



Wendy Gleason

Instructor: Sylvia Grey

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#### SEARCHING FOR SHINTO:

##### THE INTERPLAY OF POLITICS AND RELIGION FROM THE YAMATO TO THE HEIAN ERA

I have been searching for the heart of a religion which began in Japan's prehistory, and has danced a complex pattern with political systems and other religions for more than a thousand years.

Religions change through time. They evolve, they fragment, and they absorb other elements, or parts of them are absorbed or adopted when a new culture and religion overtakes the old. Comparative studies seek to discover the old by comparing old and new forms, external and internal histories and tales, and the languages used to record ancient documents. But there are huge challenges when the original tradition or philosophy goes back to the shadows of prehistory, and has no written documentation before the eighth century C.E. Japanese researchers wear blinders shaped by their own cultural environment, including the coexistence of major religions throughout the era of historical records. Research is even harder for a non-Japanese speaker, since all analyses by European writers are influenced by their own radically different cultural background and internalized, unconscious beliefs and preferences. Additionally, the meaning of many terms essential to the analysis, including Shinto, religion, and *shiso* (philosophy or ideology), can be subjective since they developed in part through translation and discussion during the rapid influx of Western ideas during the early Meiji era (Hardacre, "Priesthood" 295).

Glimpses of something different from mainstream views can be seen between the words of writers whose eyes are focused elsewhere, like watching an old film which disintegrates with the passage of time, the center focus disappearing to reveal the background. By looking at the discrepancies in historical records, as well as differences in the ways Shinto is described by different authors, I hoped to bring it into better focus.

### Historical Shinto

Shinto is the modern term for a metaphysical worldview or religion dating back to prehistoric times in Japan. The term, coined in the seventh century to distinguish it from Buddhism and other mainland beliefs which were becoming established in Japan, is now in common use, but seems to apply to many things: shrine Shinto, folk Shinto, sect Shinto, State Shinto. Shinto is described by many modern authors as the indigenous religion of Japan and as the way of the *kami*, or gods. Both apparently simple statements are already problematic.

Archaeological evidence is inconclusive about whether Shinto is truly “indigenous.” The great tombs in the Kofun period (300 – 600 C.E.) included mirrors and jewels, associated with Shinto today as religious treasures, but that’s circumstantial evidence. Debate continues about the period of change beginning in the fifth century C.E., when there was an influx of influence from the mainland and tomb objects changed to include armor and many other military objects. Some writers say that Japan was invaded and conquered by horse-riding tribes from Central Asia in the 4<sup>th</sup> C. CE (Littleton 15); it is impossible now to be certain what elements of Shinto might have been brought by such intrusions.

Treasures associated with *kami* at shrines are usually a mirror, jewel or sword (Hori, 302) and the treasures associated with Amaterasu are all three, as befits the goddess of the sun, who became associated with the ruling clan in the Yamato state in the seventh century.

Another argument is made for Shinto's existence during the Yayoi period (c. 300 BCE - c. 300 CE) when people lived in agricultural communities based on rice cultivation. The logic is based, in part, on the fact that the penultimate shrine in Shinto belief is Amaterasu's shrine at Ise, whose design is based on a Yayoi granary. An alternate and viable explanation could be that Ise's shrine was designed to represent the archetypal granary of an earlier era to reinforce its importance and antiquity as the shrine of the ancestress of the Emperor.

What about the concept of *kami*? Shinto, literally translated, means “way of the *kami*.” *Kami* is usually translated as “gods,” providing a major cross-cultural difficulty: modern Westerners, inculcated in a Judeo-Christian tradition, unconsciously interpret the word to mean a deity, often having a human form, who is the object of worship in a religion. We gravitate easily to the idea of prayer to a higher being with a representational form.

The kanji 神 (pronounced either *kami* or *shin*) can be translated as god, deity, or spirit (emphasis mine). That which is called *kami* is numinous, a formless power, present in everything, and more intense in certain objects, animals, or individuals (Nelson 158). It can be experienced more strongly in certain natural manifestations, such as great trees or rocks or mountains or storms, but it is not limited to those locations. “Shinto does not differentiate between *Kami*... and divine spirit.... Whatever is, is divine spirit.... Divine spirit... is the universe in every aspect” (Mason 60-62). “Nature – mountains, oceans, great rocks and trees -- was not created by divine spirit, nor does it have divine spirit in its elements, for there is no duality: nature IS divine spirit, as are humans, living creatures, and all things.” Thus Japanese writers may refer to Japan's "eight million deities," meaning "an infinite number... gods exist all around us.... We accept the premise that the number of gods is infinite" (Kato 6).

The word for “shrine” includes the kanji for “earth” or “ground” and implies sacred ground. Kasulis compellingly describes the concept of a shrine as a gateway or entry point for human awareness of the *kami* spirit in everything, because it is a place where such energy is concentrated and more easily experienced, not because there is a “god” residing in that rock or tree or spring. Discussing sacred spaces, Kasulis explains the internal interconnection between apparently materially separate entities, when he discusses the use of *shimenawa* (sacred straw rope) and *torii* (wooden markers on the path to a shrine) to demark places deeply charged with the energy or power with which all existence is charged (14-23).

Yet ancient Japanese folk tales that were collected in the *Kojiki* or Record of Ancient Matters (712 C.E.) do not refer only to natural forces. They also contain stories of gods and goddesses, from whom the creation of the physical world and human existence are derived. The idea of such separate beings seems contradictory to the idea of spirit described above, and is part of the difficulty in understanding Shinto.

Such stories of mythical beings can be associated at times with stories from China and Korea; Philippi has noted possible connections with myths from Asia, Taiwan, the Philippines and Malaysia (e.g. 405-406). Or the idea of individual *kami* may have evolved locally. Nelson says, "Long before the more doctrinal systems of Daoism, Buddhism, or Confucianism were adopted selectively by imperial elites, the 'way of the *kami*' was the most pervasive religious practice. It blended and reinterpreted ethical, magical and religious elements from the Asian mainland along with local beliefs, rituals, and the customs of clans and their communities" (159). Hori says "there is no strict distinction between human and *kami*" (292) but causes some confusion with the idea that *kami* and human beings may interchange with each other (292 and his discussion of *hitotsu-mono* 302-306); it appears that he may be basing his ideas on

observations made centuries after the influx of Buddhism and other foreign influences. Kasulis makes a distinction between the energies of *tama*, a charged presence with "integrity" that moves within the physical world, and *mono*, a "changeling quality that moves among the forms of ghosts, goblins, animals and humans" (16).

Kitagawa, analyzing the ancient beliefs, works with the concepts, *kami* and *uji*. He refers to *kami* both as "all beings, both good and evil, that possess extraordinary qualities and that are awesome and worthy of reverence" and as "*kami* (sacred) nature shared by all beings" and "the mysterious life force that brings about growth, fertility and production." He defines *uji* as early Japan's "primary social unit" which became localized clans sharing the same *kami*, closely tied to those *kami*, with leadership deriving authority from the *kami*. Hardacre agrees that Shinto practices were decentralized and highly localized, even into the Tokugawa era, with territorial tutelary *kami* associated with clans (Hardacre, "Shinto and State," 10).

It seems to me to be a close step, from reverencing the energy to be found in all of the natural world, perceived as existing in all things, to having a more specific reverence for one's local sacred places and energies that could evolve into named entities, including good and evil characteristics. Thus localized *kami* could develop individuated personalities, yet still be part of a larger connectedness.

In Watanabe's beautiful book about Ise Shrine, the author asks "how... the awesome and implacable *kami*-nature came to be enshrined in man-made buildings that differed little from domestic dwellings, and how did the *kami* consent to participate in activities that closely mirrored the complex social life of human communities?" Watanabe posits two essential reasons. First was the introduction of Buddhism in the mid sixth century C.E. "The concept of the Buddhist temple... exerted a profound influence on the development of Shinto shrines in

general and on the emergence of a permanent shrine sanctuary in particular." The other influence was the emperor's gradual deification during the Yamato period (Watanabe 127-128).

Before that time, distinctive wooden buildings called *shinden* and *honden* were not built. Instead, what were called "shrines" (*miya*) were simply demarcations of specific kami's sacred territory (Watanabe 128). Watanabe asserts that reverence for local *kami* was forced to change when rural regions were taken over by the Yamato during the unification of the Yamato state in the third and fourth centuries, and "compelled to abandon the indigenous cult, the kuni-tsu-*kami*, in favor of the state ('heavenly') deities, the ama-tsuy-*kami*, as a sign of submission." (153-154)

Watanabe argues that neither the design nor scale of the Izumo *shinden*, which the *Kojiki* claims was built in prehistory, would have been appropriate to that era, but that the style described more closely fits the fifth to eighth centuries. In addition, other shrines venerated by the Yamato court lacked permanent shrine sanctuaries (129). In a detailed architectural and social analysis of different shrines, Watanabe concedes that permanent sanctuaries at Shinto shrines might have been constructed as early as the sixth century, and certainly by the seventh century, to which he dates the large, granary-style shrine at Izumo (141). But he asserts that references to shrines built prior to the sixth century, such as those quoted in the *Kojiki* and *Nihon Shoki*, Japan's earliest existing books, were added when they were published in the early eighth century. Thus the fact that Ise Shrine is in the form of a granary does not, per se, support the belief that Shinto is indigenous, but does reinforce the idea that Shinto was manipulated by the Yamato rulers.

The Yamato Court, the *Kojiki* (712 C.E.) and *Nihon Shoki* (720 C.E.)

Kitagawa discusses the relationship between Shinto and government in terms of "*matsuri* (ceremonials or rituals), as the 'inner' meaning; *matsuri-goto* (political administration or

government) as the 'outer' meaning; and *saisei-itchi* (unity of religion and government, or of the ceremonial and the political dimensions) as the principle relating the two" ("Remarks," 231-232). The early Yamato state was a confederation of chieftans, and the Yamato ruler not only fulfilled his duties to his localized *kami*, but also reinforced his legitimacy by creating and controlling titles, festivals, rites and rituals ("Remarks," 234-235). This model of combined secular and religious roles would have a lasting impact on the future of Japan.

Prior to the seventh century, Japan was influenced by "Confucianism, Daoism, Legalism, as well as Chinese legal, educational and political traditions... and Buddhism" (Kitagawa, "Preface" xxii). The Chinese had been aware of rulers of Japan and had even received tribute from them in earlier times. But the Yamato decided to follow Chinese models, creating their own imperial order, a "centralized autocracy based on comprehensive legal codes (*ritsuyo*) and on the assumption that all rightful power derived from an emperor who was above the law, a system that prevailed... to the late tenth century" (Takamitsu 52). Under the *ritsuryo*, the ruler simultaneously held three roles, as secular ruler, religious ruler, and living *kami* (Kitagawa, "Preface" xxiii). The *Kojiki* and *Nihon Shoki* and the disparate mythical traditions they were based upon served to authenticate and legitimize this system. They combined folk tales, religious practices and Japanese historical accounts into a mythos that placed the Emperor, and his descendants, squarely at the head of both religion and state. This relationship was further institutionalized by placing a Department of Kami Affairs (*Jingi-kan*) next to the Great Council of State (*Dajo-kan*), which also encompassed the older Yin-Yang Bureau (*Onmyo-ryo*), and by putting Buddhist activities under government control (Kitagawa, "Remarks" 236).

The creation of the *Kojiki* and *Nihon Shoki*, or *Nihongi*, began in 682, when Emperor Tenmu (reigned 673-686) called for the collecting and correction of prior historic texts and

stories, commanding, as Wheeler describes, that the "annals of the Emperors be taken and recorded and the ancient words examined and certified, inventions stricken out and the truth ascertained, for handing down to future ages" (xxi-xxii). The job was given to a Prince and eleven court officials. The *Kojiki* was completed and presented to Empress Genmei in 712 by court noble Yasumaro Ono, although the oldest existing copy, a National Treasure, is from the thirteenth century, preserved at a Nagoya temple (Wheeler xxiii). The *Nihongi* utilized additional material collected under Emperor Tenmu as well as additions collected in the reign of Empress Jito (reigned 687-696); final revisions were made by the same Yasumaro Ono and the seventh son of Emperor Temmu, and completed in 720 (Wheeler xxiii). The "corrections" made were fully in the interest of the ruling clan, and documents which followed continued the practice of detailing links between *kami* and clan leadership.

Nelson states the case unequivocally:

The *Kojiki*... takes unrelated myths from many regions in Japan and weaves them into a narrative that moves directly from the creation of the Japanese islands to the establishment of the imperial court.

The main purpose of the *Kojiki* was to strengthen and sanctify the imperial clan's control over the regions it had recently conquered. But it was also in the court's interests to claim some of the key symbols of divine rule... For example, the primary deity of the Yamato imperial clan... became that of the sun (Amaterasu)... The Japanese emperor was said to be a direct descendant (Nelson155).

The myths and histories in these documents attempted to rationalize as well as record Japan's history, and created the basis for Imperial governance over the nation. At the same time,



they recorded traditional stories that had previously been part of an oral tradition, including beautiful songs and poetry. (For an excerpt, please see Appendix 1.)

Ritual worship, and the participation of the emperor, also helped to legitimize the state. Seasonal festivals to be observed were designed to match seasonal cycles, and the words used in rituals, tied to myth and to the emperor, became more and more similar. The *ritsuryo* eventually compiled many administrative regulations, court laws, etiquette and religious practices in the many volumes of the *Engi-shiki*, released in the tenth century. The first ten books of the *Engi-shiki* document Shinto practice, and are still regarded as authoritative today (Kitagawa, "Preface" xxiv). Book 8 contains the *Norito*, Shinto liturgical chants and prayers, in which one can see a love of nature, agricultural influences, and reverence for local *kami*, as well as ritualized recognition of the Emperor. (For excerpts, please see Appendix 2.)

Five more "National Histories" were written during the era of the Imperial Court, using government documents to track Japan's ongoing history, from 697 to 887; the last of these was completed in 901 (Brownlee 33-36). It is interesting that all of these projects were headed by one of Japan's leading clans: the Fujiwara, who would hold the reins of the nation during the Heian era. However, Brownlee states firmly that Fujiwara "dominance on the editorial teams did not create a bias in that family's favour." Instead he suggests that, as scholars, they contributed "uniformity and style" to the five histories (37). Other means were available by which the Fujiwara solidified their power as Buddhism's religious and political influence grew.

## The Amalgamation of Shinto and Buddhism

The second major influence on Shinto during the Yamato era and into the Heian era was Buddhism, and the impacts of this changing relationship have been felt throughout Japanese history to the present day. Although Buddhism arrived in Japan in the middle of the sixth century, by the Heian period huge shrine-temple complexes were being built that served to strengthen both Imperial rule and Buddhism. According to Grapard, the system of 22 Shrines (*nijunisha*) receiving Imperial support during the Heian period were essential to the ideology and practice of "*chingo kokka* (protection of the Imperial lineage)" which "influenced in a massive and decisive way the entire medieval period" (248). He said one cannot analyze shrines separately from temples, because during this period, they were, in fact, intentional "shrine-temple multiplexes" (Grapard's term.)

Imperial visits to these shrine-temple complexes made pilgrimage "part of the process of state formation" during all three periods, mixing "elite and popular" and "native and imported traditions" (249).

By the end of the ninth century, a Shinto-Buddhist syncretism had emerged that remained intact for ten centuries (Kitagawa, "Remarks" 236). The tables were turned with the 1868 "Edict Separating Shinto and Buddhism" (*Shin-Butsu Bunri-rei*) at the beginning of the Meiji era. At that time, the *Jingi-Kan* was reestablished above the *Dajo-kan* (Kitagawa, "Introduction" 323-324).

Building on the models that had been created in the Yamato state, reinforced by a popular movement against Buddhism, and informed by the 18th century writings of the National Learning (Kokugaku) scholar Norinaga Motoori, a new form of Shinto emerged, which was centered on love for Japan as a nation and reverence for the Emperor (Kitagawa, "Introduction"

322-324; Littleton 49-50). In spite of Shinto's localized roots, State Shinto tried to make Shinto a national religion, through centralized control over large shrines and their funding, and an increased emphasis on ritual activities that would reinforce belief in the Emperor and the pre-eminence of Ise Shrine. It is hard to ascertain how much independence was retained in the periphery, which was administered regionally (Hardacre, "Priesthood" 297).

Because this era was watched and heavily documented by Western interests as well as by the Japanese, it is known in great detail and will not be discussed further here.

After World War II, State Shinto was disestablished by order of the 1945 "Shinto Directive," and the emperor publicly renounced his kami nature in 1946 (Kitagawa, "Remarks" 242). The post-war constitution stipulates that the Imperial rituals involving the Emperor, including enthronement, weddings, the seasonal planting of rice in a palace paddy, and visits to Ise Shrine, are private religious practices, albeit Shinto based. Although secular decisions are made today by Western-style parliamentary bodies, many Japanese still consider the Imperial rituals as having benefit for the nation (Littleton 53).

Ise Shrine is still perceived as the peak of the hierarchy of shrines, and visits of political leaders to major shrines, particularly Ise and Yasukuni Shrines, create news coverage and public arguments. The Japanese Prime Minister's visit to Yasukuni Shrine in October 2005 sparked an international uproar and governmental responses.\*

Spirited debate about Shinto and politics also continues on the academic front. In 2002, a group of departments in Kokugakuin University Graduate School and the Japanese Culture Research Center petitioned the Ministry to establish a National Learning Institute for the Dissemination of Research on Shinto and Japanese Culture. Both Japanese and foreign

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\* For example, see government articles at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs website. 30 May 2007 <<http://www.mofa.go.jp/policy/postwar/yasukuni/index.html>>

researchers are participating in this effort (Sakamoto 1). Research into Shinto's roots, as the underpinning of Japan's self-identity and an essential element in Japanese history and culture, has been carried out since 2002. The academic debate, as exemplified in Koremaru's "Thoughts on State Shinto Research," is as heated as the public debate. Hardacre points out that "virtually all Japanese Shinto scholars are Shinto priests, descended by blood or academic lineage from the creators and administrators of State Shinto" ("Shinto and the State," 6.) Thus far it appears that a great deal of attention is going to the centralized Shinto history, and less to the possible remnants of early Japanese values at the periphery. Yet, by the end of the Edo era, even before the return of dominance from Buddhism to State Shinto, there were 75,000 Shinto shrines compared to 88,000 Buddhist temples, and the largest number of those shrines were in agrarian villages (Hardacre, "Shinto and the State," 12-14).

There are still perhaps 80,000 shrines in Japan, the periphery is still isolated from central authority and influence, localized individuated practices continue, and Shinto based matsuri, major yearly festivals, continue to be an integral part of Japanese life, expression and self-definition everywhere in Japan. Nelson says, "As a loosely structured and highly local system of rituals and festivals... , kami... veneration is still widespread throughout the Japanese islands... The kami are considered by priests and scholars alike to be a formless power present in everything" (158).

The internal, decentralized, spiritual heart of Shinto has survived catastrophic political and religious impacts over an uncountable span of time. A more recent, external, politicized form is struggling to reinvent itself as an organized religion. The continuing evolution of Shinto may be one of the most intriguing religious puzzles of the 21st Century.

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*Note: For technical reasons, unmarked vowels were used in some romaji that normally contain macrons. Otherwise, spelling followed the source's usage.*

## Appendix 1 – Excerpt from the Kojiki

This lovely excerpt from Book 1, Chapter 27 is Opo-kuni-kuni's song bidding farewell to his wife, who has declined to accompany him, I think he is trying to persuade her to change her mind!

All dressed up / In my jet-black clothes,  
 When I look down at my breast  
 Like a bird of the sea / Flapping its wings  
 This garment will not do;  
 I throw it off / By the wave-swept beach.

All dressed up / In my blue clothes/ Blue like the kingfisher,  
 When I look down at my breast,  
 Like a bird of the sea, / Flapping its wings,  
 This garment will not do;  
 This garment will not do;  
 I throw it off / By the wave-swept beach.

All dressed up / In my clothes dyed  
 With the juice / Of pounded atane plants / Grown in the mountain fields,  
 Now when I look down at my breast,  
 Like a bird of the sea, / Flapping its wings,  
 This garment will do.

Beloved wife of mine,  
 When I go off / With my men / Flocking like flocking birds;...  
 You will weep;  
 And your weeping will rise  
 Just as the morning rain  
 Rises into a mist.  
 O my young wife / Like the young grass!

(*Kojiki*, 108-110)

## Appendix 2 – Excerpts from the Norito

The Norito, compiled in the tenth century, collected shrine rituals that incorporated language deifying the Emperor (also called the Supreme Grandchild) into ancient Shinto rituals. they often contain beautiful language which may be from older incantations venerating nature, as well as references to agriculture and to specific local kami. These excerpts are from Norito 2, *Kasuga Maturi*. The Emperor is incorporated at the beginning and end.

By command of the Emperor, / I humbly speak in the solemn presence  
Of the four Sovereign Deities, dread and awesome...

In accordance with your desires, oh great deities, / On Mount Mikasa in Kasuga,  
The shrine posts broadly planed in the bed-rock below,  
The cross-beams of the roof soaring towards the High Heavenly Plain,  
A shrine is established as a heavenly shelter, as a sun-shelter;  
There the divine treasures are presented:  
Mirrors, swords, bows, / Spears and horses have been provided;  
Garments of colored cloth, radiant cloth,  
Plain cloth, and coarse cloth have been presented;  
And the first fruits of the tribute presented by the lands of the four quarters have been  
arranged in rows:  
The fruits of the blue ocean –  
The wide-finned and the narrow-finned fishes,  
The sea-weeds of the deep and the sea-weeds of the shore –  
As well as the fruits of the mountains and plains –  
The sweet herbs and the bitter herbs –  
The wine – raising high the soaring necks  
Of the countless wine vessels, filled to the brim –  
And the various offerings are piled up / Like a long mountain range...

As a result of this worship, / Do, I pray, now and in the future,  
Bless the court of the Emperor tranquilly and peacefully,  
Making it an overflowing reign, an abundant reign;  
Thus I humbly speak.

(*Norito*, 23-24)

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