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An Analysis and Interpretation of Shamanism and Spirit Possession in Selected Works
by Enchi Fumiko

A thesis presented in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts in Japanese at Massey University

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Abstract

The miko (shamaness) has played an important role in the mythology and history of Japan and in the life of the people up until recent times. Critics have commented on the development of mikoteki (shamanistic or mediumistic) abilities in characters in fictional works by Enchi Fumiko (1905-1986). In works written in Enchi’s middle years, such abilities arise in and empower suppressed, unfulfilled women who are motivated by revenge.

This thesis extends the existing analysis of Enchi’s depiction of shamanistic women, investigating and interpreting her use of mikoteki abilities in women in four works by Enchi written during the 1950s, her middle years: Onnazaka (The Waiting Years), “Yō” (“Enchantress”), “Mimiyōraku” (The Earring) and Onnamen (Masks). The analysis of “Mimiyōraku” is the first to have been completed by a Western scholar. For all four works, a synthesis of the anthropological, sociological and historical studies on shamanism and the miko in Japan provides a basis for analysis.

Onnazaka contains allusions to latent shamanistic abilities in women and has links with spirit possession and shamanism in The Tale of Genji. Symbols, myths and elements of shamanism play an even more important role in the three other works. The development of shamanistic abilities in the main characters enables them to develop links with the spirit world, to empower and heal themselves and to effect changes in their own lives. While the manifestation of shamanistic abilities is connected to the need for revenge, more importantly, through such abilities Enchi connects the women to the creative force of life in these works.
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