

# Japan's Ministry of Magic

## A Short History of the Onmyōryō

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日本の「魔法省」

陰陽寮の小史

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### Abstract

陰陽寮は、7世紀の設立から19世紀の廃止まで、日本の歴史において重要な役割を果たしてきた。天皇や国民に吉兆な時期や日付を助言し、怨霊・崇神を鎮め、將軍職を争う者たちに超自然的な支援を与えるなど、多岐にわたる活動を行ってきた。現在では日本の政府の公式な一部を構成していなくても、安倍晴明をはじめとする歴史や伝説に登場する陰陽師の物語は、今日に至るまで日本人の想像を魅了し続けている。

## 1. Introduction

“Ministry of Magic.” The phrase conjures up images from the world of *Harry Potter*: a secret but essential agency, underground in every sense of the word, where clerks of conjuring and secretaries of sorcery arrived in a flash of green flame to report to their black-marble offices. Japan's equivalent, the *Onmyōryō* (陰陽寮), might not have looked as impressive as the set of a Hollywood blockbuster, but it was real. While the rulers of many countries throughout history have counted diviners among their closest advisors, Japan appears to be the only country ever to have had an official government agency, complete with offices and a bureaucratic hierarchy, dedicated to the magical arts.

The history of the *Onmyōryō*, apart from a few notable figures such as Abe no Seimei, is not commonly known even in Japan, and virtually unknown elsewhere. While volumes have

been written in Japanese about the history of magic (before, during, and after the life of Seimei), studies on the subject in English are practically nonexistent. This paper is intended as a step toward making this fascinating aspect of Japanese culture accessible to English-language readers. While a complete chronicle of the 1200-year history of Japan's Ministry of Magic would merit its own section in a magical library, this paper will at least provide a general overview within seven yards of parchment.

## 2. Onmyōdō: The Way of Light and Shadow

The single English word “magic” covers a variety of words in Japanese:

- *Jujutsu* (呪術): Evocation, calling upon gods or spirits to exercise power over nature
- *Genjutsu* (幻術): Illusion, the technique of misleading the senses
- *Yōjutsu* (妖術): Witchcraft, the technique of bewitching or cursing a person
- *Kidō* (鬼道): Shamanism, sorcery invoking demons or other spirits
- *Mahō* (魔法): Usually used to translate “magic” in stories from other countries
- *Tejina* (手品): Sleight of hand, stage magic

The one best suited to the present purpose, however, is *onmyōdō* (陰陽道), which could be translated as “the Way of Light and Shadow.” Practitioners are called *onmyōji* (陰陽師), and the agency where they worked was called the *onmyōryō* (陰陽寮). In each of these, the first two characters are better known in the West by their Chinese pronunciation, Yin-Yang.

Onmyōdō is a system of magic and divination, originally from China and adapted for Japan. The basis of it is the Yin-Yang Five Elements System (*onmyō gogyō setsu* 陰陽五行説), a fusion of two systems developed independently in China during the Spring and Autumn Period (8<sup>th</sup>-3<sup>rd</sup> centuries BCE). According to this system, everything in the world is a combination of the five elements (wood, fire, earth, metal, and water) and the two forms of energy: Yang (associated with the day, growth and activity, and the masculine) and Yin (associated with the night, rest and replenishment, and the feminine). Each of the five elements is associated with one or the other type of energy, as well as a color, a direction, a season, a time of day, and one of the five cardinal Confucian virtues (Figure 1).

Figure 1: The Yin-Yang Five Elements System

### Wood (Yang)

Color: Blue  
Direction: East  
Season: Spring  
Time: Morning  
Virtue: Compassion

### Water (Yin)

Color: Black  
Direction: North  
Season: Winter  
Time: Night  
Virtue: Knowledge

### Metal (Yin)

Color: White  
Direction: West  
Season: Autumn  
Time: Evening  
Virtue: Righteousness



### Fire (Yang)

Color: Red  
Direction: South  
Season: Summer  
Time: Daytime  
Virtue: Courtesy

### Earth (Neither)

Color: Yellow  
Direction: Center  
Season: Changing of seasons  
Time: Noon  
Virtue: Faith

The Yin-Yang Five Elements System was imported from China into Japan, via the Baekje Kingdom in present-day Korea, in the sixth and seventh centuries, mainly by scholars and Buddhist monks on international exchanges. One significant figure was Duan Yang-er (段楊爾, dates unknown, referred to in Japanese as Dan Yōni), who introduced the Five Chinese Classics to Japan when he visited in 513<sup>\*1</sup>. Another was the Korean monk Gwalleuk (觀勒, dates unknown, referred to in Japanese as Kanroku), who brought texts to Japan relating to the Chinese astrological system known as Qimen Dujia (奇門遁甲方術, known in Japanese as *Tonkō Hōjutsu*) in 602. Onmyōdō flourished in private practice, but it would only be later in the century that it became established as part of the imperial government.

### 3. Emperor Temmu and the Establishment of the Onmyōryō

The Onmyōryō was first established in 675 CE<sup>\*2</sup>, three years after the death of Emperor Tenchi (天智天皇, 626-672) sparked a succession dispute between Prince Ōama (大海人皇子, 631-686), the emperor's younger brother, and Prince Ōtomo (大友皇子, 648-672), the emperor's son by a low-ranking consort. This dispute escalated into an armed conflict, the Jinshin War of 672. As Ōama was leading his army to challenge his nephew Ōtomo for the throne, dark clouds supposedly appeared over the capital (Asuka, in present-day Nara). Prince Ōama, according to the *Nihon Shoki*, was skilled in astrology and divination. Sensing that his soldiers regarded the dark sky as an ill omen, he gave his troops a pep talk to the

effect that such was indeed the case – for the enemy. Thus inspired, his troops marched into the capital and took it within a day. Ōtomo took his own life, thereby ending an imperial reign so short that it would be over a millennium before historians acknowledged that it happened at all. Ōama seized the throne and ruled for the next thirteen years under the name of Emperor Temmu.

After a violent war of succession, the new emperor's highest priority would naturally have been to establish the legitimacy of his reign. Emperor Temmu may well have concluded that, if exploiting his followers' belief in the supernatural could help him take the throne, it could also help him keep it. We can surmise that one of the reasons for the establishment of the Onmyōryō was to use long-established beliefs, rituals, and methods of divination to show that the gods looked with favor on the emperor's works.

In addition, by establishing the Onmyōryō, Emperor Temmu was taking a worldwide tradition to the next level. Although Japan may have been the only country with a full-fledged Department of Divination, political leaders in all times and places have kept spiritual advisors on hand to give them powers, or at least the appearance of powers, that could never be attained by natural means:

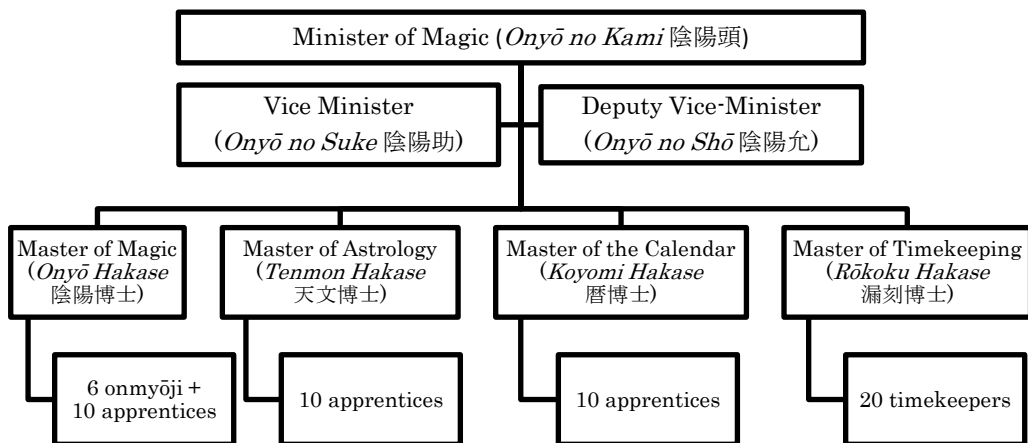
- **Controlling the uncontrollable:** Through spells and rituals, to prevent or mitigate the effects of natural disasters, epidemics, famines, droughts, and other events beyond human control.
- **Knowing the unknowable:** Through divination, to give the ruler supernatural insights when making important decisions, and when disasters struck, to discern what caused them and how best to counteract them.
- **Defeating the undefeatable:** When going into battle against a superior foe, to use spells and talismans to boost soldiers' morale by giving them a sense of supernatural protection, and to use divination to determine the most auspicious times and conditions to attack.

The main purposes of the Onmyōryō were: First, to perform rituals for the protection of the emperor and the nation. Second, to use astrology and divination to advise the government and people about auspicious and inauspicious dates and directions. And finally, when natural disasters, epidemics, or mysterious deaths occurred with more than the usual frequency, making the emperor suspect that a vengeful ghost or god (*tatarigami* 祟り神) might be at work, he would turn to the Onmyōryō for advice about how it could be appeased.

The head of the Onmyōryō, the “Minister of Magic,” was known by the title Onyō no Kami (陰陽頭). He oversaw all departments, and prepared secret reports for the emperor when cases of supernatural vengeance were suspected. Under the *ritsuryō* (律令) ranking system of imperial bureaucracy, he was an official of the junior fifth rank, lower division (*jūgoi ge* 從五位下), an equivalent rank to a lesser counselor (*shōnagon* 少納言), provincial governor, or Assistant Master of the Office of Palace Repairs (Badgley 2008).

The Onyō no Kami was assisted by a vice-minister, the Onyō no Suke (陰陽助). Internal matters were overseen, and documents inspected, by the Onyō no Shō (陰陽允), with the aid of two recording secretaries, the Taizoku (大属) and Shōzoku (少属). Below them were four departments, as shown in Table 1 below. Each one was headed by a Master (*hakase* 博士), and included a number of apprentices (*gakushō* 学生).

Table 1: Organization of the Onmyōryō



### Department of Onmyōdō

The main function of this department was to conduct various rituals for the well-being of the Emperor and the nation (Kawai 2021: 26-27, Takemitsu 2001: 91). These included:

- *Honmyōsai* (本命祭): A life-extending ceremony, performed for the Emperor six times a year.
- *Kikisai* (鬼気祭): A ceremony against illness, performed at the gates of the palace or capital when epidemics threatened. In 1030, it was performed at Rashōmon Gate by Minister of Magic Koremune no Fumitaka (惟宗文高) (Kawai 2021: 27).

- *Tensō-chifu-sai* (天曹地府祭): A ceremony to prevent war, natural disasters, and epidemics.
- *Goryūsai* (五龍祭): The “Five Dragons Ceremony,” to summon rain during periods of drought.
- *Goteisai* (五帝祭): A ceremony to consecrate national treasures. It was performed in 960, when the sacred imperial sword was reforged after the original had been destroyed in a palace fire (supposedly caused by Sugawara no Michizane in revenge for his mistreatment at the hands of Emperor Daigo).

In addition, in times of crisis, this department was entrusted with determining whether there was a vengeful spirit at work, and if so, how it might be appeased. There are many such incidences on record. The most famous, however, is Sugawara no Michizane, whose story will be told in the next section.

### **Department of Astrology**

This department was a close second in importance behind the first. Its function was to interpret the positions of the stars and planets to determine auspicious days and directions. Whenever the emperor was planning a major change, such as constructing a new building or moving an old one, he would consult this department for the auspices.

### **Department of the Calendar**

This department used information provided by the Astrology department to publish an almanac. Heian-era nobles kept it ready to hand, avidly consulting it as a guide to which days to avoid going out, or which directions to avoid traveling in.

The calendar also gave the dates of supernatural events to help people avoid them. One was the Kōshin no Machi (庚申の待). According to a Daoist belief imported into Japan, your body is inhabited by three spirits known collectively as the *sanshi* (三尸), translated as either “three worms” or “three corpses.” Finding their lodgings not especially comfortable, they eagerly await your death and their subsequent liberation. To hasten the arrival of that day, they sneak out of your body at night every sixty days to report all your secret misdeeds to the gods in hopes that they will punish you by shortening your life. The easiest way to prevent this, of course, is simply not to sleep that night. Thus, by order of the Ministry of Magic, once every two months, you *must* stay up all night partying.

Another significant event on the calendar was the *hyakki-yagyō* (百鬼夜行). Legend had it that every year, all the ghosts, demons, and other supernatural creatures in Japan, from the most powerful ogres to the ghosts of rice ladles discarded long ago without proper thanks for their long service, would march through the streets of the capital. This nocturnal parade has inspired artwork from 14<sup>th</sup>-century picture scrolls to 21<sup>st</sup>-century Ghibli films (such as *Pom Poko*, where tanuki\*<sup>3</sup> stage a re-enactment of the parade in the sky above a modern town), but very few can claim to have seen it live. Any mortal caught out on the night of this parade would be spirited away and never seen again. One duty of the calendar division was to predict the date and parade route of this event, so that those in harm's way would know to be home before sundown and keep their shutters drawn.

### Department of Timekeeping

An ancillary service provided by the Onmyōryō was to keep the capital on time. Since the Astrology department required the Timekeeping department to measure time precisely using clepsydras (water clocks), a natural outgrowth of their duties was to do the same for the public. Thus, citizens of the capital trusted the Onmyōryō to chime the hours. No one could ever claim their timing was off – and even if they did, the onmyōji could always reply with a Tolkienesque riposte: “A wizard is never late, nor is he early!”

## 4. Sugawara no Michizane

As mentioned above, one of the core duties of the Onmyōryō was to advise the emperor about how to deal with vengeful spirits. The most famous of these is Sugawara no Michizane.

Sugawara no Michizane (菅原道真, 845-903) came from a family of noted scholars. His father ran a preparatory school for young nobles hoping to qualify for a post in the Imperial court, and Michizane himself was among its alumni and sometime faculty. On the strength of his encyclopedic knowledge of the Chinese classics and his talent for composing original poetry, he was given a post at the prestigious Ministry of the Ceremonial.

Climbing the career ladder as quickly as he did, it was perhaps inevitable that he would step on a few toes. Some of these were attached to the feet of the family Fujiwara. In one decisive incident, Fujiwara no Mototsune (藤原基経, 836-891), father-in-law of Emperor Uda, expected to be granted the rank and title of *kampaku* (関白) or Chief Advisor to the Emperor, but was actually appointed *akō* (阿衡), a prestigious title but with little real decision-making power. The falling-out that resulted between Mototsune and his son-in-law caused such a

stir that word reached Sugawara, at that time serving as governor of Sanuki province (modern Takamatsu, Shikoku). He wrote a letter to Mototsune admonishing him to show proper deference to the emperor and take what he was offered.

Mototsune did not take kindly to what he must have seen as a great impertinence from someone who was in every sense his junior. Even though he eventually received the title he hoped for, his feud with Sugawara continued into the next generation. When Emperor Uda abdicated in favor of his son Daigo (醍醐天皇, 884-930) in 897, six years after Mototsune's death, Mototsune's son Tokihira (藤原時平, 871-909) took the opportunity to whisper in the new Emperor's ear that Sugawara was plotting against him. Emperor Daigo took his words to heart and sent Sugawara to a remote post as governor of Dazaifu, in Kyushu (modern Fukuoka prefecture).

This was a devastating blow to Sugawara. Having worked as a provincial governor once before, he considered that he had served his time. When later offered an ambassadorship to China, he declined, preferring to live in the capital and work in the imperial court. He would probably have agreed with Shakespeare's Romeo that "exile is death misnamed." However, the Emperor had spoken, and his will was not to be contravened. As he left home for the last time, the heavy-hearted Sugawara took a longing look at the plum blossoms in his garden and recited his famous poem:

*When the east wind blows,  
let your fragrance fill the air;  
my dear plum blossoms.  
Even with your master gone,  
never forget the springtime.* \*4

Two years later, he died in exile.

Six years after that, according to legend, a snake crossed paths with Fujiwara no Tokihira and spoke to him, to the effect of "Brahma and Shakra have promised me my revenge" (Takemitsu 2001: 68-69). Tokihira must have found this quite alarming, perhaps not least because of the scandal that would ensue if it became known that a member of the Fujiwara family could understand snake language. But he had little time to worry about it, because he died the same year, soon followed by a number of his friends and associates, including his nephew Prince Yasuakira, heir-apparent to the imperial throne.



Then, in 930, lightning struck the Imperial Palace, causing a fire that killed several courtiers and incinerated many of the imperial treasures. Emperor Daigo himself survived, but the shock was so great that three months later, he fell ill, abdicated the throne, entered a monastery, and died shortly thereafter.

Emperor Murakami was understandably anxious to get to the bottom of all these mysterious occurrences, so he consulted the Onmyōryō. The Onyō no Kami gave him a reply to the effect of: “Your predecessor sent an innocent man to exile and death. This is the revenge of Sugawara no Michizane. The only way to appease a vengeful spirit of such godlike power is to make him an actual god.”

Following his advice, Emperor Murakami ordered the construction of the Kitano Tenmangū shrine (completed in 947), the first shrine ever built to an ordinary mortal who was later deified. It was the first of 12,000 shrines now dedicated to Sugawara no Michizane, revered throughout Japan as the patron deity of scholars.

## 5. Abe no Seimei: The Merlin of Japan

Around the time that Sugawara no Michizane was making his displeasure known, another young scholar was beginning his rise through the ranks of the court. His name was Abe no Seimei (安倍晴明, 921-1005), and his life would be a turning point in the history of Japanese magic.

Abe no Seimei is a verifiable historical figure, but so many legends have grown up around him that separating fact from fiction is in itself a task for a wizard. His birthplace is debated, with places ranging from Nara (Abe Mokuzai Danchi) to Kagawa (Kōnanchō, Takamatsu, home to Kan'ei Shrine where Seimei supposedly once served as a priest) to Ibaraki (Nekoshima, Chikusei-shi, site of Seimeibashi Park) vying for the honor (Kaku & Goto 2019: 118). However, the most likely contender is Abenomachi in Abenoku, Osaka, for its proximity to the shrine in Shinoda now known as the Kuzunoha Inari Shrine. According to legend, Seimei's father may not have been anyone special, but his mother was a real fox.

Abe no Seimei's father is commonly known as Abe no Yasuna (安倍保名). He was a junior officer in the imperial court, possibly Assistant Master of the Office of the Palace Table (junior fifth rank, upper division – essentially a glorified caterer, but still equal in rank to the Onyō no Kami). If legends are to be believed, he was not the first in his family to fall in love with a girl whose charms transcended the mortal realm. Supposedly, his great-great-

great-grandfather was Minister of the Right Abe no Miushi (阿倍御主人, 635?-703), one of the five suitors mentioned in *The Tale of the Bamboo Cutter*, whose love for the moon princess Kaguyahime ended in heartbreak when she asked him for a fur coat – specifically, one made from the fur of a fire rat (Anonymous, 1929).

Yasuna had somewhat better luck with the supernatural ladies. According to legend, one day as he was passing by the Shinoda Shrine in Osaka, he found a fox caught in a hunter's snare, just as the hunter was approaching – presumably to cut out its liver, which was a highly prized ingredient in traditional medicine. Abe, though a sedentary court official and no match for a mighty hunter, bravely jumped in between them and succeeded in freeing the fox from the snare while fighting off the hunter long enough for the fox to escape. The hunter beat him senseless and left him lying in the woods.

A while later, a beautiful young woman, calling herself Kuzunoha (葛葉), came to the place where Abe lay. She took him back to his house, tenderly ministered to him, and stayed with him long enough to nurse him back to health – by which time they had fallen in love. They got married, had a baby boy, and named him Seimei. From infancy, Seimei showed a talent for perceiving that which was invisible to ordinary mortal eyes. This became evident to his parents one day when he happened to glance up his mother's kimono and innocently inquire, "Mama, why do you have a tail?"

Her secret out, Kuzunoha had no choice but to admit that she was a fox in human shape – specifically, the guardian of the shrine that now bears her name: Kuzunoha Inari Shrine, in Izumi Ward, Osaka. She recited a farewell poem:

*If you feel lonely,  
come and find me at the well  
in Shinoda wood.  
Though I may be out of sight,  
you can feel my presence there.* \*5

With these words, she disappeared, leaving her husband to raise Seimei on his own – and possibly, in his spare time, join the ex-husbands of the crane wife from *Tsuru no Ongaeshi* and the snow woman from *Yuki-Onna* in a support group for Men Whose Supernatural Wives Left Them When Their True Nature Was Revealed.

Knowing his gift for seeing beyond the material world, Seimei's father apprenticed him to a

well-known onmyōji, Kamo no Tadayuki (加茂忠行, ?-960?), who trained him alongside his own son Yasunori (加茂保憲, 917-977) (*Konjaku Monogatari Shu* 24-16, trans. by Park 2024: 118-120). Eventually, both Seimei and Yasunori were accepted into the Onmyōryō. Seimei went into the elite department of Astrology, while Yasunori was assigned to the less prestigious but still vital department of the Calendar, where he ultimately wrote what was to become the training manual for future onmyōji in that division, *Rekirin* (暦林) (Kawai 2021: 69).

These assignments endured. For the next six centuries, Abe's descendants governed the Astrology division and Kamo's governed the Calendar division, to the extent that the two lineages – known by a single name, *Anga ryōkei* (安賀両系) – became the core of the Onmyōryō. Although the original text of Yasunori's *Rekirin* has been lost, workbooks based on it were written by his descendants as late as the Muromachi period (14<sup>th</sup>-16<sup>th</sup> centuries).

### Abe no Seimei and Ashiya Dōman

In the Heian period, there were mainly two types of onmyōji: the *kanjin onmyōji* (官人陰陽師), government officials employed by the Onmyōryō, and the *hōshi onmyōji* (法師陰陽師), who plied their trade privately. The most famous (or notorious) among the latter was Ashiya Dōman (蘆屋道満, dates unknown), commonly portrayed as Abe no Seimei's arch-rival.

In the most famous episode, Dōman challenged Seimei to a magical duel, in which both of them would attempt to use their powers of clairvoyance to divine the contents of a closed box. Had Dōman been a bit more diligent in his opposition research, he might have chosen a different challenge, knowing that Seimei had studied under Kamo no Tadayuki, who was known as a specialist in clairvoyance (Kawai 2021: 68). Nevertheless, on the appointed day, a closed box containing fifteen mikan was placed before the two contestants. When asked about its contents, Dōman confidently proclaimed, "Fifteen mikan." Seimei replied, "Fifteen mice." When the box was opened, fifteen mice scurried out.

This episode was the beginning of a wizards' feud that would provide an inexhaustible fount of inspiration for the authors of books and plays for centuries to come. In one version, from the Edo-period *Abe no Seimei Ki* by Asai Ryōi, Dōman makes a show of humbly accepting defeat and asks Seimei to make him his disciple. Then, while Seimei is on a diplomatic mission to China, Dōman seduces his wife and persuades her to give him Seimei's secret spell book (Asai 1664, quoted in Kawai 2021: 64). This story is a work of fiction, but like many others, clearly illustrates the rivalry between the two.

### **Abe no Seimei and the Case of the Sinister Minister**

Another famous case in which Dōman plays Moriarty to Seimei's Holmes is recorded in the *Uji Shūi Monogatari Shū* (14:10). Like many Seimei stories, it involves the Minister of the Right, Fujiwara no Michinaga (藤原道長, 966-1028), who had a close relationship with Seimei, often using the power of his public office to intervene on Seimei's behalf in exchange for occasional help with private matters.

When the Hōseiji temple was under construction, Fujiwara often visited the site, accompanied by his beloved white dog. One day, as Fujiwara was about to enter the temple grounds, his dog suddenly barked, dug in its paws, and refused to go any further. Fujiwara sent for Abe no Seimei, who dug in the ground, and about five feet down, found two clay vessels tied together with yellow paper. When he opened them, he found nothing inside but a single character written in vermilion on the bottom of the vessels.

Seimei identified the object as a talisman bearing a powerful curse. "Your dog may have saved your life," he told Michinaga. He wrote a spell on a piece of paper, folded it into an origami crane, and tossed it into the air. According to the story, the paper crane became a real crane and flew over the housetops. Seimei and Michinaga followed it until it landed on the house of Ashiya Dōman. When questioned, Dōman admitted that he had buried the talisman at the behest of Michinaga's cousin, Minister of the Left Fujiwara no Akimitsu (藤原顯光, 944-1021).

Returning to the imperial court, Seimei and Michinaga confronted Akimitsu with their evidence and Dōman's confession. Akimitsu revealed the reason for his grudge against his cousin: Akimitsu's daughter Nobuko (延子, also read as Enshi) was married to Imperial Prince Atsuakira, but after he took a second wife, Michinaga's daughter Kanshi, he began to neglect his first. She became spiteful and asked her father to help her get revenge. Hearing all this, the Emperor ordered Akimitsu exiled to his home province of Harima. (If Sugawara no Michizane happened to be looking down from heaven to see a member of the Fujiwara family sent into exile, for a crime he really did commit, then despite his divinity, he might have allowed himself a bit of a gloat.)

From then on, Akimitsu was known as the *akuryō safu* (悪霊左府), a composite of the words for "evil spirit" and "Minister of the Left." Perhaps the most concise translation, using a word derived from the Latin for "left," would be "the Sinister Minister."

In 1005, on the 26<sup>th</sup> day of the 9<sup>th</sup> lunar month (Halloween by the Western calendar), Seimei died peacefully of old age at 85, a feat that many saw as further evidence of his magical powers. In 1007, he was enshrined at the Seimei Shrine near the Imperial Palace in Kyoto, which is still popular with visitors over a millennium later.

Surprisingly, for all Seimei's legendary magical ability, he never attained the rank of Onyō no Kami. However, his second son Yoshimasa (安倍吉昌) did, and the mantle passed from him to his grand-nephew Ariyuki (安倍有行), his son Yasunaga (安倍泰長), his son Yasuchika (安倍泰親), and future generations. Until the dissolution of the Onmyōryō, the offices of Onyō no Kami and Master of Astrology were nearly always held by a descendant of Abe no Seimei.

## 6. From the Emperor's Enchanters to the Shogun's Sorcerers

Around the end of the 12<sup>th</sup> century, the center of power moved from the imperial court in Heian-kyō to the shogunate in Kamakura. With the shift from a government centered on the emperor to a military regime, the duties of the Onmyōryō also shifted, with more emphasis placed on the martial aspect of magic, “defeating the undefeatable.”

The first Kamakura shogun, Minamoto no Yoritomo (源頼朝, 1147-1199) was not much of a believer in onmyōdō, but his son, the third shogun Sanetomo (源実朝, 1192-1219), was. At his behest, several onmyōji, mainly from branches of the Abe family, came to Kamakura to establish a branch of the Onmyōryō to serve the shogunate, called the *Ofudashū* (御簡衆) (Saito 2023: 99, Takemitsu 2001: 90). According to the 14<sup>th</sup>-century history text *Mirror of Azuma*, they performed various rituals on behalf of the shogunate, including the *Kikisai* and *Tensō-chifu-sai* mentioned above. As their clients shifted from nobles to warriors, they also began to develop new rituals (Saito 2023: 100).

The tension between the shogunate and the imperial court came to a head with the Jōkyū War (承久の乱) of 1221, when retired emperor Go-Toba (後鳥羽上皇) declared war on the regent of the shogunate, Hōjō Yoshitoki (北条義時). At that time, three onmyōji on the side of the shogunate, Abe no Yasusada (安倍泰貞), Abe no Chikamoto (安倍親職) and Abe no Nobukata (安倍宣賢), prophesied victory for the shogun, and conducted rituals such as the *zokushōsai* (属星際) and the “36,000 Gods Ritual” (*sanmanrokusenjinsai* 三万六千神際) to protect him from danger and ensure his good fortune. To what degree their intervention helped is debatable, but the conflict ended with the shogun both victorious and deeply

grateful to his magical assistants (Kawai 2021: 120-121).

In the Muromachi period, the onmyōji continued to be treated as valuable assets to the shogunate. In particular, during the Namboku-chō period (南北朝時代, 1336-1392), the shogunate seemed intent on concentrating supernatural as well as political power in its own hands. Ashikaga Yoshimitsu (足利義満, 1358-1408), the third Ashikaga shogun, put his policy into clear words to the effect of: “Let the onmyōji of the imperial court protect the emperor. Those of the shogunate will protect the nation” (Takemitsu 2001: 91).

The imperial court, alarmed at the loss of status this edict represented, responded by conferring greater ranks, titles, and favors on its own onmyōji. Onyō no Kami Abe no Ariyo (安倍有世, 1327-1405), fourteenth in descent from Seimei, ultimately reached the second rank, significantly higher than any before him. Both the Abe and Kamo families were given titles of nobility and new, more distinguished names. The Abe lineage became known as Tsuchimikado (土御門), starting from Ariyo’s son Arishige (土御門有重), and the Kamo lineage as Kadenokōji (勘解由小路). Ariyo gladly accepted these favors, but still knew which way the wind was blowing. He, along with Arishige and following generations, offered ceremonies not only for the emperor, but also for the shogun (Saito 2023: 103-104).

The two families continued their centuries-old division of labor until the mid-16<sup>th</sup> century. When Kadenokōji Akitaka (勘解由小路在高) died at the age of 23, leaving his father Akitomi (勘解由小路在富, 1490-1565) without an heir, Akitomi adopted a descendent of the Abe family, Tsuchimikado Hisanaga (土御門久脩, 1560-1625). However, when Hisanaga’s father Arinaga (土御門有脩, 1527-1577) died, Hisanaga reverted to the Tsuchimikado name. Thus ended the Kamo/Kadenokōji lineage, leaving the Abe/Tsuchimikado lineage as the unchallenged aristocracy of Japanese magic (Kawai 2021: 128, Takemitsu 2001: 91).

## 7. War Wizards and Witch Hunts

In 1467, the dispute over who would succeed shogun Ashikaga Yoshimasa (足利義政, 1436-1490) plunged Japan into civil war. During the ensuing Sengoku (Warring States) period, the Onmyōryō continued to perform its usual rituals for the health and well-being of the emperor. By this time, however, the emperor had become little more than a figurehead. The real power lay in the shogunate, and when the shogun’s seat became vacant, feudal lords across the nation vied to fill it. When they led their troops into battle, they used every means possible to give their side an advantage, both natural and supernatural. This resulted in a proliferation of military magicians (*gunshi* 軍師 or *gumbaisha* 軍配者), whose primary

purpose was to assist their masters in “defeating the undefeatable.”

The duties of military magicians included (Cummins 2017, Owada 2007):

- Advising their lords about auspicious days, times, and directions for attack, based on astrology as well as auguries read in: movement of banners in the wind, the color and shape of watch fires in the enemy camp, animal behavior (e.g. flights and calls of birds), and the color of energy fields around people and houses.
- Performing rituals to ensure victory, and pacify the souls of the defeated to prevent them from returning as vengeful spirits.
- Preparing talismans for warriors to carry into battle.
- Teaching soldiers incantations to recite for protection.

Military commanders and onmyōji saw increasing overlap in their areas of responsibility. Among the Seven Military Classics (*bukei shichisho* 武経七書), a set of seven textbooks widely read by Sengoku-era military commanders, one volume, the “Six Secret Teachings” (*Rokutō* 六韜), was also read at the Onmyōryō as part of its curriculum in astrology (Owada 1998).

As every Japanese schoolchild knows, the Sengoku free-for-all ultimately came down to three finalists: Oda Nobunaga (織田信長, 1534-1582), Toyotomi Hideyoshi (豊臣秀吉, 1537-1598), and Tokugawa Ieyasu (徳川家康, 1543-1616). The three had wildly disparate views of magic. Oda Nobunaga was a rationalist who had no particular faith in onmyōdō himself, but apparently recognized that a judicious use of onmyōji could help bolster his troops’ confidence. At the Battle of Nagashino in 1575, Nobunaga went into battle with just 3000 troops against 15,000 of Takeda Katsuyori’s, and still won a decisive victory. Years later, a folding screen was painted to commemorate the event, possibly commissioned by Naruse Shoichi (成瀬正一, 1538-1620) (Kobayashi 2023). In this illustration, Oda Nobunaga is surrounded by figures with six-pointed stars on their backs (Figures 2 and 3). Although the traditional symbol for onmyōji was the five-pointed star representing the five elements (called the “Seiman” in honor of Abe no Seimei), some later schools added a sixth element – the moon – and used a six-pointed star instead. This has been interpreted to suggest that Oda Nobunaga may have counted onmyōji among his advisors (Saito 2023: 115-118).

*Figure 2: The Battle of Narashino folding screen*



*Figure 3: Detail showing Oda Nobunaga with advisors*



Toyotomi Hideyoshi, to put it mildly, took a much less accommodating view. He saw onmyōdō as a detriment to peace and security, and a crime against the nation (Saito 2023: 120). In 1595, in a literal “witch hunt” or perhaps “wizard hunt” (*onmyōji-gari* 陰陽師狩り), he expelled over 130 onmyōji from Kyoto, Osaka, and Nara – including Tsuchimikado Hisanaga, who by then had become Onyō no Kami. In addition to the official ones, Hideyoshi also cracked down on a class of private magician/entertainers known as *shōmonji* (声聞師 or 唱門師), and ordered the destruction of temples in Kyōto known to proclaim the legend of Abe



no Seimei. The reason for his hatred of magic is not clear, but one possibility is that, when his nephew and heir Hidetsugu (豊臣秀次, 1568-1595) was accused of treason and condemned to die, Hideyoshi regarded Hisanaga as a co-conspirator (Kawai 2021: 128, Saito 2023: 119-121).

If Hideyoshi had become shogun, the history of Japanese magic might have been a great deal shorter. However, the final victory at the Battle of Sekigahara went to Tokugawa Ieyasu, who saw onmyōdō as one way to ensure the peace and stability of the nation. He pardoned Hisanaga, recalled him from exile, and invited him to officiate at his inaugural ceremony as shogun of all Japan (Kawai 2021: 128-129).

## 8. The Final Chapter

The accession of Ieyasu to the shogunate marked the beginning of a quarter millennium of relative peace and stability. With no more military confrontations on the horizon, the Onmyōryō continued to perform its traditional functions on behalf of the emperor, and also acquired the new duty of acting as a regulatory board. According to one eighteenth-century record, the Chirizukadan (塵塚談), there were as many as 2000 diviners in private practice in Edo. By a 1793 decree, all private diviners needed to register with the Onmyōryō. Such a rule, however, was easy to make but hard to enforce, especially since so many private diviners were mountain ascetics practicing the religion of Shugendō (修験道), meaning they tended to slip through the cracks in any official registration system (Takemitsu 2021: 109).

The Edo period also saw an increasing demand for entertainment, and the spread of literacy, as well as advances in printing, made books more accessible than ever to the common people. The onmyōji of the past helped supply both of those needs, with the exploits of Abe no Seimei providing a rich source of inspiration for novels, kabuki plays, and joruri recitations.

Then came the Meiji Restoration, the reopening of the country to international exchange of goods and ideas, and the scramble for Japan to modernize and prove itself worthy of a seat at the table with the great powers of Europe and America. Onmyōdō was seen as a relic of a more primitive and superstitious past, with no place in the new, modern Japan. In 1870, the Meiji government promulgated the *Tensha Kinshi Rei*, formally disbanding the Onmyōryō and prohibiting the Tsuchimikado family from issuing licenses or accepting disciples (Cabinet Legislation Bureau, 1870, p. 453). The heir to the Abe/Tsuchimikado lineage, Tsuchimikado Harenaga (土御門晴栄, 1859-1915)\*<sup>6</sup>, at the tender age of eleven – the time when most children from wizarding families look forward to owl post bringing their

magic school acceptance letters – found his name in a much less agreeable document, when the Cabinet order singled him out. (“You’re a wizard, Harenaga. Too bad you’ll never be able to train as one.”)

Thus, the 1200-year run of the Onmyōryō came to an end. However, while the public role of magic and divination was formally ended by the Cabinet order, the role it played in people’s private lives continued unabated. Even the Meiji era’s first prime minister, Ito Hirobumi (伊藤博文, 1841-1909) had in his personal library a book of divinations concerning the nation, the Emperor, several upcoming events of significance, and 27 officials starting with himself, compiled in 1894 (National Diet Library, 2010). And the Great Rite of Atavaka (*Daigensuihō*, 大元帥法), a powerful, ultra-secret ritual for military victory that could previously be performed only by the Onmyōryō (private use was punishable by exile), was performed at Gūmyōji Temple in Yokohama on two occasions after the dissolution of the Onmyōryō: once during the Russo-Japanese War, and again during World War II (Ihara 2012: 162-166). While a Cabinet order could take magic and divination out of government, taking the desire for supernatural power to “control the uncontrollable,” “know the unknowable” and “defeat the undefeatable” out of government officials’ hearts was a different matter.

Now, even though Japan can no longer boast its own Ministry of Magic, Abe no Seimei and other onmyōji of the past continue to enchant the present. In particular, since the 1990s, Japan has been experiencing a “Seimei Boom,” with Abe no Seimei suddenly taking a starring role in a staggering number of books both factual and fictitious (most notably the *Onmyōji* series of novels by Tokai University alumnus Yumemakura Baku), manga, anime, video games, and film (including a trilogy based on Yumemakura’s novels, in which the most recent installment, *Onmyōji Zero*, was released in 2024). In the 2024 NHK historical drama “Dear Radiance” (*Hikaru Kimi he* 光る君へ), Abe no Seimei (played by Yusuke Santamaria) had a supporting role. And Japan’s magician on ice, figure-skating champion Yuzuru Hanyū, used his “Seimei” routine (incorporating music, costumes, and gestures inspired by the *Onmyōji* films) to conjure gold at the 2018 Winter Olympics. Even in this modern, technologically advanced age, it would seem that Japan and magic are as inseparable as light and shadow.

## Notes

\*1 *Nihon Shoki* v. 17, Keidai 7 (513 CE), sixth month. Translation by Aston (1896), v. 2, p. 9.

\*2 *Nihon Shoki* v. 29, Temmu 4 (675 CE), first month. Translation by Aston (1896), v. 2, p. 326.

\*3 The Japanese raccoon dog (*Nyctereutes viverrinus*), often depicted in folklore as a mischievous

creature with supernatural powers, including the ability to assume human shape.

\*4 *Kochi fukaba / nioi okoseyo / ume no hana / aruji nashi tote / haru na wasureso* (東風吹かば 匂い起こせよ 梅の花 主なしとて 春な忘れそ). Author's translation.

\*5 *Koishikuba / tazune kite miyo / izumi naru / Shinoda no mori no / shinobi shinobi ni* (恋しくば たずね来て見よ 和泉なる 篠田の森の しのびしのびに). Author's translation.

\*6 Born Nishikori Kazumaru (錦織和丸). Adopted by Tsuchimikado Haruo (土御門晴雄, 1827-1869), after the death of his own son at age 4. The Cabinet order refers to him as “Tsuchimikado Kazumaru.”

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