



John Breen and Mark Teeuwen, *A New History of Shinto*

Malden MA, USA; Oxford and Chichester, UK: Wiley-Blackwell Publishing, 2010. x + 264 pp. Illustrations: 2 maps, 5 figures, and 3 tables. Paperback, GBP 17.99. ISBN 978-1-4051-5516-8.

BREEN and Teeuwen offer a postmodern, historical exposition of Shinto. In addition to independent research, they draw on a wide field of contemporary Japanese Shinto studies. Their book opens windows towards largely overlooked Shinto realities, kindles curiosity, and calls for further exploration of a vital, spiritual tradition. For Western people—and I presume also for Japanese—the book provides new, global perspectives on arguably the largest socio-religious power in Japan.

Overarching Continuity and Shinto Plurality

During the Meiji, Taisho, and early Showa eras, the unity of Shinto rites and politics, *saisei ichi*, provided a workable base for Japanese modernization. The Japanese surrender to the allied forces in 1945, however, broke down the established rite-rule unity. *Sai* (rite) was divorced from *sei* (politics). Postwar Shinto subsequently found herself in a crucial crisis of identity.

A new Japan dawned on economic, political, and spiritual ruins. During the decades following 1945 an “economic miracle” occurred within the frames of an emerging, democratic Japan. The new religions were possibly the most successful guides among the spiritual ruins. Postwar Shinto did not experience any visible renewal. Unlike economic, political, or neo-religious Japan, she seemed unsuccessful. However, she survived. Slowly but markedly, signs of vitality appeared in different fields. Interest and participation increased. After decades of Shinto literary drought, publications increased from the 1980s onwards. The number of worshippers seemed to increase, although slowly. People continued to attend shrines on festive occasions, nationally and privately. The New Year shrine visits regained their previous popularity. Sixty-five years after the breakdown of Shinto as a normative national rite, the image is surprisingly clear: Shinto, although a transformed Shinto, is alive and kicking.

The book in question orientates itself from this state of affairs, looking at Shinto in a new historical perspective. In that respect it is part of a tradition which might be traced to Japanese historian Kuroda Toshio (1926–1993). His frontal attack on the idea of an existing, indigenous Shinto religion was a historian's way of demolishing remnants of *saisei ichi* thought. The concept of Shinto as a religion was, according to Kuroda, a creation by Meiji modernizers for nation-building purposes. Prior to that process, Shinto was but a component of Japanese Buddhism, he argued. The thesis shook the world of Shinto research.¹

Together with Kuroda, Breen and Teeuwen consider Shinto a Meiji creation. With most contemporary Shinto historians, however, they do not see pre-Meiji Shinto only as a national version of Buddhism. Calling it Shinto or not, they point at a premodern indigenous tradition of worship, shrines, and mythology. Critical to the existence of a Shinto identity prior to Meiji, the authors postulate a more limited ritual tradition. In the chapter “Kami Shrines, Myths, and Rituals in Premodern Times” they limit the premodern shrine, myth, and ritual tradition to parts of a kami-cult. Affirming the existence of an ambiguous cultic continuity, the authors also observe its wide plurality of expressions and changes. The thesis of significant discontinuities and variations entangled in an overarching, ambiguous continuity, colors the book in its entirety. I return to this key conception in Chapters 5–7, where the authors have selected one shrine, one myth, and one rite for in-depth study.

Chapter 1, “An Alternative Approach to the History of Shinto,” briefly treats the appearance of Shinto after the Meiji Restoration and follows its developments until recent years. On page eighteen the book admits a problem common to writers of Shinto history: “Many Shintos; Many Histories.” Shinto is a plural phenomena. This is the dominating perspective of the two writers. However, the plurality implies a double Shinto feature: continuity and discontinuity. Although the authors are keen to identify changes and interrupted processes, they do not sacrifice the idea of a continued kami-cult during Japanese religious history. Among the numerous Shintos and histories, the authors select three central Shinto realities, each in its particular context and with its millennium-long history: Hie Shrine in Kyoto; The myth of the Sun Goddess and the rock-cave; and the rite of *daijosai* (imperial accession). This threefold study of a shrine, a myth, and a rite is treated in chapters 3 to 5 and framed by chapters 2 and 6.

Chapter 2, “Kami Shrines, Myths, and Rituals in Premodern Times” offers a compact but also comprehensive presentation of pre-Meiji shrine history. Central for the understanding of this period is the *jingi* cult. The term *jingi*, the original Chinese being *shenqi*, means “heavenly and earthly deities” and describes a cult around which the Japanese court organized its priestly power. Old records provide materials

1. See the publication under review, 19–20, and Toshio Kuroda (1981), “Shinto in the History of Japanese Religions” (*Journal of Japanese Studies* 7/1: 1–21).

about this cult, which naturally form a crucial point of orientation when early kami worship is analyzed. Their story of premodern “Shinto,” if the term be permitted, makes clever use of these records, relating the *jingi* system to Buddhism as well as to Yin-Yang thought. Tracing developments in early modernity and the period before Meiji, the chapter follows traditional historical studies on Shinto whereby the *influence* of Confucianism and nativism is taken into account.

Chapters 3 to 5 offer, as indicated above, in-depth studies on three basic aspects of the Shinto tradition: shrine, myth, and rite. For practical reasons I comment on the chapters in an order different from the order given in the book. I first look at the myth and the rite chapters, and finally the shrine chapter. The “myth” chapter (4) draws up changing motivations and elements of the Sun Goddess rock-cave myth. Their research shows interestingly that the myth might relate to nature phenomena (an eclipse of the sun) as well as to sericulture, thus already in its early stages open to various applications and different histories. The confirmation of contemporary functions of the myth in, for example, Noh plays and *kagura* dances promotes a fresh understanding of a Shinto plurality that even extends outside the traditional cults. As Sun Goddess myths are part of imperial house mythology, the extended usage might be seen as an underlying variation of Shinto history. Whereas the rock-cave myth actually transcends imperial Shinto history, the *daijosai* enthronement rite (Chapter 5) is intimately related to the image of the emperor. The rite is extraordinarily powerful in that respect. According to contemporary state ceremonial thought, the *daijosai* rite endows the emperor with the spirit of the Sun Goddess, legitimizing his sacred imperial authority. The authors claim, however, against contemporary political interpretations, that historically “the rite can hardly be said to have defined the imperial institution” (197). They show that Buddhist enthronement rites at times were also used. The authors have stripped the contemporary state ceremonial thought on *daijosai* of historical sanction. The idea of pluralist and discontinuous Shinto thus attains a critical effect in Japanese political thought.

The choice of Hie as the representative shrine (Chapter 3) comes in this context as a surprise. As the chosen myth and the chosen rite both have connections to emperor traditions, the choice of the imperial shrine at Ise would have offered a natural integration of the three chapters. In addition, the authors have studied the Ise cult extensively—and are extraordinarily familiar with the dynamics of Ise shrine. The dominating role of Ise shrine in Shinto studies is, however, used as an argument against its inclusion here. Scholarly spoken, this is definitely correct. But I wonder whether or not the choice of Hie shrine also shows the parallel existence of similar but distinctly different Shinto histories. When Chapter 3 brings in Hie, a wealth of interesting insights and materials come to the foreground and underline the plurality and the varied character of Shinto traditions. The story of Hie shrine also illustrates changes in the motivation of shrine activities and is thus a testimony to historical, Shinto discontinuity.

Chapter 6 draws lines from the plural Shinto conception to contemporary Shinto challenges. The role of Jinja Honchō—the national organization of Shinto Shrines—and the problem of Yasukuni Shrine as a war memorial are two big issues mentioned. The authors identify an intimate connection between the emperor system in the Jinja Honchō program and ideology (200). As is the case with the *daijosai*, Yasukuni shrine, with its connection to State Shinto ideology and Japanese aggression during the Pacific war, is seen as a sensitive and continued challenge for secular, democratic Japan.

Is Shinto one or many?

The authors have offered new perspectives and provided qualified, profound research on the issue of Shinto continuity and discontinuity. Continuity is found in the kami-cult dating back to premodern times. The kami-cult is found in different shrine traditions—but as the study argues, the traditions are plural. The continuity of the Shinto cult is neither essentially nor organizationally united. It envisages parallel phenomena which show different kinds of similarities over time. The authors see a family-type of relationship between the various Shinto elements in the tradition. The discontinuity is seen in changing functions and elements of shrines, myths, and rites. Breen and Teeuwen have found that *daijosai* was no exclusive enthronement rite during early centuries, and other enthronement rites were possible. For nativists of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries onwards, however, it came to be seen as an exclusive enthronement rite. The authors of the book thus find no firm tradition in Japan for preserving *daijosai* as an exclusive enthronization rite. Extending the views of Breen/Teeuwen, one might as well apply Buddhist, secular, Christian, or even multi-religious enthronement rites without sacrificing age-old Japanese imperial traditions.

Breen and Teeuwen see the relationship between Shinto and emperor-centered state ideology as one of the chief issues facing Shinto. Within the limitations imposed by “academic fairness” they see this connection as undesirable. Furthermore, the book favors the idea of Shinto as a plural phenomenon. There are many Shintos, a variety of myths and rites, and a plurality of shrines, institutions, and appearances. From the perspective of their research, the authors resist ideas of a historically founded, centralized, and exclusive Shinto.

The authors’ idea of a plural and constantly changing (discontinuous) Shinto tradition favors constitutional Japanese democracy, guaranteeing religious freedom in the frame of a secular state. The book is thus not only a result of solid academic work—it is also an ambitious political assessment.

Aasuly Lande
Lund University