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# The Collector of Teeth: The Stone Jizō of the Mountain of Fear

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# The Collector of Teeth: The Stone Jizō of the Mountain of Fear

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## Abstract

This paper investigates contemporary intersections of material, ideological, and spatial culture within expressions of emotion and imagination at Osorezan Bodaiji, a Sōtō Zen temple in Aomori, Japan. It analyses the temple's figurative stupa, the *hachiyō Jizō bosatsu* (Eight-Leaf Stone Jizō), in comparison to the "Gokuraku Jizō" to elucidate how Jizō exists as a non-binary figural repository and protector for the youthful dead, and non-figural manifestation of the Womb World and salvation. By focussing on children's teeth interred within the Stone Jizō-cum-reliquary, this study contributes to the field of "Zen materialism" and more nuanced understandings of lived Buddhist realities in Tōhoku.

## Introduction: Objects of Materiality

In eating and death, we have our teeth. They allow us to sustain ourselves with food, give us the ability to chant prayers, and come to represent our power. It is then perhaps not too surprising to see religious traditions utilise such a powerful material in practice. In thinking of the potential of teeth, I analyse Sōtō Zen's Osorezan Bodaiji (恐山菩提寺; hereafter Osorezan) and its giant stone Jizō bosatsu ("the earthen-warehouse" or "womb" bodhisattva 地藏菩薩; Skt. Kṣitigarbha; Ch. Dìzàng; K. Jijang).<sup>1</sup> My focus on the teeth of deceased children interred in this figurative reliquary of Jizō is twofold. First, I seek to uncover and understand Mount Osore's (osorezan 恐山) landscape of emotions and imagination the Stone Jizō makes possible. Second, I ask why the temple would construct this reliquary in the form of a Jizō statue rather than the more normative *pagoda*, and what that decision might convey. In exploring this form of Buddhist materiality, I turn to questions of location, the temple grounds as "ideological space," ideas through and products of comparison, and the localized and canonical importance of teeth. The goal is to explore elements of Osorezan's Stone Jizō as a protector and collector of children to add to the growing understanding of Zen materiality, thereby treating Osorezan's

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<sup>1</sup> The predominant terms parishioners use to describe this Jizō are *sekibutsu* ("stone buddha" 石仏), *hachiyōjizō* ("eight-leaf Jizō" 八葉地藏), *ishijizō* ("stone Jizō" 石地藏), or *Ojizō-sama* ("great lord Jizō" お地藏さま). One can use such terms interchangeably; for consistency, I refer to this piece as the "Stone Jizō."

material culture as an avenue to facilitate discussion around a peripheral reality fuelled by emotions and imagination.<sup>2</sup>

### Understanding Jizō: Preliminary Accounts

Jizō is a bodhisattva known for their patronage of children and the damned. Prevalent in the lived interim of the Buddha-less world (*mubutsu sekai* 無仏世界), they take the semblance of a travelling monk who, in their “great vow,” staved off their own enlightenment until all the hells have emptied.<sup>3</sup> Jizō worship frequently focusses on saving the “lost,” and is especially important for those who seek salvation from rebirth in the hells.<sup>4</sup> Jizō has thus come to be the central figure of Osorezan Bodaiji, a

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<sup>2</sup> This article is based on research I conducted in the summer of 2024 with follow-up inquiries from summer to winter in 2025. I focussed on the material culture of Osorezan and “sibling” temples, though also conversed with temple workers, caretakers, ground cleaners, clerics, guides, lay parishioners, locals, and non-Tōhoku-based Japanese tourists. One of my main methodologies was a form of casual but clear conversation. I primarily let people approach and talk to me while being explicit that I was researching this topic so as to not disrespect the emotional volatility of the space. I keep all figures anonymous—for example, “temple worker” over the designated caretaker of the octagonal hall—and resisted inserting direct words. I understand the danger in potentially muddling this author’s interpretation vis-a-vis an individual’s intent, though have sought to remain clear in this distinction without betraying the setting and people who found recording to be a discomfort. I instead opted to highlight overall emotional tones, with support from public databases, of shared thoughts and perspectives over one’s direct story.

<sup>3</sup> Śikṣānanda, *Sutra of the Past Vows of Earth Store Bodhisattva*, trans. Buddhist Text Translation Society (Buddhist Text Translation Society, 1982/2014): 4–6, 115; Hank Glassman, *The Face of Jizō: Image and Cult in Medieval Japanese Buddhism* (The University of Hawai‘i Press, 2012): 7, 14–16.

<sup>4</sup> For the *injō bosatsu* or “Jizō the Guide” in Jōdo shū contexts, see Hank Glassman, “Monastic Devotion to Jizō” in *The Face of Jizō: Image and Cult in Medieval Japanese Buddhism* (The University of Hawai‘i Press, 2012).

temple space in Aomori Prefecture that local and pan-national narratives see as a literal hell-on-earth.<sup>5</sup>

In investigating Jizō, I take inspiration from Watari Kōichi and Ishikawa Jun'ichiro. Jizō is a multifaceted figure that embodies various portrayals specific to the local contexts in which they find themselves—something Watari calls *Jizō shrinkō* (“Jizō faiths” 地蔵信仰). How “person A” understands Jizō inevitably differs from “person B” due to regional, personal, and temporal needs.<sup>6</sup> Therefore, Watari posits that all scholars must outline their processual *Jizō-ron* (“Jizō theory” 地蔵論) to disclose their perspective in how they read and synthesize this bodhisattva, along with the generative possibilities those readings entail.<sup>7</sup> This assessment does not relegate peripheral realities through claims of normativity, but offers an opening to engage under Buddhist cosmologies without a hierarchical comparative methodology. I cautiously root this heuristic stance in 20<sup>th</sup> and early 21<sup>st</sup> century *minzokubukkyō* (“Folklore Buddhism” 民俗仏教) to circumvent the “rational turn” of “modernity” that saw peripheral customs—*Jizō shrinkō*, for example—as “superstition.” In doing so, I resist the semi-embedded romanticized rhetoric of a “pure culture.”<sup>8</sup> Thus, I would

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<sup>5</sup> For example, see “Reijō Osorezan de Jigoku to Gokuraku wo Aruku” 霊場恐山で地獄と極楽を歩く. *Aomori-ken Kankō Jōhō Saito* 青森県観光情報サイト. Last revised June 18, 2025. Last accessed November 11, 2025. [https://aomori-tourism.com/feature/detail\\_48.html](https://aomori-tourism.com/feature/detail_48.html). The agency uses *jigoku* 地獄 (“the hells”) minimum ten times to describe the space. Contemporary popular media promotes this narrative as well, creating a fear or at least fantasy of the space. For example, see Tezuka Osamu 手塚治虫, *Raion Bukkusū: Hyaku Monogatari* ライオンブックス: 百物語 (Kodansha, 1971).

<sup>6</sup> For specific regional legends, see Ishikawa Jun'ichiro 石川純一郎, *Jizō no Sekai* 地蔵の世界 (Jiji Tsūhinsha, 1995): 247–286; for a summary, see Watari Kōichi 渡浩一, Review of *Jizō no Sekai* 地蔵の世界, by Ishikawa Jun'ichirō 石川純一郎, *Nihon Minzokugaku* 209 (1997): 129.

<sup>7</sup> Watari, “Review,” 132.

<sup>8</sup> See Gorai Shigeru 五來重, *Bukkyō to Minzoku: Bukkyō Minzokugaku Nyūmon* 仏教と民俗: 仏教民俗学入門 (Kadokawa, 1976), whose work Ishikawa comes out of.

like to offer that Osorezan's Stone Jizō blends established visual languages of salvation with new representations of sobriety to embody an altered religious authenticity and imaginative possibility that instils authority over the land and its myriad child spirits.

### Salvation and Sobriety: Reading the Stone Jizō

The roughly 20-foot-tall Stone Jizō at the centre of this study relies on and alters previously established and ingrained visual language of being an authority of enlightenment to generate new possibilities for interpreting and interacting with the figure. The statue requires reading its “normative” Jizō iconography and “perversions” of a severe austerity that differ from “traditional” lexica of salvatory ideals—to which I discuss in-depth below. It is thus the following “similar yet different” representations that allow the Stone Jizō to act as it does, give it that power to do so, and instill in the audience the ability to comprehend and accept such changes as proper.

Sitting on a bloomed lotus, Jizō gives a double connotation of their enlightenment and relation to the long visual culture that ties bodhisattvas to the lotus and thus salvation (see fig. 1).<sup>9</sup> Atop their throne they wield their *shakujō* (錫杖), a symbol of their spiritual ascendance, journey to save all, and tool for instruction.<sup>10</sup> In their left hand they hold the *nyoihōju* (“wish-fulfilling jewel” 如意宝珠), representing their

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<sup>9</sup> Anna Filigenzi, *Art and Landscape: Buddhist Rock Sculptures of Late Antique Swat/Uddiyana*, with contributions by Luca Maria Olivieri and a note by Peter Rockwell (Austrian Academy of Science Press, 2015), 70.

<sup>10</sup> For the *shakujō* and Zen teachings, see Steven Heine, “Thy Rod and Thy Staff, They Discomfort Me: Zen Staffs as Implements of Instruction,” in *Zen and Material Culture*, eds. Pamela Winfield and Steven Heine (Oxford University Press, 2017), 1–36.

potentiality and commitment to release those suffering in the hells.<sup>11</sup> The stonework of Jizō's robes billow over to give a ribbed quality, reminding viewers of the more extraneous ascetic practices of Śākyamuni Buddha. This status visually imprints to the parishioner a determination in the bodhisattva's goal to the extent of self-harm, thereby breaking free from "Tang international style" conventions of the more common, jolly portrayals of said deity. While the Stone Jizō still has a full moon face, arched eyebrows, long aquiline nose, full lips, and three neck rings, their disposition—being less "fat" and therefore less rich—breaks from tradition and invokes a more severe ascetic idea;<sup>12</sup> it is an instance of non-normative sobriety that aligns to the more extraneous practice of *migawari* (身代わり), whereby Jizō compassionately substitutes their body for one being tortured in the hells.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> For the *nyoihōju*, see Brian Ruppert, *Jewel in the Ashes: Buddha Relics and Power in Early Medieval Japan* (Harvard University Asia Center, 2000) and Ryūichi Abé, "Of Mantra and Palace: Textualizing the Emperor, Calamity, and the Cosmos," in *The Weaving of Mantra: Kūkai and the Construction of Esoteric Buddhist Discourse* (Columbia University Press, 1999): 305–357.

<sup>12</sup> Pamela Winfield, personal communication, December 10, 2024; for the "child-like face" of goodness, see Horiguchi Sōzan 堀口宗山, *Jizō bosatsu ryūzō 地藏菩薩理* (Geien Junreisha, 1955) 1–3.

<sup>13</sup> Marilyn Ivy, "Ghostly Epiphanies: Recalling the Dead on Mount Osore," in *Discourses of the Vanishing: Modernity, Phantasm, Japan* (University of Chicago Press, 1995), 157.





**Figure 1** Osorezan's Ishijizō. Unless otherwise indicated, the author took all photos in 2024.

Set against a verdant forest, the Stone Jizō fulfils their role of life extension. The bodhisattva sits in a half-lotus position (*hanka fuza* 半跏趺坐) and overlooks Mount Osore's cultivated "valley of hells" (*jigoku no tani* 地獄の谷),<sup>14</sup> representing what may be described as an "Enmei Jizō" ("the life-preserving Jizō" 延命地藏). This bodhisattva form upholds a specific task of protecting and preserving the living, specifically that of children.<sup>15</sup> While temple maps do not formally label this *ishijizō* as such, the Stone Jizō follows a historical lexicon of symbolic posturing that carries that mentality into its material form in a setting of general Enmei Jizō worship.<sup>16</sup>

<sup>14</sup> For an exploration of the space as the *jigoku no tani*, see Ivy, "Ghostly Epiphanies," 155–156; Ishikawa, *Jizō no Sekai*, 15–26.

<sup>15</sup> Alise Eishō Donnere, "Finding a Place for Jizō: A Study of Jizō Statuary in the Buddhist Temples of Sendai," *Japanese Journal of Religious Studies* 46, no. 2 (2019): 154.

<sup>16</sup> For a different Enmei Jizō at Osorezan, see Ivy, "Ghostly Epiphanies." Ivy's discussion of the Jizō Hall's *gohonzon* helps support my reading of the Stone Jizō as an Enmei by highlighting the prolific foci of "the eternal" at Osorezan. The Stone Enmei Jizō is not to be confused with those on Osorezan's older maps.

According to Alise Eishō Donnere, the half-lotus positioned bodhisattva denotes the idea they are ready to “stand up and immediately depart on a rescue mission” to protect those that call to them.<sup>17</sup> Moreover, as Sojun Roshi states, the title *enmei* “mean[s] something like ‘eternal,’” or “its own endless dimension [. . .] covering [. . .] all time and all space.”<sup>18</sup> With Osorezan being a land filled with bitter “myriad spirits” wishing to harm others, this notion of cross-dimensional, eternal protection becomes critical.<sup>19</sup> With this reading, the Stone Enmei Jizō not only takes on the role of preserving the lives of those in the here and now, but all children of Osorezan, past and future, material and immaterial. They never fully rest, for their mission—cemented in form—never truly ends.<sup>20</sup>

Beyond posturing, the statue’s substance additionally ties it to established narratives. The statue is made of stone rather than the wood, clay, or lacquer that frequently serve as the medium for sculptures across Japan. Such a material consciousness is important to consider as the Stone Jizō’s substance of creation directly relates to the domain of the figure it portrays. By being stone, this Jizō fits into the extant religious landscape that utilizes that materiality to generate a unified relational atmosphere. In other words, this statue mirrors other *ishijizō* and *shakutō* (“stone stupas” 石塔)—collectively-made non-figural representations of Jizō—that dot the landscape through their shared substance and divine portrayal,

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<sup>17</sup> Donnere, “Finding a Place,” 154.

<sup>18</sup> Sojun Roshi, “Commentary on the *Enmei Jukko Kannon Gyo*,” *Berkley Zen Center*, January 2003, 3.

<sup>19</sup> Helen Hardacre, *Marketing the Menacing Fetus in Japan* (University of California Press, 1997): 164.

<sup>20</sup> For similar posturing, see “Avalokiteshvara Padmapani,” THE MET, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, last modified March 17, 2025, <https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/39346>. The referenced statue is of Avalokiteshvara Padmani and their representative-positioning of ease and contemplation.

albeit in a different form.<sup>21</sup> This consciousness of a material continuity extends one step further. By way of their similar stone substance, these three representational forms of Jizō come to be equated with the physical mountain they inhabit. This association of substance ties human-made constructions like the Stone Jizō to the collective optic environment to form an overarching Jizō domain.<sup>22</sup>

The conscious choice of a visualized focus of stone further reifies the land as not just a hell-on-earth, but the specific *sai-no-kawara* (“dry riverbank” 賽の河原). In the c. 11<sup>th</sup>-century *sai-no-kawara Jizō wasan* (“Jizō hymn” 和讃), deceased “infants but two or three years old” construct *shakutō* throughout the hell before demons knock them down.<sup>23</sup> According to Marilyn Ivy, the children are locked in a “Sisyphean labour” of accumulation and torment.<sup>24</sup> In response, Jizō roams the land each night to try and save them.<sup>25</sup> In the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Tezuka Osamu used a barren landscape in conjunction with *shakutō* imagery and myriad spirits as identifiers for both Osorezan and *sai-no-kawara*, highlighting how ingrained such symbols and spaces have become in the public consciousness.<sup>26</sup> Takei Hiroyuki similarly used the imagery of a child constructing a *shakutō* to preclude his own narrative’s spatial and tonal shift to Osorezan and the hellish setting’s sobriety in his manga *Shāman Kingu*.<sup>27</sup> Yet, as Ivy outlines, this

<sup>21</sup> Ivy, “Ghostly Epiphanies,” 155–156.

<sup>22</sup> Glassman, *The Face of Jizō*, 188–189; Donnere, “Finding a Place,” 153–154.

<sup>23</sup> As translated from the Japanese in Lafcadio Hearn, *Glimpses of Unfamiliar Japan*, vol. 1 (Ams Press, 1894; repr., Ams Press 1969), 59–60.

<sup>24</sup> Ivy, “Ghostly Epiphanies,” 156, 158; for the process of continuous building and destruction, see Ishikawa, *Jizō no Sekai*, 15–16.

<sup>25</sup> Jizō statues that represent this myth are often made of stone; Ishikawa, *Jizō no Sekai*, 15–16; Hearn, *Glimpses of Unfamiliar Japan*, 61.

<sup>26</sup> Tezuka, *Raion Bukkusu*, 69–76.

<sup>27</sup> Takei Hiroyuki 武井宏之, *Shāman Kingu: 19 Osorezan Ru Voāru* シャーマンキング: 19 恐山ル・ヴォワール (Shueisha, 2002): 23–25.

act of piling stones holds a double meaning of (1) a ritualized offering to Jizō and (2) a visual representation of the bodhisattva and the dead who are otherwise physically absent.<sup>28</sup> This “labour of memorialization” parallels the Stone Jizō’s substance and power, thereby formulating the land via its material manifestation as not only a tangible *sai-no-kawara*, but a boundary of space to other “mundane” lands of the living.<sup>29</sup> I will elaborate on this point of “space” and the question of “when” later on.

The aesthetics of acidity inherent to the high-sulphurous domain create one last notable effect on the Stone Jizō and emotional landscape. From past volcanic activity, the ecosystem of and around Osorezan has changed to create a toxic environment uninhabitable for almost all fauna and flora.<sup>30</sup> The water alone has a pH of 3.4–3.8, compared to the more normal pH of 6.8–7.2 in Japan.<sup>31</sup> Beyond aspects of inhospitality, the environment induces chemical reactions that reinforce the image of a tangible *sai-no-kawara*. Highly acidic rains and sulphur deposits darken pigments and form kaleidoscopic colours along stone monuments, just as coin offerings “bleed” altered composites onto the material around (see fig. 2.1 and fig. 2.2). This phenomenon as it occurs on the Stone Jizō displays a production of emotional depth central to the bodhisattva’s newfound sobriety.

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<sup>28</sup> Ivy, “Ghostly Epiphanies,” 156.

<sup>29</sup> Ivy, “Ghostly Epiphanies,” 158; for the emotional boundary, see Kōda Rohan 幸田露伴, *Rohan Zenshū Dai-Jukkan* 露伴全集第十卷 (Iwanami Shoten, 1929): 94–96.

<sup>30</sup> Watanabe Mirai, Shigeki Yamamura, Takejiro Takamatsu, Masami K. Koshikawa, Seiji Hayashi, Tomoyoshi Murata, Shoko S. Saito, Kazuyuki Inubushi, and Kazunori Sakamoto, “Microbial Biomass and Nitrogen Transformations in Surface Soils Strongly Acidified by Volcanic Hydrogen Sulfide Deposition in Osorezan, Japan,” *Soil Science and Plant Nutrition* 56, no. 1 (2010): 124, 129–130.

<sup>31</sup> Kaneko Toyoji, Sanae Hasegawa, Katsuhisa Uchida, Tsuyoshi Ogasawara, Akira Oyagi, and Tetsuya Hirano. “Acid Tolerance of Japanese Dace (a Cyprinid Teleost) in Lake Osorezan, a Remarkable Acid Lake.” *Zoological Science* 16, no. 6 (1999): 871–872.





Figure 2.1 *Ishijizō sit near altered rocks*



Figure 2.2 *Blackened shakutō*

Upon staring at Jizō's face, I realized even bodhisattvas cry. Shaped by the contours of the figure, the acidic water, upon hitting Jizō's head, traces a natural route down the front of their face to coalesce under their eyes. The resulting effect is a sombre scene in which Jizō, eyes shut and looking down at us, cries tears of a metallic hue (see fig. 3). Cautious of whether this chemically manifested sense of sobriety was merely my own interpretation, I conversed with individuals on the temple grounds, colleagues, and those on online databases; all noted the tears before I raised the point. In questioning its intentionality, I must note that a chemical change such as this occurs over time. This means that there must have been a conscious choice on the clergy's part to allow the specific stone breakdown to occur—a thought supported when compared with the meticulous care and more standard practice in covering the heads of other statues (see fig. 4). The Stone Jizō, as being uncovered, is the outlier rather than the norm. I am left asking: What makes Jizō, the protector of all lost and suffering souls, cry so? Is it the dead children, us as we approach, or those trapped in the hells? Through established iconography of Jizō's salvific powers *and* atmosphere of a gravitational sobriety, I argue the statue takes on a level of religious authenticity and both spatial and spiritual authority that reifies its non-normative reality.



**Figure 3** *The crying bodhisattva. The acidic rain creates a chemical reaction that produces a tear-like effect on the statue's face.*





**Figure 4** Eirei Jizō Bosatsu. The cover prevents weather from damaging the statue. This statue is one of Osorezan's many that don similar head-covers.

### **‘To Be Afraid is to Not Have Faith’: The Land of the Hells**

We cannot understand Osorezan's Stone Jizō if we do not analyse the temple grounds as a sacred "ideological space." However, to parse the meaning of that term, we must first refer to Allan G. Grapard and his examination of the "establishment of a sacred geography" for Japan.<sup>32</sup> Grapard

<sup>32</sup> Allan G. Grapard, "Flying Mountains and Walkers of Emptiness: Toward a Definition of Sacred Space in Japanese Religions," *History of Religions* 21, no. 3 (1982): 195.



argues that we cannot limit perceptions of “sacred space” in Japan to one static conception or “-ism” as centuries of complex religious interactions led to the sacralization of the entirety of Japan temporally and spatially.<sup>33</sup> To better frame academic works regarding Japanese sacred spaces, he offers three non-mutually exclusive categories to frame our studies: “sacred site,” the material residence of a deity; “sacred area,” the more extensive territory that allows a realization of Buddha-nature; a “sacred nation,” the intertwined nature of Japan as a state and the Dharma as a salvific reality.<sup>34</sup> Osorezan is a combination of all three understandings of sacred space: it is the residence of Jizō, a salvific area that is Jizō themselves, insofar as the bodhisattva being the non-figural land that individuals can reach enlightenment on, and a space that ties Japan to spiritual supremacy via the manifestation of the Womb World. More on these specifics below. This framing allows us to place Osorezan in a much broader history of Japanese spatial traditions, thereby connecting peripheral phenomena to concurrent conceptions elsewhere.

To flesh out this framework, I pull from Malcolm B. Hamilton in seeing “ideology” as “a system of collectively held normative and reputedly factual ideas and beliefs [. . .] advocating a particular pattern of social relationships and arrangements [. . .] aimed at justifying a [. . .] pattern of conduct,” and Slavoj Žižek in rejecting ideology as a “false consciousness” for a socially embedded one that structures reality itself.<sup>35</sup> I look to the

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<sup>33</sup> Grapard, “Flying Mountains,” 195–196.

<sup>34</sup> Grapard, “Flying Mountains,” 196.

<sup>35</sup> Malcolm B. Hamilton, “The Elements of the Concept of Ideology,” *Political Studies* 35, no. 1 (1987): 38; Slavoj Žižek, *The Sublime Object of Ideology* (Verso, 1989; repr., Verso, 2008); for the production and general theories of space, place, and meaning, it may be more appropriate to cite Michel de Certeau, Henri Lefebvre, or Yi-fu Tuan. However, this combinative framework of Grapard, Hamilton, and Žižek allows me to explore “ideological

externalization of the result of an inner necessity as a desire to give meaning and structure “fantasy” that originates within. My intent is thus to explore this function of ideology at Osorezan as stemming from an internal need that positions the subject, rather than seeking and thus validating a “truth” claim.<sup>36</sup> I add a necessity to see “ideology” as a relationship that exists through “things;” materiality allows these patterns and externalizations to exist. While Žižek believes all ideologies have a “thing” that gives that innate perception meaning—what he calls the “fantasy support,”<sup>37</sup> I differ in seeing that “thing” not only as a fantastical perception of consciousness, but also a material object central to the reality-construction. As a result, I refer to the discussed phenomenon as a “Jizō ideology,” thereby seeing it is a collective system of beliefs around both the material and abstract Jizō patterned among relationships of Osorezan clerics, parishioners from nearby Mutsu city, and trans-prefectural visitors, all mapped onto conceptions of a sacred space relative to its social function and need. My reasoning is to permit a different conceptualization of Osorezan when compared to the paranormal talk surrounding it, and focus on the on-the-ground relational and material qualities that are lived and reinforced through reiterative emotions, imagination, and semblances of nostalgia. The goal is to attempt a self-reflexive consciousness while recognizing the spectrum of opinions in approaching the periphery as a research subject.<sup>38</sup>

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space,” i.e., a space that is both built on and supports an ideological way of (religious) practice, rather than space as a cultural production or form of political sacrality without pre-supposing judgement on what is “real.”

<sup>36</sup> Žižek, Slavoj, “Introduction: The Spectre of Ideology,” in *Mapping Ideology*, ed. Slavoj Žižek (Verso 1994), 4–8.

<sup>37</sup> Žižek, *The Sublime Object*, 47–50.

<sup>38</sup> For “exoticized” talk of “discovering Japan” and the “otherworldly” qualities of Tōhoku, see Mihic Tamaki, “Heterogenous Japan,” in *Re-Imagining Japan After Fukushima*

In analysing the statue within its ideological space, location and its reasoning under the temple's intellectual corpus play a critical role. Located in Mutsu within Honshu Island's northernmost prefecture, Aomori,<sup>39</sup> Osorezan's ideological space represents an expression of macrocosmic awakening that clerical views substantiate in form and substance. To understand why, one needs to examine the temple's founding. Risshakuji (Yamadera) and over forty temples north of Iwate share Osorezan's foundation myth.<sup>40</sup> Ennin, the head of Mt. Hiei and purported "founder" of these forty-plus temples, likely wanted to expand Tendai influence and landholdings in northeastern regions. He proclaimed to have had an auspicious dream while in China that cloaked this expansion in an aura of authenticity. "When you return to Japan, go eastward," instructed the dream. "You will find a sacred mountain in thirty-days walk from Kyoto. Carve a statue of the bodhisattva Jizō and propagate Buddhism."<sup>41</sup> Ennin allegedly discovered the lands of Osorezan and established his "unbroken" sacred site.<sup>42</sup> He, as the myth claims, chose the peripheral location because it was both a representation and manifestation of the

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(Australian National University Press, 2020); for Tōhoku's constructed history, see Hidemichi Kawanishi, *Tōhoku: Japan's Constructed Outland*, trans. Nanyan Guo and Raquel Hill (Brill, 2016).

<sup>39</sup> I find inspiration in Tsugaru studies which fills knowledge gaps of life and the important yet too often absent role of Ainu in forming regional and intersectional identities in the northeastern periphery. For an exploration of the Ainu of Tsugaru, see Sekine Tatsuhito 関根竜人, "Honshū Ainu to sono Kurashi" 本州アイヌとその暮らし in *Nihongo to Eigo de Yomu Tsugarugaku Nyūmon* 日本語と英語で読む津軽学入門, eds. Hannah J. Sawada and Kitahara Kanako (Shohan, 2008): 42–57.

<sup>40</sup> Ivy, "Ghostly Epiphanies," 145.

<sup>41</sup> Osorezan Bodaiji, *Osorezan: One of the Three Holiest Sites of Japan—Founded in the Ninth Century by Great Buddhist Master Jikaku En'nin* (Osorezan Jimusho, n.d.).

<sup>42</sup> For the history of Osorezan's space that challenges the "unbroken" narrative, see Ishikawa, *Jizō no Sekai*.

Buddhist cosmos, and therefore a metaphorical and literal expression of awakening—an aspect more unique than its common foundation tale.<sup>43</sup>

From very early in its construction, an understanding shaped the location of Osorezan as fundamental to the production of an ideological space and overarching metaphor of enlightenment. The temple's bureau of information states, "the landscape of Osorezan with the eight peaks surrounding it represents a lotus flower of eight petals, the symbol of the world of Buddha."<sup>44</sup> They use the words *hachiyō* ("eight-petaled lotus" 八葉) and *reijō* ("sacred site" 霊場), rather normative terminology hinting at the Womb World mandala.<sup>45</sup> The eight mountains are: Kamafuse, Ōzūkushi, Kozukushi, Hokkoku, Byōbu, Tsurugi, Keitō, and Jizō—the last of which houses the temple grounds.<sup>46</sup> In the centre lies Lake Usori (*Usoriko* 宇曽利湖), a milky, mist-laden body representative of the lotus's core that bridges our world to the lands of the dead and "paradise" (see fig. 5). The bureau of information continues, "[i]n its central area there are 108 pounds of boiling water and mud, which correspond with the 108 worldly desires and the hells linked to each of them."<sup>47</sup> There is a one-to-one

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<sup>43</sup> Osorezan, *One of the Three Holiest Sites of Japan*, n.d.; Fumiko Miyazaki and Duncan Williams explore Edo records of this temple and show wax and wane cycles of its popularity, challenging Ennin's more miraculous narrative. Miyazaki and Williams, "The Intersection of the Local and the Translocal at a Sacred Site: The Case of Osorezan in Tokugawa Japan," *Japanese Journal of Religious Studies* 28, no. 3/4 (2001): 399–440.

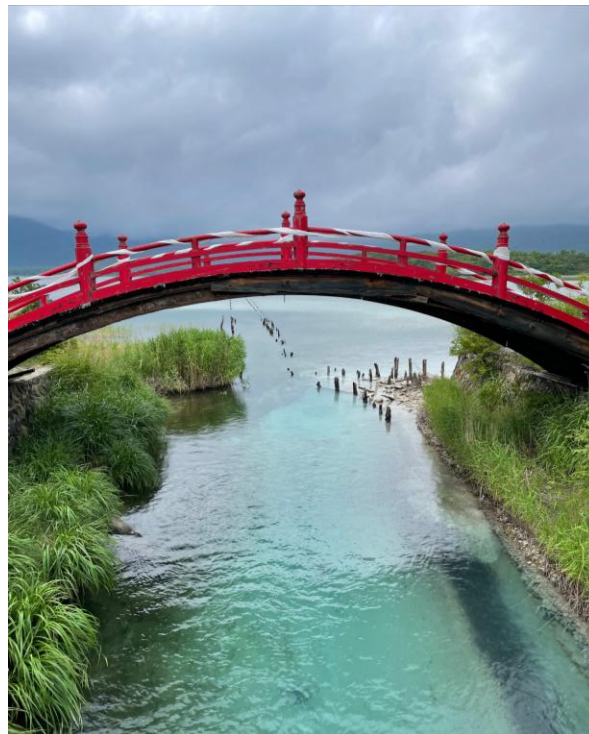
<sup>44</sup> Osorezan, *One of the Three Holiest Sites of Japan*, n.d.

<sup>45</sup> Osorezan Bodaiji. *Reijō Osorezan: Jikaku Daishi Ennin Kaiki* 霊場恐山: 慈覚大師円仁開基. Osorezan Jimusho, n.d.; Ivy, "Ghostly Epiphanies," 143–144; in contradistinction to Tezuka's focus on *sai-no-kawara*, Takei, *Shāman Kingu*, 36, uses this same *reijō* terminology. Contrasting these popular *mangaka* helps reveal certain popular understandings of the space, being either a hell or sacred site of salvation.

<sup>46</sup> Osorezan, *One of the Three Holiest Sites of Japan*, n.d.

<sup>47</sup> Osorezan, *One of the Three Holiest Sites of Japan*, n.d. The Meiji period's over-mining of Osorezan limited the "visible hells" to an estimate of 30 and required the temple to restore the land to this Buddhist parallel. See Ishikawa, *Jizō no Sekai*, 20.

relation between Osorezan's land and a Buddhist cosmological structuring of reality. However, the land's geography does not only represent the lotus and everything in a Buddhist equivalent of the notion of "good," but becomes a transubstantiation of enlightenment, wherein the lotus bud and eight mountains are the Womb World.<sup>48</sup> At the same time, those that subscribe to the "Jizō ideology" perform a narrative of it being the afore-said land of fear, the *sai-no-kawara*.<sup>49</sup> How may such a dichotomy exist, and what role does the Stone Jizō have in these dueling narratives?



**Figure 5** *The bridge before Lake Usori*

<sup>48</sup> For an exploration of how sacred sites become what they represent, see Janine Anderson Sawada, *Faith in Mount Fuji: The Rise of Independent Religion in Early Modern Japan* (The University of Hawai'i Press, 2022).

<sup>49</sup> Osorezan, *One of the Three Holiest Sites of Japan*, n.d; Ivy, "Ghostly Epiphanies," 147–148. For an exploration on this lived out dichotomous space during a 19<sup>th</sup>-century festival, see Kōda, *Rohan Zenshū*, 94–96.

To put it as a cleric described to me, the hells are not terrifying because Jizō is there with you—materially and spiritually. If you are frightened or suffer in the presence of the dead or in the hells, it is because you do not trust (or have faith) in Jizō’s powers.<sup>50</sup> The sulphurous smell permeating every pore of one’s nose, the geysers breaking the ground, the pools of boiling yellow muck that threaten to disintegrate one’s flesh, are all nothing compared to Jizō’s salvific grace. This belief does not discredit the seriousness of the hells but shifts our perspective of individualistic suffering to a guided understanding of emptiness within the mind. Such was the sentiment the Osorezan clerics expressed after the morning *Hannya Shingyō* (“Heart Sutra” of the *Prajna-paramita* 般若心経) chanting.<sup>51</sup> While we often associate Jizō with Avalokiteśvara as a devotional saviour figure ensuring rebirth out of hell and into Amida’s Pure Land, Jizō embodies here a slightly more philosophical insight into the emptiness of form that a wisdom figure such as Manjusri would more typically hold. Even in the hells, maybe even more so, enlightenment can occur.

The clerical mentality of Jizō’s’ salvific prowess may not appear “Zen-forward” based on its initial reliance on *tariki* (“other-power” 他力); yet, that reading is too narrow in scope. It is more apt to suggest, at least through dialogue with those at this *bodaiji*, that the security of Jizō’s presence allows one to properly focus on their own practices and, treating the hells as their teacher, reach the enlightenment that is already within

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<sup>50</sup> A common notion Mutsu temple workers and Osorezan clerics expressed (personal communication, August, 2024).

<sup>51</sup> For how Osorezan incorporates “contradictions” into a non-dual, heterodox-orthodox, see Ōmichi Haruka 大道晴香, “Arubeki Reijō-zō no Seisei: Rokujū–Nanajū Nendai no Osorezan wo Megutte” 在るべき霊場像の生成: 六〇・七〇年代の恐山をめぐって, *Shūkyō Kenkyū* 87 (2014): 119–120.

them.<sup>52</sup> One can further argue this notion when thinking about the placement of the Stone Jizō. The bodhisattva, both in our minds and on the temple grounds, is removed from centres of practice off the beaten path (see fig. 6). Despite being one of the core ideological foci of this hellscape, the Stone Jizō is not the most visited figure; Jizō is instead the watcher of and the land itself, protecting those within while they reach their potential under the deity's gaze.<sup>53</sup> What may appear as a dichotomy of *tariki* and *jiriki* ("self-power" 自力) holds no ground in this analysis.

Moving beyond this temple narrative, the Tendai founders did not solely build this site on Mt. Jizō because it visually represented the image in the foundational dream, but also because they saw the very mountain as Jizō in a non-figural form.<sup>54</sup> This mountain form became a spiritual gateway from which the figural Jizō emerged.<sup>55</sup> Through this narrative, the temple ties Jizō's nature of being the "Earth Womb" to the material rock and soil, finding salvation in a land that is the *sai-no-kawara* hell, the Womb World, and the bodhisattva. This understanding corresponds, albeit at a larger scale, to how the stone *stupas* (*shakutō*) are representative of Jizō in a non-figural manner. Such patterning suggests a continuous fluidity in understanding Jizō at Osorezan as the mountain, bodhisattva, and cosmos. This mentality contrasts well with the Stone Jizō, for it demonstrates how the temple grounds can exemplify both figural and non-figural representations of their Enmei or "life-preserving" patron in macro and micro forms.

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<sup>52</sup> A rather normative claim in Zen traditions of *hongaku shisō* ("original enlightenment thought" 本覚思想), though brings in the extension of a Jizō "supervisor" that watches and protects.

<sup>53</sup> Osorezan, *One of the Three Holiest Sites of Japan*, n.d.

<sup>54</sup> As explained to me by a temple worker (personal communication, August, 2024)

<sup>55</sup> Miyazaki and Williams, "The Intersection of the Local and the Translocal," 406–407.





**Figure 6** *The isolation of Stone Jizō*

### **The Time of Creation: Hypothesizing the Stone Jizō's Birth**

One cannot be certain when exactly the clerics of Osorezan commissioned the Stone Jizō, however I can offer some educated guesses of a possible contemporary origin. The temple was hesitant to discuss the “when” of this *ishijizō*; pushing for an answer would cross boundaries, particularly around origins that temples historically present as more mystical. This “mysticism” in turn gives rise to an aura of authenticity in being something of non-human origins. The *Jūyonkanbon Jizō Bosatsu Reigenki* (“The Fourteen-Volume Collection of Miraculous Tales of Jizō Bodhisattva” — 四卷本地蔵菩薩靈驗記; hereafter *Reigenki*), a pre-modern text focussing on Jizō worship, often centralizes such mystical origins of *ishijizō*. For example, Jizō implants the idea in one’s mind via the dreamworld or causes statues to magically appear by those who worship. In other cases, Jizō’s many bodies manifest as various statues. I cannot say whether the temple

believes in similar ideas for certain, though there are patterns in the historical record where Jizō frequently appears in contrast to more static understandings as a living and dynamic statue capable of movement and action, and it is through such origins that *ishijizō* come to be important.<sup>56</sup> The admission of a profane and contemporary construction would thus strip the statue of much of its authority and sacrality.

Unlike many of the other statues at Osorezan, the clerics do not protect the Stone Jizō from the aforementioned acidic rains. This decision has caused chemical alterations to the stonework, most notably on the Stone Jizō's front steps. Intrigued by this accumulation of a dark-green pigment, I analysed a surplus of photographs uploaded onto open-access sites and built a database of the slow yet visible chemical alterations over an 18-year period. The pigmentation I witnessed in 2024 was slightly more than double that of the photos taken between 2014–2018. This might suggest that sometime around 2016 was the statue's half-life cycle, though such an analysis would rely on the pigmentation's permanence and the clergy's inability to clean such alterations.

Keeping the above in mind, there is another route we can follow to estimate the Stone Jizō's age. When I went to Osorezan in August 2024, I acquired both their Japanese and bilingual pamphlets. The dual English-Japanese one does not show an image of the Stone Jizō, but rather a tall, thin tower titled the *hachiyō-tō* ("eight-lotus tower" 八葉塔) in a similar geographical location (see figs. 7–10, arranged chronologically).<sup>57</sup> I had

<sup>56</sup> See *Jūyonkanbon Jizō Bosatsu Reigenki* 一四卷本地蔵菩薩靈驗記, eds. Ōshima Tatehiko 大島建彦, et al., 2 vols. (Miyai Shoten, 2002–2003). For the "living Buddha" (生身), see Ishikawa, *Jizō no Sekai*, 7–38; Watari Kōichi 渡浩一, *Ojizō-san no Sekai: Sukui no Setsuwa, Rekishi, Minzoku* お地藏さんの世界: 救いの説話・歴史・民俗 (Keiyūsha, 2011): 38–43.

<sup>57</sup> In mapping the borders of a *reijō*, contemporary tourist maps and shrine pilgrimage mandalas both default on similar methods that bend the land to present a symbolic

initially assumed this was the temple's conscious choice to refer to that specific *ishijizō* in a non-figural way, assigning it a purpose more fit for a reliquary than a statue. Yet, after building my database, I realized the earliest credible online photograph of the Stone Jizō dates to 2008.<sup>58</sup> On the other hand, the Stone Jizō is not extant in late-19<sup>th</sup>-century scholarly works. For example, Ivy notes a non-figural ossuary—potentially the “bilingual” map's *hachiyō-tō*—in the mid-1980s without reference to the Stone Jizō, thereby providing a possible temporal limit.<sup>59</sup>

It is possible that the Stone Jizō was not well known in international and national tourist circles, or that no individual felt the need to share such photographs. However, when viewing the figural Jizō's absence with the previously mentioned potential half-life cycle deduced from chemical pigmentations, I came to regard the pamphlet's non-figural representation as speaking more to the absence of the figural material Stone Jizō from that period than an artistic choice. I thus suggest treating (1) 2008 as the earliest credible origin date, (2) 2000–20008 as possible years of creation, and (3) the mid-1980s as the oldest, albeit unlikely, maximum. These estimates correlate to the post-1987 Tōhoku Shinkansen construction and JR “Discover Japan” campaign, wherein Osorezan received a mass increase in tourism and thus profit. This rise may account for the relatively new formation.<sup>60</sup> That is not to discredit the former *hachiyō-tō* from being a long-lasting reliquary, nor is it to challenge the

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picture of temple grounds rather than a site's accurate spacing. For the construction of Osorezan as a *reijō*, see Mori Yūo 森勇男, *Reijō Osorezan Monogatari* 霊場恐山物語 (Namioka Shoten, 1978).

<sup>58</sup> Jpatokal, “File: Jizo-osorezan-jpatokal.jpg,” Wikimedia Commons, March 2, 2024, last modified November 7, 2021, <https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Jizo-osorezan-jpatokal.jpg#filehistory>.

<sup>59</sup> Ivy, “Ghostly Epiphanies,” 154.

<sup>60</sup> For the occult and tourism in Aomori, see Ōmichi Haruka *‘Itako’ no Tanjō: Masumedia to Shūkyō Bunka* 「イタコ」の誕生: マスメディアと宗教文化 (Kōbundō, 2017).

anecdotes and narratives of the stone structure; I instead question whether the Stone Jizō is as materially old as the idea it seeks to convey. Such a hypothesis would suggest that the newly founded “*ishijizō hachiyō-tō*”—as a material construction in a figural shape, not as a practice of being a reliquary—is a 21<sup>st</sup>-century construction, roughly 20 years old.



Figure 7 Japanese Map of Osorezan. From Ozoresan, Reijō Osorezan, n.d. (n.p.).

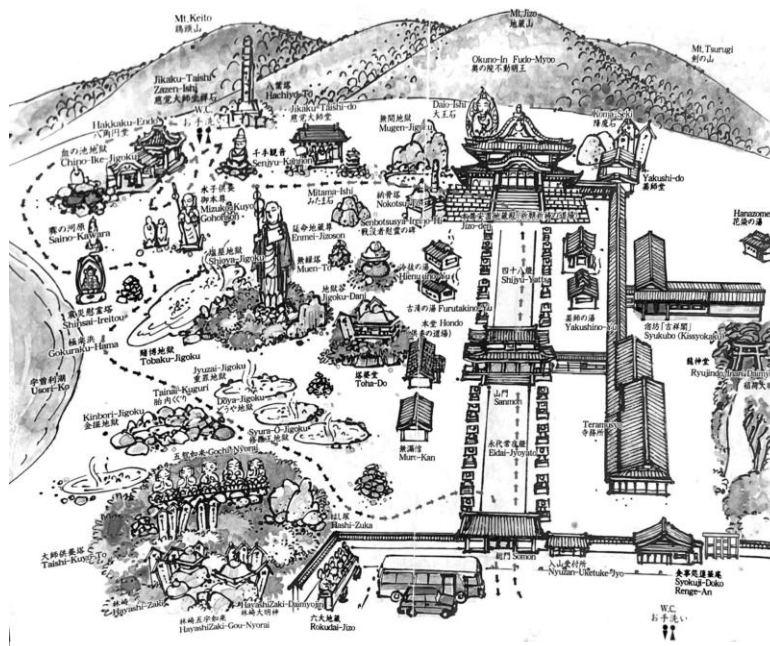


Figure 8 Map of Osorezan (Bilingual). From *Osorezan, One of the Three Holy Sites of Japan*, n.p.

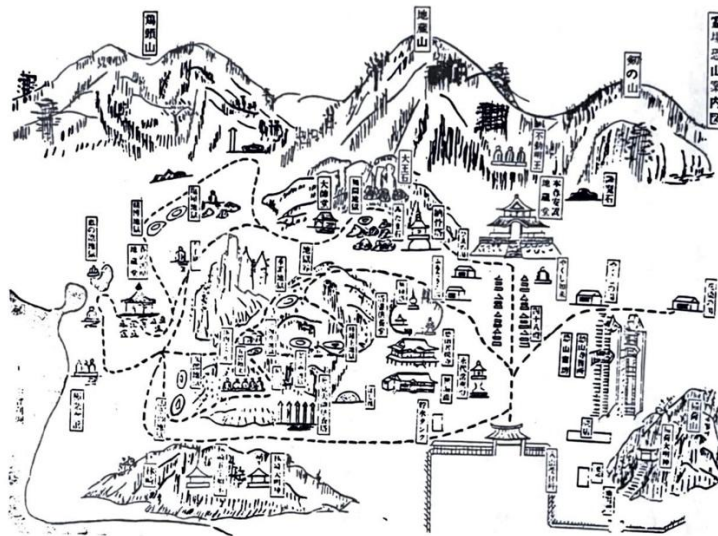
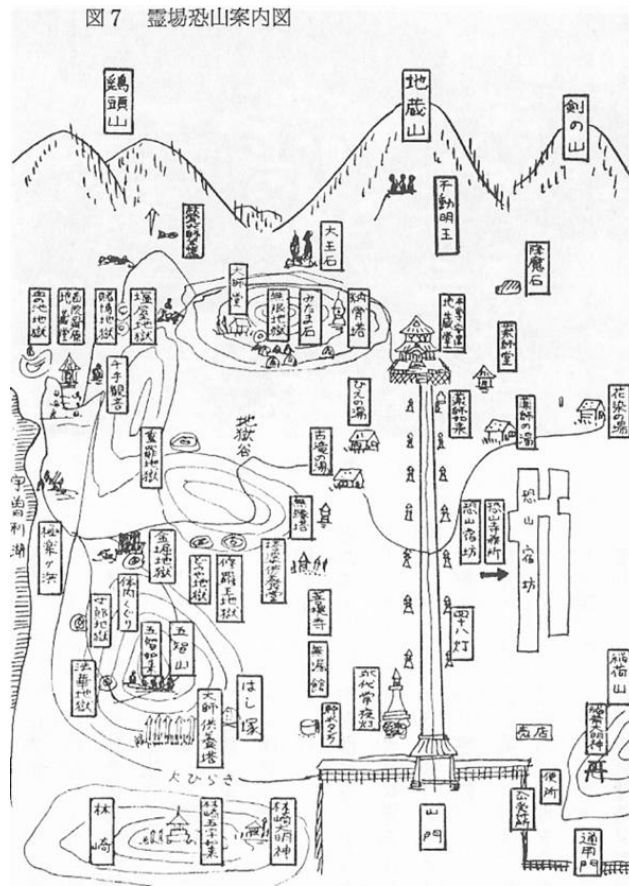


Figure 9 Ishikawa's Guide Map. From *Ishikawa, Jizō no Sekai*, 19.



**Figure 10** Mori's 1975 Map of Osorezan. From Mori, Reijō Osorezan Monogatari, 50.

## A Three-Dimensional Face: Jizō Through Comparison

The Stone Jizō discussed here is far from the only statue on the temple grounds. When analysing a material object, it is helpful to compare it to other like-minded constructions to elucidate further distinctions. Along the shore of Osorezan's *gokuraku hama* ("paradise beach" 極楽浜), a notion denoting the "far shore" of enlightenment and physical representation of *nirvana* in comparison to our own non-*nirvana* "near shore," lies the *hi-gashi nihon daishinsai kuyō-tō* ("Great East Japan Earthquake Memorial

Tower” 東日本大震災供養塔) (see fig. 11).<sup>61</sup> The temple used their own funds to build this memorial shortly after the March 11, 2011 earthquake, tsunami, and nuclear meltdown triple disaster for the deceased in Tōhoku.

The memorial “tower” is shaped like a tall, semi-opened lotus bud. A red-bibbed Jizo figure in the lotus-position appears within the almond-shaped, womb-like niche, visually communicating the *Tathāgatagarbha* message that Buddhahood and salvation lie within our lotus-like Womb World—only in embryonic form. Accompanying what I call the “Gokuraku Jizō” are two smaller chibi-like versions of the patron, representative of the children they save.<sup>62</sup> A granite table stands in front of the “tower” to hold offerings for the deceased, while bells stand erect on either side to call the bodhisattva and liminal dead to attention. Numerous handprints of different ages and sizes are engraved on the back of the lotus facing the beach of paradise. These engravings allow one to connect with the dead by physically touching a hand that may resemble them.<sup>63</sup> In addition, through its physicality, these handprints advance the idea that Lake Usori bridges our realm to others. It does so by creating the effect of the dead reaching out from the lake, grasping onto the bud and, in turn, enlightenment. How may this statue compare with the primary Stone Jizō?

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<sup>61</sup> Osorezan, *Reijō Osorezan*, n.d.

<sup>62</sup> Jizō’s common chibi-like appearance may be rooted in what Watari describes as “shamanistic ideas of children” as liminal beings and intermediaries for oracles. See Watari, *Ojizō-san*, 70–72.

<sup>63</sup> The handprint imagery mirrors an illustrated *Reigenki* tale. A community constructed a giant *ishijizō* to avoid torture in the hells. They pasted one thousand handprints over Jizō’s skin and inserted the Diamond and Womb World mandalas on the inside. Afterwards, that Jizō statue saved a cleric from the hells and commissioned a road-building project connecting this group to others; Glassman, *The Face of Jizō*, 124–125.





**Figure 11** *The gokuraku Jizō of the higashi nihon daishinsai kuyō-tō*



First, the Gokuraku Jizō is in a much more relevant and “inclusive” area of other Jizō domains and bodhisattvas. Right next to this *ishijizō* lies the Jizō of the Blood Pool Hell (*chi no ike jigoku* 血の池地獄) and the primary image of veneration for the water child memorial service (*mizuko-kuyō gohonzon* 水子供養御本尊). In addition, a few Kannon bodhisattva statues stand nearby for worship, as well as the *hakkaku endō* (“octagonal hall” 八角円堂) that stores items of the deceased waiting to be burnt. Explorations on each of these sites are beyond the scope of this analysis; I instead raise them to show how the Gokuraku Jizō is situated in a more active nexus of prayers, rituals, and corpora of sacrality. On the other hand, the Stone Jizō exists in a way so as to not immediately be seen.

Secondly, and more importantly, the function of each statue differs drastically. When I asked a Mutsu temple worker what the Gokuraku Jizō’s core function was, she suggested it offered individuals a centre for the dead who were lost during the 3.11 disaster. She stated that people in the Shimokita peninsula believe their spirits return to Osorezan upon death, no matter where they are.<sup>64</sup> This belief, coupled with the Gokuraku Jizō as a material object, allows the numerous victims of the disaster to care for their beloved deceased in a designated space without having their physical bodies or the ability to inter them. One throws money on the table, bows to Jizō, rings the bells, and deliver a message to the dead at the lake. People—mainly female-presenting individuals—came, engaged with the material aspects at play, and cried. This space is a localized symbol for an emotive relational form of imagination, connection, and deliverance. It is a material construction for the living to engage with the dead. In contrast, the giant Stone Jizō is primarily a construction for the dead to engage with the living.<sup>65</sup>

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<sup>64</sup> An idea further documented in Osorezan, *Reijō Osorezan*, n.d.

<sup>65</sup> For a nuanced view of the non-dual relationship of the living and the dead, see William R LaFleur, *Liquid Life: Abortion and Buddhism in Japan* (Princeton University Press, 2020).

### ‘Through Thy Teeth, Shalt be of Thee’: House of the Dead

In the Stone Jizō, form meets function. While the temple’s visitors and clerics referred to the Jizō in question as a stone buddha (*sekibutsu*), stone Jizō (*ishijizō*), or simply The Great Lord Jizō (*Ōjizō-sama*), the temple’s official narrative differs. According to the temple’s bureau of information, the proper terminology for this rendition of Jizō is the *hachiyō-tō* (“eight-leaf tower” 八葉塔).<sup>66</sup> In literal terms, this means that the Stone Jizō is not a “statue” but a relic-holding *stupa* or *tō* (塔). However, such a “truth” directly clashes with how most individuals view and speak about the “statue.” My earlier framing of the Stone Jizō as only a statue was then less a tool of subversion to my readers than a reflection of this predominant view. In doing so, I raise a question of who is this statue a reliquary for? What importance does this reliquary’s form have, and what audience is meant to read it as such?

Approaching the eight-leaf *tō* and its mortuary practices through the localized framework of Osorezan additionally allowed me to circumvent—or attempt to circumvent—the thematic trappings of the *sōsai mon-dai* (“mortuary problem” 葬祭問題) around Buddhist death practices that followed Tamamuro Taijō’s (1963) *Sōshiki Bukkyō* 葬式仏教.<sup>67</sup> As Mark Michael Rowe (2011) writes, the expression *sōshiki bukkyō* (“funerary Buddhism” 葬式仏教) “has since become pejorative, synonymous with the supposed decline of Japanese Buddhism.”<sup>68</sup> It thus commonly brings a perception of wealthy temples profiting off entrepreneurial endeavours whereby they have turned “death” into a commodity.<sup>69</sup> My focus on

<sup>66</sup> Osorezan, *One of the Three Holiest Sites of Japan*, n.d.

<sup>67</sup> Tamamuro Taijō 圭室諦成. *Sōshiki Bukkyō* 葬式仏教 (Daihō Rinkaku, 1963; repr., Daihō Rinkaku, 1993).

<sup>68</sup> Mark Michael Rowe, *Bonds of the Dead: Temples, Burial, and the Transformation of Contemporary Japanese Buddhism* (The University of Chicago Press, 2011), 6.

<sup>69</sup> Rowe, *Bonds of the Dead*, 6.

materiality, form, identity, and land prior to an analytical mortuary account seeks to give the reader the opportunity to view the Stone Jizō from a “non-*sōshiki bukkō*” framework that would otherwise limit the possibility of how one may critically engage with all facets in play.<sup>70</sup>

*Stupas*, also known as pagoda or *tō* in the Japanese context, protect and enshrine the impermanent in a semblance of permanence. In other words, *stupas* try to prolong and project the spiritual powers and existence of an individual after death by preserving a portion of that renowned figure’s bodily remains.<sup>71</sup> Most Japanese pagodas are multi-tiered stone structures or wooden buildings that complement the architecture of the main hall they are situated near. In the case of Osorezan, one instead sees a giant stone statue of a bodhisattva sitting on a lotus leaf rather than the standard tower-like form conventional to East Asia.

The phenomenon of having a stone statue of a bodhisattva simultaneously be a pagoda has precedence. During the beginnings of “non-sectarian” Buddhism, *stupas* originally represented Śakyamuni Buddha’s body through its physical form and the artifacts held within.<sup>72</sup> That idea generally shifted over time in China and then Japan to create the “traditionally” East Asian looking buildings we see today. The real question to ask is why. Why have the eight-leaf tower as a statue of Jizō instead of the more typical pagoda, and what religious importance or power might that choice of a shifted materiality convey?

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<sup>70</sup> For an exploration of the *sōsai mondai* and vibrancy within mortuary practices, see Rowe, *Bonds of the Dead*.

<sup>71</sup> John S. Strong, *Relics of the Buddha* (Princeton University Press, 2004), 8–9.

<sup>72</sup> Strong, *Relics of the Buddha*, xiii–xvi; for early forms of Buddhism and their terminology, see Rupert Gettin, “Was Buddhaghosa a Theravādin? Buddhist Identity in the Pali Commentaries and Chronicles,” in *How Theravāda is Theravāda? Exploring Identities*, eds. Peter Skilling, et al. (Silkworm Books, 2012), 1–66.

Here we come to the crux of our analysis. Pagodas typically hold the relic of some sacred figure. Just like the ancient city of Kanyākubja's *stupa* that houses a tooth relic of the Buddha,<sup>73</sup> Osorezan's *Jizō hachiyō-tō* carries the teeth of the deceased. The notable difference between the two is that Osorezan houses milk teeth from children born in Aomori prefecture who died quite young, rather than a figure of the highest eminence.<sup>74</sup> Around Osorezan are various "donation boxes" in which a parent can anonymously place their child's teeth. Once every July, the clerics take the teeth from the boxes and place them within the *Jizō-tō*. These children are not saints, nor had they attained high spiritual training. They are simply lost beings whose deaths caused distress for the living.

To elucidate some local ideas around this internment act, I turn to one of the most popular rituals at Osorezan: the *mizuko-kuyō*. The function of collecting children's teeth acts very similar to rituals around the *mizuko* on two levels. First, as Helen Hardacre states, Osorezan is populated by numerous young spirits full of negative attachments to the material world and "unable to be at peace" (see fig. 12).<sup>75</sup> These were specifically "spirits of all those involved in [. . .] practices of abortion, infanticide [. . .] and abandoning the elderly to die."<sup>76</sup> Couple those "angry" spirits with the sheer volume of Aomori children who "return" to Osorezan, and you have an insurmountable amount of unseen beings able to affect the material and seen world. Interring children's teeth inside the body of *Jizō* serves to protect all from any negative actions the spirits may take: the living from

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<sup>73</sup> Strong, *Relics of the Buddha*, 180.

<sup>74</sup> The practice of storing items or symbols within a *Jizō* statue has a particularly long history. Scholars have uncovered items such as hair or images of the bodhisattva to *sid-dham* engravings of *Jizō*'s "seed." See Horiguchi 堀口, *Jizō bosatsu ryūzō 地藏菩薩理*.

<sup>75</sup> Hardacre, *Marketing the Menacing Fetus*, 164. For a visualization of this perspective in a popular contemporary context, see Tezuka, *Raion Bukkusu*, 68–90.

<sup>76</sup> Hardacre, *Marketing the Menacing Fetus*, 164.

harm and the dead from accruing any bad *karma*. The act of finding a posthumous house within Jizō helps those spirits by guiding them to a more prosperous life, just as *mizuko-kuyō* reportedly set out to do.



Figure 12 Pinwheels for the *mizuko* of Osorezan.

Secondly, finding a “home” for one’s deceased child postmortem can allow an alleviation of distress for the living. While visibly represented throughout the nation, there is perhaps a societal distrust of *mizuko kuyō* in Japan. Many individuals question the practice’s scriptural validity and more importantly the forms of monetary and emotional exploitation directed towards women that cause unnecessary distress.<sup>77</sup> However, it is important to recognize the cases where such rituals can help an individual accept the passing of their child. Hardacre recounts a few testimonies of women who went through *mizuko* rites, focusing not on the legal and economic aspects but the mental hardships or expressions of relief possible through such events. As she documents, these women alleviated trauma associated with their child’s death through the prospect of their child’s immediate rebirth into a better life.<sup>78</sup>

<sup>77</sup> Hardacre, *Marketing the Menacing Fetus*, 3–4, 164.

<sup>78</sup> Hardacre, *Marketing the Menacing Fetus*, 158, 182–183.

Similarly, we can look to Marc L. Moskowitz who explores *yingling* (嬰靈), similarly aborted or deceased fetuses, in Taiwan. While he notes how *yingling* Buddhist rituals and their public perception can and do cause unnecessary burdens for women, he argues that this worldview also allows instances where women can form bountiful relationships with their deceased child's spirit.<sup>79</sup> On the same note, the ritual to appease said spirits offers the alleviation of anxiety (emotions) or negativity (worldly events) that may plague an individual, whether it be related to one's abortion or not.<sup>80</sup> It is here we come back to the importance of emotions and imagination in such rituals. I suggest Osorezan's Stone Jizō holds the same potential. With the belief that Jizō, as the patron of children, will guide and protect them in death, one may similarly alleviate distress by finding faith in some other-power. Moreover, by having the physical form of the *stupa* be this patron protector, one creates a thick layering of symbolic meaning around salvation and potential that reinforces the Jizō ideology and understandings of protection at play.

By interring children's remains in a *stupa*, the Stone Jizō equates each of the lost children with the Buddha. The Buddha, upon nearing his death, instructed the loyal Ānanda to enshrine his material remains at a *stupa* for all to come learn.<sup>81</sup> Out of these remains, John Strong argues that the teeth were the most important. According to him, Pali literature prioritized teeth as one of the "meaningful centres" of the Buddha, for they are the only bone one can see while visibly alive. They bridge the worlds of the living with the inevitable dead.<sup>82</sup> Moreover, they were the only artifacts to survive the Buddha's cremation in their entire pure, white, and

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<sup>79</sup> Marc L. Moskowitz, *The Haunting Fetus: Abortion, Sexuality, and the Spirit World in Taiwan* (University of Hawai'i Press, 2001), 58.

<sup>80</sup> Moskowitz, *The Haunting Fetus*, 48, 50.

<sup>81</sup> Strong, *Relics of the Buddha*, 121.

<sup>82</sup> Strong, *Relics of the Buddha*, 180.

unchanged form. Thousands of pilgrims travel to reach these teeth and feel the spiritual power within.<sup>83</sup> Yet, instead of the Buddha, bodhisattva, or some other master, Osorezan's Jizō-tō holds an assortment of teeth from children who died each year. Their teeth mix in the stone and remain in perpetuity. By calling back to such high-honouring rituals, I argue the Osorezan clerics give importance to and put the deceased children on the same spiritual ground as *stupa*-associated eminent individuals.

The Stone Jizō's interment practice and uplifting of deceased children mixes, as Sasaki Kōkan would outline, two axes of conceptualized *seikatsu bukkyō* ("lived Buddhism" 生活仏教). On one end lies the "doctrinal stance," the Buddha's command regarding his remains and their sacrality. On the other end is the "local perspective," wherein two manners represent the importance of deceased children: (1) the grieving family, presumably from Aomori, and (2) perceptions of Osorezan as the *sai-no-kawara* with its host of liminal children. I hesitate to treat the two axes as mutually exclusive. I more directly pull from Sasaki's work to similarly prioritize ways that people "feel" and conceptualize that feeling of what they understand "Buddhism" to be. Doing so allows one to read "Japanese Buddhist" practices, such as the Stone Jizō, not only as an intellectual conscious phenomenon, but also an inner feeling of emotion expressed outwards. This is the inclusive space of reality between axes.<sup>84</sup> Thus, as a *stupa* in *sai-no-kawara*, Jizō physically and inwardly becomes the protector of and construction for children in hell, as well as hope for all the lost souls set to return to the mountain of fear.

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<sup>83</sup> Strong, *Relics of the Buddha*, xiii, 41–43.

<sup>84</sup> For more, see Sasaki Kōkan 佐々木宏幹, *Seikatsu Bukkyō no Minzokushi: Dare ga Shisha wo Shizume, Shōja wo Anshinsaseru no ka* 生活仏教の民俗誌: 誰が死者を鎮め, 生者を安心させるのか (Shunjusha, 2012).

### The Five Reflections and Recitations: Teeth at Play

There is one final ritual to consider when looking at the importance of teeth at Osorezan: the *gokan no ge* (“verse of five reflections” 五観の偈) and its effect on visitors. Throughout Japanese history, individuals have often deemed mountains as sacred spaces that generate social networks and lineages of pilgrimage communities. Whether it be the numerous large-scale Fujisan (富士山) movements or the smaller shrine rituals at Mitakesan (御嶽山) and their respective *oshi* (“pilgrim guide” 御師), Osorezan differs not.<sup>85</sup> As Ishikawa states, Osorezan used to have prominent *Jizō-kō* (Jizō pilgrim associations or confraternities 地蔵講) throughout the early modern to modern periods, though their numbers have diminished.<sup>86</sup> As a remnant practice, Osorezan offers pilgrims and tourists the opportunity to stay overnight in their *shukubō* (“pilgrim’s lodging” 宿坊) and participate in curated religious activities for a fee (for an estimate of numbers, see Table 1.1 and 1.2). In the *shukubō*, the *gokan no ge* builds and relies on this worldview of and importance regarding teeth.

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<sup>85</sup> For Fujisan groups, see Janine Anderson Sawada, “Religious Culture in Transition: Mt. Fuji,” in *Defining Shugendō: Critical Studies on Japanese Mountain Religion*, eds. Andrea Castiglioni, et al. (Bloomsbury Academic, 2020): 187–204; for Mitakesan, see Helen Hardacre, *Religion and Society in Nineteenth-Century Japan: A Study of the Southern Kantō Region, Using Late Edo and Early Meiji Gazetteers* (University of Michigan, 2002). Labelling any such practice as solely “Buddhist” discredits other intertwined traditions at play.

<sup>86</sup> Ishikawa, *Jizō no Sekai*, 24–25.



Table 1.1: Number of Visitors by Area in the Shimokita Peninsula, 2001–2006.

| Classification | 2001      | 2002      | 2003      | 2004      | 2005      | 2006      |
|----------------|-----------|-----------|-----------|-----------|-----------|-----------|
| Osorezan       | 370,00    | 390,000   | 446,000   | 432,000   | 404,000   | 387,000   |
| Yagen Keiryū   | 347,000   | 343,000   | 419,000   | 374,000   | 324,000   | 289,000   |
| Shiriya        | 140,000   | 142,000   | 148,000   | 150,000   | 131,000   | 131,000   |
| Ōma            | 223,00    | 218,000   | 260,000   | 220,000   | 204,000   | 232,000   |
| Hotoke-Ga-Ura  | 227,000   | 231,000   | 244,000   | 219,000   | 174,000   | 190,000   |
| Wakinosawa     | 39,000    | 39,000    | 46,000    | 42,000    | 33,000    | 29,000    |
| Yunokawa       | 65,000    | 66,000    | 93,000    | 102,000   | 125,000   | 102,000   |
| Total People   | 1,411,000 | 1,429,000 | 1,656,000 | 1,539,000 | 1,395,000 | 1,360,000 |

Source: *Dēta Mutsu 2008 データむつ 2008* (Mutsu: Mutsu-shi Kikaku-bu, 2008): 37.

Note: These are the earliest readily available public statistics.

Table 1.2: Number of Tourists, 2017–2023.

| Classification                | Location | 2017    | 2018    | 2019    | 2020   | 2021    | 2022    | 2023    |
|-------------------------------|----------|---------|---------|---------|--------|---------|---------|---------|
| Osorezan                      | Tanabe   | 214,999 | 178,450 | 183,447 | 93,558 | 102,914 | 152,313 | 225,424 |
| Mt. Kamafuse Observation Deck | Ōminato  | 22,526  | 21,162  | 21,151  | 16,507 | 9,563   | 14,881  | 16,843  |
| Mt. Kamafuse Ski Resort       | Ōminato  | 21,963  | 17,162  | 20,815  | 2,521  | 32,906  | 181,020 | 149,255 |
| Yunokawa Hot Springs          | Kawauchi | 46,428  | 43,523  | 40,595  | 26,557 | 22,344  | 24,418  | 25,455  |
| Yagen Gorge                   | Ōhata    | 41,381  | 39,185  | 47,482  | 30,376 | 27,472  | 47,262  | 53,839  |

|                                       |             |                |                |                |                |                |                |                |
|---------------------------------------|-------------|----------------|----------------|----------------|----------------|----------------|----------------|----------------|
| Oku-Yagen<br>Shūkei Park<br>Resthouse | Ōhata       | 10,643         | 9,916          | 12,227         | 7,776          | 7,599          | 13,039         | 15,556         |
| Kappa no Yu                           | Ōhata       | 6,273          | 5,926          | 4,831          | 3,671          | 4,192          | 4,745          | 4,979          |
| Yagen Campsite                        | Ōhata       | n/a            | 1,515          | 1,811          | 1,362          | 1,621          | 2,469          | 2,339          |
| Ōmazaki Rest-<br>house                | Ōma         | 41,654         | 40,208         | 39,031         |                |                |                |                |
| Ōmazaki Park                          | Ōma         | 71,700         | 76,137         | 84,797         | 44,801         | 55,038         | 106,535        | 131,635        |
| Cape Shiriya                          | Higashidori | 141,630        | 128,200        | 120,085        | 56,662         | 70,801         | 78,800         | 79,408         |
| Hotoke-Ga-Ura                         | Sai         | 87,094         | 85,101         | 86,865         | 53,434         | 56,151         | 64,295         | 77,040         |
| Wishing Rock<br>Park                  | Sai         | 13,686         | 12,181         | 16,010         | 8,341          | 9,365          | 10,344         | 11,034         |
| <b>Total</b>                          |             | <b>719,977</b> | <b>658,666</b> | <b>679,147</b> | <b>345,566</b> | <b>399,966</b> | <b>700,121</b> | <b>792,807</b> |

Source: *Dēta Mutsu 2024* データむつ 2008 (Mutsu: Mutsu-shi Kikaku-bu, 2024): 47.

Note: The COVID-19 Pandemic reduced the number of tourists in 2020, with some locations recovering better than others. While Osorezan does not have the same visitors as it did during the early 2000s, its quick recovery from the pandemic shows a high interest in the site.

Upon entry into the *shukubō*, a cleric informs all that they must partake in two rituals: eating and the morning ceremonies. The bells of the *shukubō* ring at 17:25 sharp, signalling the guests to hastily make their way to the dining hall (*shokudō* 食堂) for the evening meal. One cleric waits for all to enter, then guides each person to their designated seats ordered by their Japanese names. The nine of us sit evenly spaced at one long table, all facing the wall; to our left is a golden-flaked statue of Śākya-muni Buddha. At 17:30 sharp, the cleric instructs all to take their chopsticks out of their “Zen packaging,”<sup>87</sup> clasp our hands together, and communally recite the *gokan no ge*. The cleric gives a short speech, bows, and leaves. Only then do the guests talk amongst themselves, as if the aura of sacrality vanished with the cleric’s departure. He returns at 18:00 for us to

<sup>87</sup> A term the other guests used. They had Osorezan’s name and a lotus on the front, and the *gokan no ge* script on the back.

communally recite the “after meal verse,” thereby signalling our departure from the hall.

The entire ritual generates a perceived connection of eating to our teeth. In their speech, the cleric told us that as we eat, we should reflect on (1) who grew the food, (2) who transported it, and (3) who cooked it. Once we do so, we will realize that the food becomes filled with the “taste of the Dharma.”<sup>88</sup> In this process of consuming the Dharma-taste, people I dined with during and after the meals commented on their teeth or the “strange” customs at the temple. For example, a few individuals mentioned how the strange (*bukimi* 不気味) children’s teeth interred in the *Jizō-tō* made them unsettled. On the other hand, others were more self-conscious of, laughed at, or solemnly remarked their own use of their teeth to eat. There was a plurality that ranged from discussion to a simple passing comment. For most of those I conversed with afterwards, who were mostly non-Aomorian Japanese individuals, the preservation of children’s teeth weighed heavily on their minds as both a topic of fascination and uncertainty. I believe these dialogues and remarks speak to the underlining and perhaps intentionally connected religiosity floating on the temple grounds.

According to Tachi Ryūshi, the Sōtō Zen school prioritises a sense of mindfulness and reflective practice in eating; that very act is done to attain enlightenment and raise one’s contemplative skills.<sup>89</sup> In other words, eating is an important aspect of Sōtō temple life that only recently

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<sup>88</sup> This portion of the speech was almost verbatim to Sōtō Zen’s website depicting the importance of food: “Soto Zen Shojin-ryori Vol. 2: A Meal Given with Warm Consideration towards Others,” Sotozen.com, last accessed April 14, 2025. <https://www.soto-zen.com/eng/practice/food/cooking/omotenashi.html>.

<sup>89</sup> Tachi Ryūshi 館 隆志, “Sōtō-shū to Rinzai-shū no Gokan-ge no Sōi wo Kangaeru” 曹洞宗と臨済宗の五観偈の相違を考える, *Journal of Indian and Buddhist Studies (Indogaku Bukkyōgaku Kenkyū)* 70, no. 2 (2022): 651–652.

entered lay experiences.<sup>90</sup> Yet, the reflective verses hold no explicit connection to or mention of teeth in relation to how one should eat. What occurred after the cleric's reflection is a lay reception that conceptually tied one's teeth to the *gokan no ge* citation and the eating ritual not as a mere item, but the fundamental tool that allowed one to act as they did. This may seem an obvious tie-in, given that having teeth makes it easier to eat, though I have not come across any other *gokan no ge* commentary that makes such a connection.

The succeeding lay dialogue and absence of any mention of the *bukimi* teeth in the *gokan no ge* leads me to conclude that these parishioners take the importance of teeth from some other source readily at hand—likely the various locations and notices of teeth throughout the grounds—and apply it to their experiences here. The teeth, or the Stone Jizō in its entirety, become what Žižek dubs the “sublime object.” As objects of ideology, they come to construct and hold Osorezan's overarching reality together. The Stone Jizō or its teeth then transcend the category of “material construction” and penetrate the realm of a connected perception that determines how to and in what manner one should perceive and think about such objects.<sup>91</sup> The temple fosters a lay narrative of a connected Osorezan-rooted religiosity centered on children's teeth.

What I am left with is the question as to whether this is an intentionally guided narrative or happenstance of lived lay practice, and whether that distinction even matters. This concern is not a doctrinal question but one of how individuals within peripheral realities live and breathe these traditions that we call Buddhism.<sup>92</sup> Osorezan mandates its *shukubō* visitors to participate in *chōka* (“morning sutra lesson” 朝課), as

<sup>90</sup> Tachi, “Sōtō-shū to Rinzai-shū,” 651.

<sup>91</sup> Žižek, *The Sublime Object*.

<sup>92</sup> For a more critically analytical stance, see Iwata Mami, “Kindai Bukkyō Nabigēshon,” 269–270. For a cross comparative one, see Ishikawa, *Jizō no Sekai*.

most stay-over-temples do, and to recite the *gokan no ge*, which most do not.<sup>93</sup> They do not mandate, let alone offer, the more “typically-conceived” Zen practice of *zazen* (“seated meditation” 坐禪), which other Sōtō temples readily do. This could dictate a deliberate institutional choice to prioritize the *gokan no ge* as a religious activity for the temple’s lay followers to further curate the perception of the grounds as a sacred area, site, and nation for and of Jizō. Thus, I suggest that the lay connection of the *gokan no ge* and eating ritual to one’s teeth stems from and continues the temple grounds’ overall atmosphere that holds teeth as a potentially sacred relic of the mundane and enlightened alike.<sup>94</sup> Whether it be through the *shukubō* or the Stone Jizō, teeth are a fundamental piece of Osorezan’s material culture.

### The Closing Ceremony

This analysis finally reveals its state of impermanence. In reiteration, the Stone Jizō as both an *ishijizō* (statue) and *hachiyō-tō* (reliquary) represents the physical and spiritual protection of deceased children, guiding them to more prosperous lives after “returning” to the land of hells. Closer analysis of the “statue’s” Jizō-façade revealed it to be a reliquary exclusive to children’s teeth. This roughly 20-foot-tall *stupa* resides in the temple complex of Osorezan in Mutsu, Aomori. It was likely crafted no more than 20 years ago in the contemporary period. The Stone Jizō exists a slight walk away from the temple and is not the primary focus of the hellscape nor of our minds when visiting or meditating on the larger site. Yet, it embodies

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<sup>93</sup> For the *chōka*, individuals meet in the main hall through a side passage at 6:00. They sit and listen to *sūtra* recitations for roughly one hour. They repeat this process, albeit a different chant, in the Jizō hall. This second location involves a more interactive element in offering incense to the communal bowl.

<sup>94</sup> For a description of Osorezan’s self-image, see Ōmichi, “Arubeki Reijō-zō,” 119–120.

a salvific power over the volcanic terrain that both represents and is a manifestation of the Womb World and *sai-no-kawara*. The function of the Stone Jizō exemplifies a purpose more for the dead than nearby *sekibutsu*, though the bodhisattva protects all within their domain. At the mountain of fear, Jizō has become collector and protector, figural and non-figural, solid and hollow. They have turned a land of fear into paradise, and children into enlightened ones.

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### Notes on the Contributor

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