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Title: The Watchful Gaze of the Dead

Abstract:

Without scientific knowledge, the people of pre-modern societies in Japan, as elsewhere, tried to understand and come to terms with the occurrence of natural disasters through their association with the actions of transcendent beings (kami). In ancient Japan, natural disasters were interpreted as messages, that is, vengeful curses, from the kami. With the establishment of a systematic cosmology which came with the broad reception of Buddhism during the middle ages, the causes of catastrophes came to be explained in terms of the law of cause and effect according to which punishment and salvation were delivered by transcendent beings (hotoke).

With the onset of the early modern period, the sense of reality inherent in perceptions of the presence of those fundamental beings declined, and the salvation of the dead could no longer be entrusted to the system provided by the otherworldly god. For this reason, people came to terms with catastrophes as natural disasters that must be faced. Rituals and customs, carried out over long periods, were put in place to raise the unfortunate dead to the status of ancestral spirits as kami.

In addition to a shift from the traditional world in which the living, kami and the dead coexisted toward a shutting out of the latter group, the process of “modernization” brought with it a restructuring of society around the exclusive rights and interests of human beings. The experience of the 3.11 disaster and Fukushima Accident has been an opportunity to reconsider the path ahead, and to reconsider responses to catastrophe which display the modern tendency to focus on the concerns of the living to the exclusion of those of the dead.