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Introduction: Facets of “Shinto” in the Muromachi Period

It is no exaggeration to say that the Muromachi period (1336–1573), with the brief appendix of the Azuchi-Momoyama period (1573–1600), is the blind spot of Japanese religious and intellectual history. As of today, there are no comprehensive histories or sustained studies of the various developments that took place in the religious and intellectual arenas of Japan during that time. A telling example is the work of Kuroda Toshio 黒田俊雄 (1926–1993), which dramatically changed the ways in which we now look at medieval Japan. Despite the revolutionary nature and the deep impact of his research, Kuroda essentially limits his interests to the time-span between the late Heian (twelfth century) and late Kamakura period (early fourteenth century)—in other words, from the establishment of the retired emperors’ rule (*insei*) to the establishment of the Ashikaga shogunate. His major contribution, a new framework of the understanding of the role of Buddhist institutions and their doctrines, known as *kenmitsu taiseiron* (discourse on the exo-esoteric system) loses its heuristic appeal after the Nanbokuchō period (1336–1392) (see especially Kuroda 1975, 1980, 1990). Another influential historian, Amino Yoshihiko 網野善彦 (1928–2004), did carry out important research on the Muromachi period, emphasizing the Nanbokuchō period as a sort of epistemological break and arguing for the importance of studying professional groups and local areas away from Kyoto to understand the culture of the time (see, in particular, Amino 1991). However, he did not pay much attention to religious or intellectual history. The studies that exist on the Muromachi period tend to focus on so-called “Kamakura new Buddhism”—Zen sects, Pure Land organizations, and Nichiren-derived groups—with little attention dedicated to Shingon, Tendai, and the Nara schools, which still played a leading role among Buddhist organizations for most of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. “Shinto” as a whole has received even less attention, with scholars focusing primarily on Ise Shinto 伊勢神道 and, above all, Yoshida Shinto 吉田神道.¹

Given the research interests and scope of giants such as Kuroda and Amino, and the general situation of the field, which privileges late Heian and Kamakura

1. For example, see Inoue, ed., 2003; Okada, ed., 2010; Hardacre 2017.

periods in terms of religious history, it is no surprise that none of the major multi-volume histories of Japan published in the last twenty-some years—all of them major academic and editorial endeavors involving dozens of scholars presenting innovative and cutting-edge developments from various fields—include any treatment of developments in kami cults.² The *Cambridge History of Japan*, a landmark accomplishment and still the standard reference for the study of Japanese history in the west, has no entry on Shinto or related themes in the volume on medieval Japan.³

And yet, the Muromachi period was a time of vast and dramatic changes in society, culture, and religion. In terms of world history, its span was delimited by two major events: at the beginning, by the establishment of the Mongol Empire (Yuan Dynasty, 1271–1368), an enormous multi-ethnic polity with its center in China that occupied most of Eurasia, from Eastern Europe to India, Southeast Asia, and eastern Siberia; and at the end, by the emergence of world exploration and colonialism by European powers in the sixteenth century. These two events and their aftermaths marked profoundly the Japanese culture in the Muromachi period, especially in terms of its global awareness and international relations. More specifically, the Mongol invasions to Japan in 1274 and 1281 triggered a sense of Japanese identity and superiority, based on the idea that Japan was a sacred country protected by the buddhas and the kami (what is known as *shinkoku shisō* 神国思想), something that continued to resonate when the Japanese had to deal with visitors from southern Europe in the second half of the sixteenth century. At the same time, the Mongol Empire stabilized trade routes across Eurasia in ways that also affected Japan, creating a seafaring, mercantile culture which flourished in the Muromachi period (despite Ming China's attempts to eliminate it) and brought many Japanese traders to establish many "Japan towns" (*nihonjinmachi*) in East and Southeast Asia—a mercantile culture that ended only after the new Tokugawa government's forceful closure of the country (*sakoku*) in 1640. Thus, a growing number of foreigners came to Japan during the Muromachi period, bringing books, ideas, artifacts, images, foods, and ways of life.

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2. See *Nihon no rekishi* 日本の歴史. Tokyo: Kōdansha, 2000–2002, 25 vols.; *Nihon no rekishi* 日本の歴史. Tokyo: Shūeisha, 1991–93, 21 vols.; *Nihon no rekishi* 日本の歴史. Tokyo: Shōgakkan, 2007–2009, 17 vols.; Iwanami kōza *Nihon tsūshi* 岩波講座日本通史. Tokyo: Iwanami shoten, 1993–1996, 25 vols.; Iwanami kōza *Nihon rekishi* 岩波講座日本歴史. Tokyo: Iwanami shoten, 2013–16, 22 vols.
 3. *Cambridge History of Japan*, volume three (edited by Kozo Yamamura). An important entry on Shinto, written by Allan Grapard, which covers the history of kami cults and teachings from the prehistory until the late Heian period, is included in volume two.

The Japanese engaged with this wealth of new sources and ideas by questioning their place in the world order, by reflecting on their own cultural heritage and its specificity, and by creating new cultural formations. Many religious developments and intellectual innovations also resulted from this new cultural climate.

The Muromachi period was also a time of dramatic and painful transformations: the reorganization of the feudal system under the Ashikaga shoguns generated a constant situation of internal warfare and instability, which culminated in widespread destruction in the second half of the fifteenth century (Ōnin war, 1467–1477)—warfare that continued until after the battle of Sekigahara and the establishment of the Tokugawa Shogunate in 1600 with the siege of Osaka in 1614–1615; and a radical questioning of established, traditional customs. This situation of precariousness, if not outright destruction, resulted in the loss of ancient traditions (especially at court and temples and shrines across the country), immediately countered by attempts to recover them; but also in the creation of new traditions (doctrines, rituals, arts forms, etc.).

The loss of authority of the imperial court (together with the related loss of sources of stable income), resulted in the discontinuation of rituals, but at the same time, in attempts by various courtiers to transmit their knowledge to people who were interested in them and were able to pay to receive them. Divination specialists (*onmyōji* 陰陽師) spread in the provinces, selling their expertise to *daimyō* and townspeople; artists (poets, musicians, etc.) came to be affiliated with regional temples and shrines; intellectuals began to teach Chinese classics to regional *daimyō*, Buddhist monks, and shrine priests; and ritual specialists tried to promote their expertise in divine matters outside of the court. In terms of Shinto history, matters also related to the *kami* (myths, rituals, lore, performances) that were traditionally limited to the imperial court, began to spread in society at large and affected ways in which people thought about, represented, and dealt with the *kami*.

More specifically, during the Muromachi period we encounter the following tendencies related to local cults, which ultimately affected the development of what we call today “Shinto”:

(i) formation and consolidation of a discourse largely independent of Buddhism, with many elements from Chinese thought (Song Neo-Confucianism and Daoism), initially limited to Ise Shrine, but later expanded by other shrines as well as by Yoshida Shrine affiliates;

(ii) even from within established Buddhist discourses about the *kami* and their cults, a tendency emerges to consider the *kami* the primary forms of the divinities, and the buddhas as their manifestations, in what is called “reverse *honji suijaku*” (*shinpon busshaku*);

(iii) formation of regional cults to hybrid deities, in which the Buddhist component became less and less relevant: Miwa 三輪, Suwa 諏訪, Gozu Tennō 牛頭天王, Konpira 金比羅, Awashima 淡島, Kashima 鹿島, Munakata 宗像—all

these temple-shrine complexes developed, each in its own form, novel doctrines, representations, and rituals that cannot be simply understood as yet other variations on *honji suijaku* 本地垂迹;

(iv) new narratives about the kami: a new narrative genre emerged, called *otogizōshi* 御伽草子 or *honjimonō* 本地物, which was often written in illustrated scrolls and constituted the text for spoken performances (*etoki* 絵解). These stories tell the origin of sacred places (including shrines); often, the kami are described as human beings and go through all kinds of ordeals in this world, before their divinity is disclosed; in many tales it is even unclear whether the protagonists themselves had some clue as to their true nature. In other words, the kami in these stories, while still being considered manifestations of some buddhas or bodhisattvas, are described as increasingly close to the human world; often, their vicissitudes take them to remote and exotic locales, such as Ezo (present-day Hokkaidō) and distant islands south of India.

(v) new visual representations of the kami widely circulate, based on Chinese images of bodhisattvas and Daoist gods;

(vi) most momentous of all was the intuition that brought a mid-ranking courtier and ritual specialist, Yoshida Kanetomo 吉田兼俱 (1435–1511), to imagine a form of Shinto that was in essence not dependent upon Buddhism or Chinese thought, but a direct transmission from the kami; perhaps unsurprisingly, Kanetomo called that this unique, primordial, and singular (non-combinatory) form of Shinto, which he call *Yuiitsu* 唯一 (singular) Shinto or *Genpon-Sōgen* 元本宗源 (primary and original) Shinto, had been transmitted only to him by his ancestors. This intuition opened the way for subsequent authors to envision their own forms of Shinto as a separate religious tradition—Shinto as we know it today.

As a whole, we can say that the Muromachi period shows a wide range of forms of interactions between the kami and Buddhism (*shinbutsu shugō* 神仏習合), an interaction in which other systems of thought (Confucianism and Daoism, in particular) also acquire growing relevance.

With all this at the background, the articles in this special issue of *Japanese Religions* aim to bring novel attention to the developments in the world of kami cults during the Muromachi period. It is of course impossible to present a comprehensive and systematic picture of the multifarious situation of Shinto at the time, so we chose to identify topics that are little known (the diffusion of kami-based consecrations rituals known as *shintō kanjō* 神道灌頂, the hybrid god Seiryō Gongen 清瀧権現, the Shinto-Christian dialog in the late Muromachi – early Edo period, elusive visual representations of deities) or present new approaches to old themes (the representations of kami in Nō plays, and the awareness of world religions and Shinto's place among them in the Muromachi period). Let us take a look at the various contributions.

Itō Satoshi, whose work has provided important material for a reconsideration of medieval Shinto, presents here a general overview of kami cults in the Muromachi period. After a review of the existing scholarship and its limits, he focuses in particular on important but still little-understood traditions centered at Buddhist institutions, such as Miwa shrine (formerly, Ōgorinji 大御輪寺 temple, the center of Miwa-ryū Shinto) and Murōji 室生寺 (the center of Goryū Shinto 御流神道)—both based on Shingon teachings and including elaborations about Ise related to Ryōbu Shinto 両部神道. Itō also presents a number of kami-based consecrations rituals (*shintō kanjō*) that spread in large areas of Japan in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, and covered many aspects related to everyday life such as military arts, filiality (in the so-called *oyashiro kanjō* 父母代灌頂), and medicine. These consecrations show a deep and extensive influence of Esoteric Buddhist ideas of the body, in particular the conceptual model based on the five Indian elements and their respective shapes (*gogyō* 五形: earth=square, water=circle, fire=triangle, air=crescent, and space=sphere). Itō is also explicit in pointing out that we can begin to talk about “Shinto” proper only after Yoshida Kanetomo’s momentous intervention in the later fifteenth century.

Uejima Susumu, a medieval historian working on religious issues, offers a novel and compelling analysis of the Nō drama *Miwa*. The choice is not accidental. It has been argued that “Miwa is perhaps the most obscure play in the Nō canon ... Even family stage manuals never intended for publication guardedly note for the most problematic points, ‘To be communicated orally’ (*kuden*). The crucial problem is the identity of the main character in Act Two”⁴—i.e., the identity of the god Miwa Myōjin. Uejima addresses this problem in his contribution, but goes far beyond *Miwa* to expand his inquiry to the nature of medieval kami and their different modes of representation. In short, *Miwa* presents all the typical features of interactions between buddhas and kami (*shinbutsu shūgō*): the kami is presented here simultaneously as a protector of Buddhism, as a suffering being seeking salvation from a Buddhist monk, and as an agent of salvation for sentient beings (thus, as a bodhisattva). Ontologically, the kami-bodhisattva manifests itself in human form (both as a man and a woman). Sociologically, the kami is not a lofty and inscrutable entity, but a being close to humanity, with which it shares vicissitudes and suffering. Importantly, the kami takes center stage and is the protagonist (*shite*); in other words, in the performance, the kami is no longer a subordinate entity (as an avatar of a loftier Buddhist divinity), but the main agent of salvation for itself and all beings.

4. Yokota-Murakami 1997, p. 164. Yokota-Murakami also discusses various interpretations of this problem on pp. 164–170.

Gaétan Rappo, a scholar of medieval Shingon Esoteric Buddhism who has focused on the figure of monk Monkan 文観 (1278–1357), offers what is perhaps the first extensive treatment of the Shingon protector god Seiryō (Kiyotaki 清瀧) Gongen, based at Daigoji 醍醐寺. For some reason, scholars (especially internationally) have focused their attention to Tendai-related gods such as Sannō gongen 山王権現 and, to a lesser extent, Shinra Myōjin 新羅明神, but little exists on the divine protectors of large Shingon monastic complexes such as Mt. Kōya 高野山 (Niu 丹生 and Kōya myōjin 高野明神), Tōji 東寺, and others. Seiryō Gongen was established in the mid-Heian period as the protector of Daigoji, in a cult that has evolved over time to encompass Shugendō elements (Kami-Daigo is the center of the Tōzan-ha 当山派 sect of Shugendō); the cult is still active today. Rappo shows how the god Seiryō and its cult was conceived, modified, and represented by situating its history in the broader East Asian context. He tells the story of Japanese monks traveling to China, where they discovered mountain gods and sea dragons, which they brought back to their Japanese temples, where they were enshrined, possible in connection with pre-existing local cults. The bricolage-like nature of Seiryō Gongen, always in construction, as it were, is also representative of many kami discourses all over Japan.

Kadoya Atsushi, an intellectual historian of medieval religion and an expert on the *Reikiki* 麗氣記, one of the central texts of Ryōbu Shinto, presents a close iconographical reading of an elusive horse-riding deity that is found, in different forms, in many versions of *Reikiki* (especially the chapter “Shintaizu 神体図” or “Images of the bodies of the kami”) and its commentaries from the late Kamakura until the Edo periods. This particular female-looking kami, normally known under her Buddhist appellation as Memyō bosatsu 馬鳴菩薩 (which, in turn, originally refers to the Indian scholar Āśvaghoṣa), is identified in commentarial literature, variously as the male god Izanagi no mikoto (one of the two creators, together with his female partner Izanami no mikoto, of Japan, according to the ancient mythology), Ame no minakanushi no mikoto 天御中主命 (the primordial god of *Kojiki*), the god of the Outer Shrine of Ise (Tsukiyomi 月読命), and Ninigi no mikoto, the kami connecting the first emperor of Japan, Jinmu, with his divine ancestor, the sun goddess Amaterasu Ōmikami (normally called Tenshō Daijin 天照大神 in the middle ages). Other associations involve bodhisattvas and Daoist gods. Along the lines of Rappo’s article, Kadoya’s contribution also highlights the experimental nature of what we could call “kami making” in the Muromachi period. He also shows that at least some of the doctrines and representations behind certain kami and their discourses had become incomprehensible to exegetes working a few decades apart—a phenomenon that requires further considerations.

John Breen, intellectual historian of Shinto of the late Tokugawa and modern Japan, contributes a critical study of Jesuit sources depicting late Muromachi period kami cults, especially Yoshida Shinto. After a detailed analysis of the chapter

“Shintō no koto” (On Shinto) from Habian (Fabian) Fucan’s *Myōtei mondō* 妙貞問答 of 1605 (in which the author promoted the Catholic teachings while criticizing the various religious and intellectual systems of Japan—Buddhism, Confucianism, Daoism, and Shinto), Breen revisits the main accounts of Japanese religion and especially Shinto, written by leading Jesuits such as Francis Xavier (1506–1552), Cosme de Torres (1510–1570), Luis Frois (1532–1597), and Alessandro Valignano (1539–1606). Frois in particular also reports about the disputation that took place in Nara in 1563 with the participation of Jesuits, Buddhists, and also Kiyohara Shigekata 清原重賢, the great grandson of the founder of Yoshida Shintō, Yoshida Kanetomo. Importantly, Breen shows that the critique of Shinto myth initiated by Habian Fucan was the beginning of a Confucian revisionist discourses about Shinto that characterizes the Edo period (Breen in particular discusses Arai Hakuseki 新井白石, Andō Shōeki 安藤昌益 and Yamagata Bantō 山片蟠桃); still, Fucan’s intervention was significantly different from his successors in his relentless and radical criticism of mythology: as Breen emphasizes, Fucan was the first ever to criticize *Nihon shoki* to such an extent.

Finally, Fabio Rambelli expands the discussion on developments in Shinto discourses during the Muromachi period by addressing how the understanding of Shinto within the context of the Japanese growing awareness of other religious traditions has changed. Rambelli does so by focusing on the idea of the Three Teachings (*sankyō* 三教), namely, Buddhism, Confucianism, and Daoism, that dominates Buddhist self-understanding in relation to existing religious and philosophical discourses in China and East Asia since before the Tang. In Japan, Kūkai brought systematic discussion of the position of Buddhism within a range of religious systems, including atheism and various Chinese and Indian religions and intellectual schools. Rambelli shows that gradually, between the late Kamakura and the Muromachi period, “Shinto” begins to replace Daoism in Japanese discussions of the Three Teachings. The turning point once again is Yoshida Kanetomo’s reconfiguration/invention of “Shinto”; for Kanetomo, Shinto is not simply one of the Three Teachings, but their very root. The encounter with Christianity, in particular with Fucan’s *Myōtei mondō*, marked the inclusion of Shinto among the religious systems of the world; this enhanced awareness of Shinto was later developed in the Edo period by Nativist authors to various degrees of cultural nationalism and even chauvinism. A notable exception was Tominaga Nakamoto 富永仲基, who proposed a sort of cultural relativism. In general, however, Japanese authors tended to follow Kanetomo in using his modified list of the Three Teachings to produce cultural and ethnic profilings of Japan, China, and India. Be that as it may, tracing the history of the self-awareness of Shinto as a marker of Japanese cultural identity, shows that the Japanese developed ideas about world religions before the arrival and the diffusion of western models, as is often argued today.

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