



Bernard Faure, Michael Como, Iyanaga Nobumi (eds.), *Rethinking Medieval Shintō/Respenser le shintō medieval. Special issue, Cahiers d'Extrême-Asie 16 (2006–2007)*

Kyoto, Japan: l'École française d'Extrême-Orient—Centre de Kyoto, 2009. x + 387 pp. Softcover, €40.00 ISBN 978-2-85539-116-8.

In 2007, 2008, and 2009 the Columbia Center for Japanese Religion at Columbia University in New York staged a cycle of three conferences, all focusing on aspects of Japanese religion that are seriously understudied: medieval Shinto, Shugendō, and Onmyōdō. This special issue collects fourteen papers¹ presented by American, European, and Japanese scholars at the 2007 conference.

These three themes have much in common: they all represent traditions that lost much of their credibility and intellectual prestige in the Edo period, and fared even worse after the Meiji Restoration. Yet it is hardly possible to understand Japanese religion in any historical period without taking into account the lore of kami monks and priests, mountain practitioners, and Yin-Yang diviners. Here we find a broad field of overlapping ideas and practices that have pervaded cultic life in Japan for centuries, but ended up being purged from the record when, starting in the Edo period, the sectarian identities and doctrines were construed that still circumscribe our understanding of Japanese religious history today.

(Medieval) Shinto, Shugendō, and Onmyōdō share strikingly similar histories. Their early roots can be traced back to the late Heian period; they crystallized into increasingly autonomous fields of knowledge and practice in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries; and by the Edo period, they had developed identities that were cogent enough to make the Tokugawa shogunate decide to regulate them. Yet their status as officially recognized “professional groups” did not give rise to orthodoxies taught at sectarian schools comparable to the Buddhist *dangisho*. In the nineteenth century, these three traditions all struggled (and in the case of Onmyōdō and premodern Shinto, failed) to survive institutionally, while at the same time leaving behind a legacy of popular practices and beliefs that still makes their presence felt today.

Of course, there are also important differences. Medieval Shinto, especially, is a concept that comes with its own problems. Shugendō and Onmyōdō are difficult to pin down in their own ways, but at least they can be anchored in a social context: Shugendō is what *shugenja* do, and Onmyōdō is defined by the activities of the

1. In the introduction, Michael Como also announces an essay by Bernard Faure, which is not included in this volume; see FAURE 2009.

onmyōji of different eras. In contrast, medieval Shinto is first of all represented by a body of texts and ideas that is difficult to contextualize. Simple questions about who, what, and when are still open to speculation, both because many manuscripts remain hidden in the archives of temples that are not necessarily keen to see them investigated or published, and because the authors and copyists of these texts have consistently obfuscated their origins. Not knowing *who* was involved in the development of medieval Shinto, or *when* and *where* this occurred, makes it difficult to say much about motives and audiences. It even raises the question whether we are dealing with real practices or mere doctrinal experimentation. What was medieval Shinto? A broad and transformative movement that left its traces in all corners of the religious world, or a fringe phenomenon that produced obscure texts but failed to make an impression on mainstream religious culture?

The different essays in this volume suggest different answers to this central question. Allan Grapard, the pioneer of Shinto studies to whom this volume is dedicated, proposes that the term should not be limited to those Dharma lineages known as *Shintō-ryū*, but rather lead us into a “vast variety of Shinto-Buddhist cults” that can only be studied by focusing on specific sites, each with their own sets of “differences, similarities, individualities, [and] relationships” (2–3). Grapard, then, stresses the difficult social context of medieval Shinto, underlining especially its economic aspects.

Nevertheless, most essays focus on the texts that represent “medieval Shinto,” rather than on sites. Both the difficulty and the importance of recovering and contextualizing medieval Shinto texts is exemplified by essays by two of Japan’s most prolific specialists on medieval Shinto: Itō Satoshi and Abe Yasurō. Both focus on the earliest texts of this genre, which Abe describes as “*jingi* texts with an esoteric dimension” (108). Why this esoterization of kami cults, and why at this time? Both Itō and Abe point at a particular incident: the burning of Tōdaiji in 1180 and the subsequent efforts to restore it. Itō relates how Chōgen’s 1186 pilgrimage to Ise (where he received an oracle that facilitated fund-raising) gave rise to a range of new myths, not only identifying Amaterasu with Dainichi but also linking Ise to such founding figures as Gyōki and Kūkai. In Itō’s essay, this event appears as a beginning, leading to full esoterization and the formation of an organized body of lore only much later, towards the end of the thirteenth century at the earliest. Abe, on the other hand, proposes that esoteric *jingi* lore was already fully developed in the late twelfth century. He introduces *Yaketsu*, a twelve-volume collection of esoteric teachings and rituals of the so-called Goryū lineage—the Shinto lineage that was to prove most successful, in close competition with the Miwa-ryū. *Yaketsu* was transmitted to the Ise-related temple of Shinpukuji in 1312; the Shinpukuji manuscript from this date carries a colophon that identifies it as a compilation by the Dharma-Prince Shūkaku (1150–1203), whose teacher Shōken was heavily involved in Chōgen’s fund-raising. Abe is convinced that *Yaketsu* is indeed Shūkaku’s work, and sees the appearance of the first Shinto-ryū as a phenomenon of the late twelfth century. Itō, on the other

hand, favors the view that this is a later attribution, and he dates the formation of the Shinto-ryū to the late thirteenth and early fourteenth centuries. Needless to say, it will make a great difference for our understanding of the Shinto-ryū and their social context whether we place them in the Insei or the Muromachi period.

The same problem comes to the fore in Anna Andreeva's essay on the early history of the Miwa-ryū. Like that of the Goryū, this lineage's textual tradition defies dating: does its core date back to the mid-thirteenth century, or to the fifteenth—or even to the early Edo period? Was its early setting Miwa, or rather Murō? Did its legendary founder, a certain Kyōen, have anything to do with its early teachings (probably not, Andreeva argues)? What was the role of the humble Miwa *bessho* retreat, and that of such large temples as Saidaiji, Daigoji, Ninnaji, and Hasedera, which all appear to have been involved in some way? Lurking beyond these problems of context are more general questions: What were Miwa-ryū monks doing performing, among other things, their own versions of imperial enthronement initiations? What did they use their esoteric kami lore for? Who constituted their audience outside the temple gates? And why did Miwa-ryū spread to such places as Kantō and even Tōhoku, staging something of a comeback as late as the first decade of the nineteenth century? In the light of all this uncertainty, we are perhaps not ready to pursue Grapard's cogent questions about the social and economic dynamics of medieval Shinto.

Two essays by Lucia Dolce and Kadoya Atsushi take a different perspective on the development of new doctrines by focusing on medieval Shinto iconography. Dolce points out that medieval depictions of such kami as Amaterasu (for example, in the guise of *Aśvaghōṣa*) originated in ritual settings. They must be understood within the context of a wider trend within *mikkyō* lineages of developing new, non-canonical iconographies. Indeed, the images we now categorize as Shinto closely followed medieval Tōmitsu and Taimitsu interests, and were in fact an integral part of those traditions. One example are triads of Aizen, Fudō, and a third entity representing their ultimate nonduality, to be realized through the ritual that inspired the image in the first place (in “Shinto” contexts, that entity would be Amaterasu). Another example of shared interests are embryological schemes based on the *Yūgi-kyō* (focusing, for example, on Amaterasu in the rock cave as an image for the embryo in the womb). Dolce suggests a new approach to the logic of medieval Shinto doctrine by arguing that much doctrinal innovation was triggered directly by such images, which, in their turn, originated in performative settings. Kadoya makes a similar argument by emphasizing that in order to understand what he calls “Shinto icons,” we must “place ourselves inside a circuit between ‘text and practice.’” The images make sense only when read as part of “concrete liturgical procedures” that often are no longer available to us (158). Kadoya looks beyond the *mikkyō* prototypes referred to by Dolce, and argues that the icons used in medieval Shinto texts also drew on other sources, notably Daoist and popular cults from China. These

two essays, then, raise the question to what degree medieval Shinto can be understood as a specialization that was fully contained within *mikkyō*.

This question is addressed head on in the essays of Iyanaga Nobumi and Fabio Rambelli. Iyanaga zooms in on the fascination for creation myths in the Shinto texts, whose authors appear to have scanned Buddhist scripture for references to “Hindu” myths about the origin of the universe. He shows that thirteenth- and fourteenth-century texts of medieval Shinto draw on “Hindu” (Śaiva) mythologies through the often erratic interpretations found in Annen’s ninth-century treatises. This leads Iyanaga to a comparison between what he calls the “self-implosion” of Indian Buddhism, caused by the Tantric dilution of its basic logical structure, and a similar collapse of Japanese Buddhism due to the spread of Original Enlightenment thought (297). Medieval Shinto, Iyanaga argues, was structurally related to Indian Hinduism (which explains its fascination with Śaiva myth), and emerged as the result of a similar implosion of Buddhism. Where Iyanaga seeks to understand medieval Shinto based on internal developments within Buddhism, Rambelli sees the importance of medieval Shinto in the fact that it constituted a move to the outside of Buddhism. Rambelli discusses various categorizations of kami in medieval texts, which define some kami as manifestations or even the essence of Buddhist enlightenment, and others as dangerous forces outside of Buddhism. These categorizations reflect the huge variety in Buddhist approaches to kami, and indicate that “medieval Shinto” was not a coherent discourse. Yet, Rambelli follows Iyanaga in emphasizing a quest for a “primeval ontological condition” as “one of the most significant features” of medieval Shinto (309), and argues that this quest forced thinkers to look beyond the usual scope of Buddhist discourse, both towards Japanese mythology, Brahmanical (Vaiṣṇava and Śaiva) cosmogonies, and Chinese (Daoist and Neo-Confucian) thought. This process, encouraged by Buddhism’s general loss of influence in East Asia, led to a gradual estrangement of the kami from Buddhism that would eventually produce Shinto.

The remaining five essays offer a range of other perspectives on medieval Shinto. Michael Como reminds us of the fluent hybridity of the cultic landscape *before* the emergence of medieval Shinto. He focuses on eighth- and ninth-century cults of threatening deities from Kyushu dominated by Hata priests and monks, and argues that their (continental) techniques of pacifying violent deities laid the basis for “the establishment of *jindō* as an organizing principle of the royal cult” in the mid-Heian period. *Jindō*, the likely early reading of *shintō*, is here used in its original meaning: to describe pacification rites, typically Buddhist in nature, used to control threatening local deities.²

Brian O. Ruppert surveys the phenomenon of royal progresses to shrines, a practice that boomed in the eleventh century and lasted until the Jōkyū war of 1221. He

2. In my own paper presented at the 2007 conference, I sought to trace the transformation of this *jindō* cult into something that might be called (medieval) Shinto (TEEUWEN 2007).

relates this practice to the politics of the Insei period, when cloistered sovereigns experimented with new ways to “forge a ritual identity for the royal family independent of the northern Fujiwaras” (200). It is striking that these events of great political and economic importance coincided with the formative decades of medieval Shinto.

Jacqueline I. Stone discusses a recurrent trope in Buddhist tales about the kami: tales of kami who tolerate violations of death defilement committed by monks out of compassion. Stone investigates the question whether the *honji suijaku* assimilation of kami to buddhas might have had an effect on social practices to do with death defilement. She finds little evidence of this. Quite to the contrary, considerations of pollution by contact with death gave rise to a specialized category of “death-managing monks” whose activities these tales were designed to legitimate. The kami, then, remained “intractable” and were never fully “subsumed within a Buddhist soteriological framework” (225).

William Bodiford investigates the figure of “one of the most influential gods in Japan,” Matara, focusing on the guise that this “combinative deity” takes in the writings of a leading figure of Edo-period Sannō Ichijitsu Shintō, the Tendai monk Jōin (1682–1739). Jōin identifies Matara with the Brahmin-like shaman who beats a golden drum at the beginning of the Golden Light sutra, calling up visions of infinite Buddha lands through its waves of sound. Jōin’s “occult spiritualism” (255) was soon to be eliminated by Tendai reformers such as Reikū Kōken, whose movement to restore classical orthodoxy diminished the importance of the kami. Bodiford argues that this left an open space that was later to be filled by non-Buddhist forms of Shinto.

In the volume’s only French-language article, Sueki Fumihiko compares understandings of imperial power as they are expressed in the writings of Jien, Kitabatake Chikafusa, and Jihen. Jihen, who was most active in the 1330s, ascribed to the emperor an “absolute character” not found in the works of his predecessors. Jihen conceived of the imperial line as the “essence of original purity,” a tenuous link between the divine realm of primordial times and the present degenerated age of man. In many striking ways, Jihen’s ideas foreshadow those of Kokugaku thinkers many centuries later; yet, his works were all but forgotten and exerted little direct influence on Edo-period thought.

Finally, Bernhard Scheid proposes a new theoretical approach to Shinto history by drawing on the work of Jan and Aleida Assmann, notably their concepts of cultural memory, ritual vs. textual coherence, primary vs. secondary religions, and canonization. Analyzing medieval Shinto through these concepts, Scheid proposes that medieval Shinto displays signs of a transition from a primary, ritual mode to a secondary, textual mode, but stopped short of establishing a “counter culture”—a value system that stood in contrast to the secular world. Obsessed with “imperial charisma and courtly pedigree,” Shinto remained at an intermediate stage between the religious categories proposed by the Assmanns, a fact that is reflected even in Shinto’s modern status as a “non-religious cult” (340).

What is the substance of “medieval Shinto,” as it emerges from the essays of this volume? The concept appears to call up two very different images: a textual body of texts and ideas about kami and the emperor on the borderlines of medieval Buddhism (the narrow definition); and a nationwide patchwork of combinative cults, each unique to its own location and yet in constant interaction with many others (the broad definition). What remains unclear is the relationship between these two. We still have remarkably little idea about the social contexts and impacts of the texts that are our main source on medieval Shinto, or even of the texts of post-medieval esoteric Shinto. Much work remains before we can overcome the effects of the (early) modern wipe-out of medieval religious culture, and set out mapping Shinto’s place in what Grapard calls the “ecology and economy of salvation” of that period.

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