Skin Disease and Gods of the Boundaries:
A Step toward the Study of the History of Japanese "Senmin"

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Among the rights of "senmin" in medieval and early modern Japan, the following three attract special attention: (1) the right to strip and obtain the skins of dead oxen and horses, (2) the right to strip and obtain the clothes of corpses to be buried, and (3) the right to take "lepers" along. The medieval historian Keiichi Miura said "the skins of oxen and horses were regarded as clothes" and treated (1) and (2) on the "same level." Kiyoshi Yokoi also said "I do not believe that stripping and obtaining the skins is unrelated to receiving the clothes of corpses" and raised the issue of how to consider "the right and behavior of stripping worn superficial skins." On the other hand, (3) was a medieval right, and the "lepers" taken along became a member of the group of "senmin." Because "leprosy" is a skin disease that causes symptoms on "superficial skins," the rights of "senmin" might have to be understood as related to all the "worn superficial skins" including (3).

It is very likely that the religious sources of the "right to strip worn superficial skins" of dead oxen, horses, and human bodies, and the right of supervision of "lepers" were believed to be in the gods of the boundaries in ancient times. The gods of the boundaries were worshipped in the boundaries of lands and also believed in by "senmin." This article attempts to ascertain the original figure of the gods of the boundaries.

This article presumes the following: in ancient times, the belief in the gods of the boundaries was based on that in the mother-child gods, especially the belief in the fetal or child god; the gods of the boundaries had the character of moon gods and were believed to strip and obtain human skins, animal skins, clothes, and single sleeves; based on such belief, the custom of offering animal skins, clothes, and single sleeves to the gods of the boundaries was started; it was believed that the gods of the boundaries not only healed skin diseases but also caused them. In other words, this article presumes a close relationship between the gods of the boundaries and "worn superficial skins" and presents the future task of verifying the character of "senmin" as agents for the gods of the boundaries.

Key words: Moon, boundary, dosojin, "leprosy," animal skin, "senmin"