

The Giō Story of *The Historic Romance of the Taira Family* and its circumstances

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(1) The Giō (祇王) story of *The Historic Romance of the Taira Family* (*Heikemonogatari* 『平家物語』) originated in connection with a class of women called “Shirabyōshi” (白拍子) who were harlots and shamans who performed a religious practice called “the permeation of Nembutsu” (Yūzūnembutsu 融通念仏).

(2) This refers to the practice where a Shirabyōshi participates in the permeation of Nembutsu for the purpose of creating a connection to attain Buddhahood. Therein she puts performing skills to work by leading the chorus of the Nembutsu.

(3) The term “Shirabyōshi” refers to a female entertainer, the acting performed by her, and the scenario in which she performed. Moreover, as a female entertainer the Shirabyōshi fulfilled the role of a sibyl (Miko 巫女).

(4) The nucleus the plot and the content of the Giō story is based on a ballad (Imayō 今様) recited by Giō: “Even the Buddha was at one time an ordinary person. We too will, in time, become a Buddha. It’s just a pity that we don’t know we all have a body endowed with Buddha-nature.” In other words, the Giō story expressed concretely the Tendai Buddhist concept of “original enlightenment” (Hongaku 本覚). The ballad says that “we too”, who are only “ordinary persons” called Shirabyōshi, “will, in time, become

a Buddha ” because “ we all have a body endowed with Buddha-nature. ” The Giō story offers, then, in my opinion, a fleshing out of the thought expressed in the ballad.

(5) “ The permeation of Nembutsu ” contained all the ideas found in the Giō story, such as the concept of “ original enlightenment ” and the emphasis on the relationship of the Nembutsu practitioners.

(6) The basic idea of the Giō story, that the deity called “ Gi ” (祇) is saved by an encounter with the Buddha, is derived from the permeation of Nembutsu. It is closely related to a story “ which tells of the original relationship of the Buddha with deities. ” The story might have been “ composed in Shirabyōshi ”, as a number performed by the Shirabyōshi.

(7) The Giō story bears the strong flavor of popular entertainment, though it is really a story relating birth in the Buddha-field through the practice of Nembutsu. We should understand that the germ of the story lay in the relationship between the Shirabyōshi and the practice of the permeation of Nembutsu.

(8) The characteristic of combining entertainment and the permeation of Nembutsu, for instance, the emphasis on the relationships amongst the practitioners of Nembutsu, etc., can be found more clearly in the chapter of “ Giō-Ginyo ” (義王義女事) of *The Selected Legends of the Taira Family* (*Heikezokudenshō* 『平家族伝抄』).