</sup> Ohnuki-Tierney (1984): 70.

<sup>17</sup> Ivy (1995): 146.

<sup>18</sup> Furui (1983): 23.

safety of the Buddhist temple in the village, they still maintain, in what might even be seen as a parody, those same rites for the *saemon*, at least until the forty-nine day mourning period has elapsed. Safe is safe, as Marilyn Ivy concludes: "By correctly remembering the dead through these practices, the living hope to console them as well as to keep them from troubling this world."<sup>19</sup>

Almost inevitably, the beggar who found himself in the role of *saemon* settled down with time, cleared a patch of ground by the river and began to cultivate sweet potatoes and beans. His appearance was no longer so unkempt. He has moved from being a complete outsider, a wanderer, to being a member of the community, following an accepted occupation as a farmer, albeit still on the extreme margins of village society.<sup>20</sup> Any women who visited him were treated cruelly by the villagers. He was no longer so much an outcaste that he was beyond the pale and opportunities for sexual attraction to be consummated were more likely to present themselves. His relocation closer to the outer boundaries of society allowed those women also considered to be on the outer edges, usually those thought mentally disturbed, to give in to their sexual frustration and live out their attraction to the erotic power and exoticism of the outsider. When it was clear that the woman was pregnant, the *saemon* was beaten and driven into the river and away, in retribution for having misjudged the situation and overstepped the boundary of danger.

Sae tells of an extended period when no *saemon* was available to carry out the polluting duties associated with burial "across the river."

That was the time when you couldn't die for the world. ... Before, it was at most three years. Of course there were deaths in the meantime. No one wants to enter eternity if he won't be carried "across the river." So they made a second or third son, in any case a young man, be the holy man.<sup>21</sup>

The designated young man took on the role of the holy man and carried out the duties expected of him. "Afterwards, he remained in the hut for three nights in order to rid himself of the impurity."<sup>22</sup> As reward or consolation, he was offered a night with a young woman from the family of the deceased, but this was for form's sake only. The actual compensation was financial, and in addition, he

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<sup>19</sup> Ivy (1995):146.

<sup>20</sup> Furui (1983): 25.

<sup>21</sup> Furui (1983): 26.

<sup>22</sup> Furui (1983): 27.

was accompanied by an older, more experienced man to a brothel in town. Despite this, a certain frisson of scandal remained amid speculation that he had actually slept with the young women in accordance with the old custom. More recently they had chosen a young man of ability from a family lacking financial means, with the promise to send him to higher education, distant from the village. Some of these men had even reached positions of respect in Tokyo.<sup>23</sup>

Here we can see the complex entwined connections between danger and sexuality simultaneously present in the position of the outsider. The above practice allows for the successful resolution of conflicting premises. It was earlier noted that, even before it becomes clear that he will take on the *saemon* role, Sae warns the young man of the danger inherent in any form of sexual relationship between the *saemon* and village women. "Tramps who help themselves to the women of the village will be killed."<sup>24</sup> Obviously, it would be difficult to motivate a young village man to take on this role if the consequence is death. Yet a night with one of the young women of the village is precisely the incentive on offer. In order to resolve this apparent paradox, a compromise has evolved. Sexual liaison is still a component, but this is one step removed, having become a proxy arrangement involving a prostitute. Similarly, the threat of death is no longer that of physical death, but of the social death of exile and ostracism, however much more that may be made palatable by the prospect of education and attainment of social status elsewhere. The chosen young man enjoys the possibility of success in the modern urban world at the expense of the connection with his traditional village roots. The children fathered by a *saemon* were also taken care of. Often very good-looking children, there was no problem finding adoptive parents in the city. These children, too, seemed to find success and happiness in life. They are also exiled into the existence of an outsider, with all ties to their home or *furusato* having been completely severed.

Sae herself is in a transitional period. She has just broken up with her boyfriend, and had reached the point where she just couldn't continue her life in Tokyo. Her health suffered and she was persuaded to return to the village to recuperate physically and spiritually. Here she found herself forced by circumstances to take over the care of her seriously ill grandmother. She realises

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<sup>23</sup> Furui (1983): 27.

<sup>24</sup> Furui (1983): 20.

that once her grandmother dies she must leave again, having no more ties to keep her.

It is from the grandmother's stories that Sae learns the details of the *saemon*'s traditional role in the village. Just as the narrator "I" is eased into the role of mediator between this world and the next for the grandmother, the circumstances surrounding the necessity of achieving such an aim see Sae cast in the role of mediating the traditional village expectations and the communal history behind those traditions.

Resentment on the part of Sae's brother and sister-in-law grows. They fear Sae's influence with the old woman and suspect that she has already persuaded her to disinherit them in her own favour. In the heat of an argument, the sister-in-law blurts out: "We're the main family, and the eldest son is still the eldest son!" Sae's reply points to the sister-in-law's own marginal position as someone who has married into the family: "And what about you? You're nothing but a stranger!"<sup>25</sup> When Sae asks why such inhuman burial practices took place, her grandmother replies,

"What's inhuman about that? ...[I]sn't it more heartless to render someone to ashes all at once?" Those left behind didn't forget the dead until they had completely become earth. That had nothing to do with what the monks at the temple say, the "seven times seven days" or the such-and-such anniversary of death. Every time they dug the soil in the field, they remembered. Every time when they collected water. Every time they went to bed and drew up their arms and legs, they remembered.<sup>26</sup>

In order to make the best use of the limited amount of arable land, and for the benefit of the community, the cemetery is located on a small patch of land across the river. The area is so limited that once it is filled with graves, interment begins all over again, beginning with the oldest graves. Thus eventually with the passing of time, the earth has become a receptacle for myriad remains, all in different stages of decomposition, and none identifiable as individuals. This is communal burial for the good of the community. Occasionally, with heavy rain, the cemetery is disturbed by landslide and remains are swept into the river. This is what the student had observed on the day of his arrival at the hut. Despite his reluctance and misgivings, he finds himself entering the persona of the *saemon*.

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<sup>25</sup> Furui (1983): 34.

<sup>26</sup> Furui (1983): 37.

However, I suddenly realised that I'd unconsciously begun to play the role. I put the sake bottle down carefully to the side, sat down properly, brought my hands together in my lap, closed my eyelids to slits and rolled my eyes from time to time. It looked as if at any moment I'd reach out for the rosary, bow to the lattice and recite the sutras I'd never learnt in a loud voice. My hand had already begun to reach out towards the rosary, but I quickly held it tightly pressed against my stomach. I rolled myself up tightly and laughed in a sombre voice "It was only a joke, just a joke!"<sup>27</sup>

Now there is nothing to do but wait for the grandmother's life to end. He begins to pack his belongings in preparation for leaving as soon as Sae brings him the news. His role is limited to his presence, any further traditional duties of the *hijiri* are out of the question.

After fulfilling what he sees as his role as holy man, and without waiting for the grandmother's death, the student decides to leave. In the temporal liminality of dawn, he sets off through the vivid dawn light. "And so I changed back into the mountain climber who had come past the small temple in the evening five days ago."<sup>28</sup> But he'd forgotten to leave the grandmother's bankbook for Sae, and spurred on by the image of her sitting reading his note in front of the breakfast she'd brought him and the remembrance of her breath on his ear, he returns to the hut. He is told that the grandmother had spoken of him in her delirium, and still recognises his face. Once again he is constrained to extend his stay. This time he follows Sae's orders to mow the grass on the approaches to the bridge, in accordance with the customary duties of the *hijiri*.

Several days later he sets off once more to return home. Again this occurs at a liminal time – midnight. But ominous signs are present. "Only as the small stones began to roll and clatter did I experience this omen in an immediate physical way."<sup>29</sup> The movement of rocks and mud are reminiscent of the imagery of the student's struggle to survive the threat of mountain landslides before he reaches the relative safety of the hut.

Now, as he leaves the hut, he sees a large landslide which has covered the whole graveyard on the far side of the river, and is moving toward the bank on this side, causing the water behind to dam up and cover the fields. He runs on into the village, but as he looks back:

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<sup>27</sup> Furui (1983): 82.

<sup>28</sup> Furui (1983): 86.

<sup>29</sup> Furui (1983): 94.

The cemetery on the other bank lay buried under mud and scree, the suspension bridge hung at an angle, slanting and twisted, and only the small temple and the hut were untouched. There they stood, with offerings in front of the wooden lattice and opened shutters, in the middle of the glittering surface of the water.

It seemed to me that I was awake and dreaming a dream that the many *saemon* who were united with the women of the village had over and over again, and I felt a shudder of horror down my spine.<sup>30</sup>

The traditions of the village are effectively buried beneath a landslide of modernity. The student endeavours to explain the sensation he feels as he looks back, both literally and figuratively, on the events of the past few days. His experience defies expression and he resorts to the use of paradox, of being simultaneously awake and dreaming, and the imagery of union, in this case referring to the sexual union of previous itinerants with village girls. He is but the latest in a long line of such men, and his role is now over.

*Hijiri*'s protagonists occupy a marginal status. The student is outside the confines of village life. Sae, as a returnee from Tokyo, is on the margins of her family. The *saemon* is a marginal itinerant, by definition outside society, and his parallel persona, the *hijiri*, is marginalised because he assumed the polluting tasks of disposing of bodies.

The protagonists also have a mediating function. Sae mediates between her grandmother's traditional expectations and the student "I" to communicate "communal memory and will."<sup>31</sup> The student-*hijiri*'s mediation role is a practical one, that of ensuring the safe passage of the soul of the deceased into the next world.

Furui relocates the traditional *hijiri* figure into modernity, but the change does nothing to diminish the power and danger inherent in the role of the outsider he portrays. However, the final destruction of the traditional burial ground across the river represents the demise of old local customs, leaving only the temple and hut above the flood waters as symbols of what has been lost.

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<sup>30</sup> Furui (1983): 95.

<sup>31</sup> Maeda (1986): 421.



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