Sources of Japanese Tradition

CHAPTER II
EARLY SHINTO

Western scholars, intrigued by what they imagined to be the indigenous nature of Shinto, from the early days of the opening of Japan devoted considerable attention to this religion. By the turn of the century there were scholars from the important Western nations studying what has been termed the "National Faith of Japan," in the hope of discovering in it an explanation of Japanese characteristics long obscured to foreigners by the self-imposed isolation of the country. Strictly speaking, however, Shinto was not an indigenous religion, for the Japanese were not the first inhabitants of the islands, and their religion apparently came with them from elsewhere. Shamanistic and animistic practices similar to those of Shinto have also been found throughout Northeast Asia, especially in Korea, and we thus cannot say of Shinto that it is a purely Japanese faith.

Shinto was diverse in its origins and remained an aggregate of heterogeneous cults well into historical times. Its failure to develop into a unified religion resulted largely from the natural features of Japan and a strong sense of regionalism among the people. The numerous tribal communities living in the river basins held to their own beliefs even after the unified control of the central government began to assert its authority early in the seventh century.

The objects of worship in all Shinto cults were known as *kami*, a term for which it is difficult to find any translation. A famous student of Shinto, Motoori Norinaga (1730-1801), wrote:

I do not yet understand the meaning of the term *kami*. Speaking in general, however, it may be said that *kami* signifies, in the first place, the deities of heaven and earth that appear in the ancient records and also the spirits of the shrines where they are worshipped.

It is hardly necessary to say that it includes human beings. It also includes such objects as birds, beasts, trees, plants, seas, mountains, and so forth. In ancient usage, anything whatsoever which was outside the ordinary, which possessed superior power, or which was awe-inspiring was called *kami*. Emi-
nence here does not refer merely to the superiority of nobility, goodness, or meritorious deeds. Evil and mysterious things, if they are extraordinary and dreadful, are called kami. It is needless to say that among human beings who are called kami the successive generations of sacred emperors are all included. The fact that emperors are also called “distant kami” is because, from the standpoint of common people, they are far-separated, majestic, and worthy of reverence. In a lesser degree we find, in the present as well as in ancient times, human beings who are kami. Although they may not be accepted throughout the whole country, yet in each province, each village, and each family there are human beings who are kami, each one according to his own proper position. The kami of the divine age were for the most part human beings of that time and, because the people of that time were all kami, it is called the Age of the Gods (kami).  

Primitive Shinto embraced cults of exceedingly diverse origins, including animism, shamanism, fertility cults, and the worship of nature, ancestors, and heroes. In the course of time the distinctions between these various cults tended to disappear. The Sun Goddess, for instance, became the chief deity not only of nature worshipers, but also of ancestor worshipers as well. She was also considered to be the dispenser of fertility and of the fortunes of the nation. Similarly, an object of animistic worship could assume the role of a fertility god or a shamanistic deity, or even pose as the ancestor of the land on which a community lived. Before Shinto could become the “national faith” of Japan, however, it had to be bolstered successively by the philosophical and religious concepts of Han Confucianism, Esoteric Buddhism, Neo-Confucianism, and, finally, Christianity. The forms which these influences took will be discussed in later chapters; in the early period with which we are here concerned, Shinto was still a primitive and almost inarticulate group of cults.

The oldest center of Shinto worship was that of the Izumo Shrine on the Japan Sea coast, and thus close to the Korean peninsula, by way of which continental civilization had reached Japan. The Kashima and Katori shrines in the Tone River basin to the north for a long time marked the frontier between the lands of the Japanese and those of the less civilized aborigines. The shrine at Ise, that of the Sun Goddess, came to be the most important, and it was there that various symbols of the imperial power were displayed.


The buildings of the shrines were architecturally very simple. They consisted generally of a single room (although it was sometimes partitioned), raised from the ground and entered by steps at the side or front. It was invariably of wood, with whole tree-trunks used for beams. A mirror or a sword might be enshrined within, but often the building served merely as a place where the kami, visible or invisible, might be worshiped.

Outside the main building of the shrine two other architectural features usually may be found, a gateway called a torii, and a water basin where the mouth and hands of worshipers may be washed. The characteristic Japanese insistence on cleanliness finds its expression in many forms. Two important acts of worship at Shinto shrines, the harai and the misogi, both reflect this tendency. The former apparently originated in the airing of the cave or pit dwellings of prehistoric times, and came to refer to both the sweeping out of a house and the special rites of chasing out evil spirits; the latter refers to the washing of the body, an act of increasingly spiritual significance. In addition to these formal acts of religion, there were formulas, prayers, and ritual practices associated with almost all human activities (but especially in the arts and crafts), whereby divine power was invoked to assure success.

Worship at a Shinto shrine consisted of “attendance” and “offering.” “Attendance” meant not only being present and giving one’s attention to the object of worship, but often also performing ceremonial dances or joining in processions, which have always been an important part of Shinto ritual. The offerings usually consisted of the first-born of a household, the first fruits of the season or the first catch from the water, but might also include booty of war, such as the heads of enemies. The shrine was in the charge of a medium who transmitted messages both from the kami and from the political rulers. The mediums were assisted by supplicants, the general term for officers of the shrine, and by ablu- tioners. Some of the texts of the prayers and rituals of this early time have been preserved. The following is part of a prayer for the harvest festival:

More especially do I humbly declare in the mighty presence of the Great-Heaven-Shining Deity who dwells in Ise. Because the Great Deity has bestowed on him [the sovereign] the lands of the four quarters over which her glance extends as far as where the walls of Heaven rise, as far as where the bounds
of Earth stand up, as far as the blue sky extends, as far as where the white clouds settle down; by the blue sea-plain, as far as the prow of ships can reach without letting dry their poles and oars; by land, as far as the hoofs of horses can go, with tightened baggage-cords, treading their way among rock-beds and tree-roots where the long roads extend, continuously widening the narrow regions and making the steep regions level, in drawing together, as it were, the distant regions by throwing over them [a net of] many ropes—therefore let the first-fruits for the Sovran Deity be piled up in her mighty presence like a range of hills, leaving the remainder for him [the sovereign] tranquilly to partake of.

Moreover, whereas you bless the Sovran Grandchild’s reign as a long reign, firm and enduring, and render it a happy and prosperous reign, I plunge down my neck cormorant-wise in reverence to you as our Sovran’s dear, divine ancestress, and fulfill your praise by making these plenteous offerings on his behalf.²

The texts of these ancient prayers are often beautiful, with a simplicity that is characteristic of Shinto. The above example indicates moreover that at the time of its composition the cult of the Sun Goddess of Ise was closely associated with the imperial house and had already come to dominate the various other beliefs. It was, in fact, just when Shinto was first assuming the features of a more homogeneous and developed religion that the arrival of Buddhism caused it to be relegated to a position of minor importance for many centuries.

LEGENDS CONCERNING SHINTO DEITIES

There is virtually no documentary evidence to indicate the original character of Shinto belief. Before the introduction of Chinese writing and Chinese ideas, the Japanese were unable to record their religious beliefs and there is little reason to believe that they had produced an articulate body of doctrine or dogma. The legends in the *Kojiki* and *Nihongi*, often cited as containing the original deposit of Shinto folklore, are late compilations in which political considerations and specifically Chinese conceptions intrude themselves almost everywhere. This fact was recognized by the great Neo-Shinto scholars of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries who tried almost in vain to find in these texts any evidence of pure Japanese beliefs. Elements of Chinese cosmology are most apparent in rationalistic passages explaining the origin of the world in terms of the yin and yang principles, which seem to come directly from Chinese works such as the *Huai-nan tsu*. The prevalence of paired male and female deities, such as Izanagi and Izanami, may also be a result of conscious selection with the yin and yang principles in mind. Also the frequency of numerical sets of deities, such as the Five Heavenly Deities of the *Kojiki* and Seven Generations of Heavenly Deities of the *Nihongi*, may represent an attempt at selection and organization in terms of Chinese cosmological series, in this case the Five Elements and Seven Heavenly Luminaries.

With these major reservations in mind, we may still discern in these legends some features of early Japanese belief in regard to questions which might arise in almost any country or culture. But since Shinto cults were so closely associated with nature worship and the topographical aspects of Japan, one obvious question was “How was the Japanese archipelago created?” This led to another, “Who has a rightful claim to occupy and rule over this land?”; a question answered in favor of the Yamato people and their rulers by the passages cited in the previous section. Still other passages, attempting to assert Yamato supremacy, betray the existence of diverse and competing cults, such as that associated with Susa-no-o and the Izumo people. It should be noted in the following excerpts how the names of deities and semi-divine beings are composed of vivid images from nature, and how often their activities suggest a concern with fertility, ritual purification, ancestor or hero worship, and animism.

*Birth of the Land*

[Adapted from Aston, *Nihongi*, I, 10–14]

Izanagi and Izanami stood on the floating bridge of Heaven, and held counsel together, saying:

“Is there not a country beneath?”

Thereupon they thrust down the jewel-spear of Heaven,¹ and groping about therewith found the ocean. The brine which dripped from the point of the spear coagulated and became an island which received the name of Ono-goro-jima.

The two Deities thereupon descended and dwelt in this island. Accordingly they wished to become husband and wife together, and to produce countries.

So they made Ono-goro-jima the pillar of the center of the land.

Now the male deity turning by the left, and the female deity by the right, they went round the pillar of the land separately. When they met together on one side, the female deity spoke first and said: “How de-

---


¹ Considered by some commentators to resemble the phallus. Cf. Aston, *Nihongi*, I, 10. [Ed.]
lightful! I have met with a lovely youth." The male deity was displeased, and said: "I am a man, and by right should have spoken first. How is it that on the contrary thou, a woman, shouldst have been the first to speak? This was unlucky. Let us go round again." Upon this the two deities went back, and having met anew, this time the male deity spoke first, and said: "How delightfully! I have met a lovely maiden."

Then he inquired of the female deity, saying: "In thy body is there aught formed?" She answered, and said: "In my body there is a place which is the source of femininity." The male deity said: "In my body again there is a place which is the source of masculinity. I wish to unite this source-place of my body to the source-place of thy body." Hereupon the male and female first became united as husband and wife.

Now when the time of birth arrived, first of all the island of Abaji was reckoned as the placenta, and their minds took no pleasure in it. Therefore it received the name of Abaji no Shima.2

Next there was produced the island of Ō-yamato no Toyo-aki-tsushima.8

(Here and elsewhere [the characters for Nippon] are to be read Yamato.4)

Next they produced the island of Iyo no futa-na,8 and next the island of Tsukushi.9 Next the islands of Oki and Sado were born as twins. This is the prototype of the twin-births which sometimes take place among mankind.

Next was born the island of Koshi,7 then the island of Ō-shima, then the island of Kibi no Ko.8

Hence first arose the designation of the Great Eight-island Country. Then the islands of Tsushima and Iki, with the small islands in various parts, were produced by the coagulation of the foam of the salt-water.

"The island which will not meet," i.e., is unsatisfactory. Abaji may also be interpreted as "my shame." The characters with which this name is written in the text mean "foam-road." Perhaps the true derivation is "millet-land."

Rich-harvest (or autumn)-island of Yamato.

Yamato means probably mountain-gate. It is the genuine ancient name for the province which contained Nara and many of the other capitals of Japan for centuries, and it was also used for the whole country. Several emperors called themselves Yamato-neko. It is mentioned by the historian of the Later Han dynasty of China (A.D. 25-220) as the seat of rule in Japan at that time.

5 Now called Kyushu.

6 Now called Shikoku.

7 Koshi is not an island. It comprises the present provinces of Echû, Echigo, and Echizen.

8 These two are not clear. Kibi is now Bingo, Bizen, and Bitchû. Ko, "child" or "small," perhaps refers to the small islands of the Inland Sea.

Legends Concerning Susa-no-o

The part of Amaterasu's unruly brother, Susa-no-o, in the creation of the imperial line has already been described in Chapter I. His other activities are of interest because they reflect the importance of regional cults incorporated into the Yamato system of Shinto. After his banishment from Heaven, Susa-no-o is reported in one account to have gone to Korea, an indication that the activities of the Gods were no more limited to Japan alone than those of the people themselves. In any case this black sheep of the gods settled in Izumo, where he married the local princess and rid the land of a dreaded serpent, in whose body was found the Great Sword which became one of the Three Imperial Regalia (another of the Regalia is a curved stone or jewel produced in both Izumo and Korea).

The Sun Goddess and Susa-no-o

[Adapted from Aston, Nihongi, I, 40-45]

After this Susa-no-o no Mikoto's behavior was exceedingly rude. In what way? Amaterasu [the Heaven-Shining-Deity] had made august rice fields of Heavenly narrow rice fields and Heavenly long rice fields. Then Susa-no-o, when the seed was sown in spring, broke down the divisions between the plots of rice, and in autumn let loose the Heavenly piebald colts, and made them lie down in the midst of the rice fields. Again, when he saw that Amaterasu was about to celebrate the feast of first-fruits, he secretly voided excrement in the New Palace. Moreover, when he saw that Amaterasu was in her sacred weaving hall, engaged in weaving garments of the Gods, he flayed a piebald colt of Heaven, and breaking a hole in the roof-tiles of the hall, flung it in. Then Amaterasu started with alarm, and wound herself with the shuttle. Indignant of this, she straightway entered the Rock-cave of Heaven, and having fastened the Rock-door, dwelt there in seclusion. Therefore constant darkness prevailed on all sides, and the alternation of night and day was unknown.

Then the eighty myriads of Gods met on the bank of the Tranquil River of Heaven, and considered in what manner they should supplicate her. Accordingly Omoi-kane no Kami, with profound device
and far-reaching thought, at length gathered long-singing birds of the
Eternal Land and made them utter their prolonged cry to one another.
Moreover he made Ta-jikara-o to stand beside the Rock-door. Then
Ame no Koyane no Mikoto, ancestor of the Nakatomi Deity Chieftains,
and Futo-dama no Mikoto, ancestor of the Imibe Chieftains, dug up a
five-hundred branched True Sakaki tree of the Heavenly Mt. Kagu.
On its upper branches they hung an august five-hundred string of Yasa-
jewels. On the middle branches they hung an eight-hand mirror.
(One writing says Ma-futsu no Kagami.)
On its lower branches they hung blue soft offerings and white soft
offerings. Then they recited their liturgy together.
Moreover Ama no Uzume no Mikoto, ancestress of the Sarume Chietain,
took in her hand a spear wreathed with Eulalia grass, and standing
before the door of the Rock-cave of Heaven, skillfully performed a
mimic dance. She took, moreover, the true Sakaki tree of the
Heavenly Mount Kagu, and made of it a head-dress, she took club-moss
and made of it bracelets, she kindled fires, she placed a tub bottom
upwards and gave forth a divinely-inspired utterance.
Now Amaterasu heard this, and said: "Since I have shut myself up
in the Rock-cave, there ought surely to be continual night in the Central
Land of fertile reed-plains. How then can Ama no Uzume no Mikoto
be so jolly?" So with her August hand, she opened for a narrow space
the Rock-door and peeped out. Then Ta-jikara-o no Kami forthwith
took Amaterasu by the hand, and led her out. Upon this the Gods Nakatomi
no Kami and Imibe no Kami at once drew a limit by means of
a bottom-tied rope (also called a left-hand rope) and begged her
not to return again [into the cave].
After this all the Gods put the blame on Susa-no-o, and imposed on
him a fine of one thousand tables and so at length chastised him. They
also had his hair plucked out, and made him therewith expiate his guilt.

SUSA-NO-O IN IZUMO
[Adapted from Chamberlain, Ko-ji-ki, pp. 60-64]
So, having been expelled, Susa-no-o descended to a place [called] Toro-
kami at the head-waters of the River Hi in the land of Izumo. At this
time some chopsticks came floating down the stream. So Susa-no-o, thinking
that there must be people at the head-waters of the river, went up in quest of them, when he came upon an old man and an old woman—two
of them—who had a young girl between them, and were weeping. Then
he deigned to ask: "Who are ye?" So the old man replied, saying: "I am
an Earthly Deity, child of the Deity Great-Mountain-Possessor. I am
called by the name of Foot-Stroking-Elder, my wife is called by the name
of Hand-Stroking-Elder, and my daughter is called by the name of
Wondrous-Inada-Princess." Again he asked: "What is the cause of your
crying?" [The old man] answered, saying: "I had originally eight young
girls as daughters. But the eight-forked serpent of Koshi has come every
year and devoured [one], and it is now its time to come, wherefore we weep.
Then he asked him: "What is its form like?" [The old man]
answered, saying: "Its eyes are like akakagachi, it has one body with
eight heads and eight tails. Moreover on its body grows moss, and also
chamaecyparis and cryptomerias. Its length extends over eight valleys
and eight hills, and if one look at its belly, it is all constantly bloody and
inflamed." (What is here called akakagachi is the modern hoaho-zuki.)

* The cock is meant.  * Hand-strength-male.
14 Nakatomi probably means ministers of the middle, mediating between the Gods and the
Emperor, and the Emperor and the people. In historical times their duties were of a priestly
character. Worship and government were closely associated in ancient times in more countries
than Japan. Matsurigoto, government, is derived from matsuri, worship. It was they who
recited the Harai or purification rituals.
15 Futo-dama, big-jewel.
16 Imi-be or imbe is derived from imi, root of imu, to avoid, to shun, to practise religious
abstinence, and be, a hereditary corporation.
17 The Sakaki, or Clearya Japonica, is the sacred tree of the Shinto religion. It is still used
in Shinto religious ceremonies.
18 Mt. Kagu is the name of a mountain in Yamato. It is here supposed to have a counterpart
in Heaven.
19 It is said to be this mirror which is worshiped at Ise as an emblem of the Sun Goddess.
20 Terrible female of Heaven.
21 Monkey-female.
22 This is said to be the origin of the Kagura or pantomimic dance now performed at Shinto
festivals.
23 The Nihonji strangely omits to say that, as we learn from the Kojiki, she danced on this
and made it give out a sound.
24 These Gods' names were properly Koyane no Mikoto and Futo-dama no Mikoto (see
above), but here the names of their human descendants are substituted.
25 A rope made of straw of rice which has been pulled up by the roots.
26 By tables are meant tables of offerings.
27 Or "Country Deity," "Deity of the Land."
28 O-yama-tsu-mi-no-kami.
29 A coniferous tree, the Chamaecyparis obtusa, in Japanese hi-no-ki. The cryptomeria is
Cryptomeria japonica.
30 The winter-cherry, Physalis Alkekengi.
Then Susa-no-o said to the old man: "If this be thy daughter, wilt thou offer her to me?" He replied, saying: "With reverence, but I know not thine august name." Then he replied, saying: "I am elder brother to the Heaven-Shining-Deity. So I have now descended from Heaven." Then the Deities Foot-Stroking-Elder and Hand-Stroking-Elder said: "If that be so, with reverence will we offer [her to thee]." So Susa-no-o, at once taking and changing the young girl into a multitundinous and close-toothed comb which he stuck into his august hair-bunch, said to the Deities Foot-Stroking-Elder and Hand-Stroking-Elder: "Do you distill some eight-fold refined liquor. Also make a fence round about, in that fence make eight gates, at each gate tie [together] eight platforms, on each platform put a liquor-vat, and into each vat pour the eight-fold refined liquor, and wait." So as they waited after having thus prepared everything in accordance with his bidding, the eight-forked serpent came truly as [the old man] had said, and immediately dipped a head into each vat, and drank the liquor. Thereupon it was intoxicated with drinking, and all [the heads] lay down and slept. Then Susa-no-o drew the ten-grasp sabre, that was augustly girded on him, and cut the serpent in pieces, so that the River Hi flowed on changed into a river of blood. So when he cut the middle tail, the edge of his august sword broke. Then, thinking it strange, he thrust into and split [the flesh] with the point of his august sword and looked, and there was a sharp great sword [within]. So he took this great sword, and, thinking it a strange thing, he respectfully informed Amaterasu. This is the Herb-Quelling Great Sword.

So thereupon Susa-no-o sought in the land of Izumo for a place where he might build a palace. Then he arrived at a place [called] Suga, and said: "On coming to this place my august heart is pure," and in that place he built a palace to dwell in. So that place is now called Suga. When this Great Deity first built the palace of Suga, clouds rose up thence. Then he made an august song. That song said:

Eight Clouds arise. The eight-fold fence of Izumo makes an eight-fold fence for the spouses to retire [within]. Oh! that eight-fold fence.

---

Princess Yamato and Prince Plenty

The Shinto shrine in Izumo, Kitsuki-no-miya, dedicated to the son of Susa-no-o, is the most ancient shrine in Japan and therefore is called "the shrine ahead of those to all other gods" (Kami-mae no Yashiho). Perhaps because it was here that Susa-no-o, from the Yamato line, married the Izumo princess, and their son Prince Plenty or the Great Landlord God (Onamochi or Ō-mono-nushi) married a Yamato princess, this shrine is particularly thought of as symbolizing union and compromise. A visit to the Izumo shrine has been regarded as especially beneficial to those with hopes of marriage or those desirous of promoting greater harmony and understanding in their own families.

[Adapted from Aston, Nihongi, I, 158–59]

After this Yamato-toto-hi-momo-so-bime no Mikoto [Princess Yamato] became the wife of Ō-mono-nushi no Kami [Prince Plenty]. This God, however, was never seen in the day-time, but came at night. Princess Yamato said to her husband: "As my Lord is never seen in the day-time, I am unable to view his august countenance distinctly; I beseech him therefore to delay a while, that in the morning I may look upon the majesty of his beauty." The Great God answered and said: "What thou sayest is clearly right. Tomorrow morning I will enter thy toilet-case and stay there. I pray thee be not alarmed at my form." Princess Yamato wondered secretly in her heart at this. Waiting until daybreak, she looked into her toilet-case. There was there a beautiful little snake, of the length and thickness of the cord of a garment. Thereupon she was frightened, and uttered an exclamation. The Great God was ashamed, and changing suddenly into human form, spake to his wife, and said: "Thou didst not contain thyself, but hast caused me shame: I will in my turn put thee to shame." So treading the Great Void, he ascended to Mount Mimoro. Hereupon Princess Yamato looked up and had remorse. She flopped down on a seat and with a chopstick stabbed herself in the pudenda so that she died. She was buried at O-chi. Therefore the men of that time called her tomb the Chopstick Tomb. This tomb was made by men in the daytime, and by Gods at night. It was built of stones carried from Mount O-saka. Now the people standing close to each other passed the stones from hand to hand, and thus transported them from the mountain to the tomb. The men of that time made a song about this, saying:

---

[31]
If one passed from hand to hand
The rocks
Built up
On Ō-saka,⁴
How hard 'twould be to send them!⁴

Enshrinement of Amaterasu

The following entries in the *Nihongi*, for the twenty-fifth year of the Emperor Suinin's reign (5 B.C., according to traditional dating, but more probably around A.D. 260), describe the founding of the great shrine to Amaterasu at Ise. The moving of the Sun Goddess no doubt refers to the transporting of the mirror thought to be her embodiment.

[Adapted from Aston, *Nihongi*, I, 175–76]

25th year, Spring, 2nd month, 8th day. The Emperor commanded the five officers, Takesu Kaha-wake, ancestor of the Abe no Omi; Hikokuni-fuku,⁵ ancestor of the Imperial Chieftains; O-kashima, ancestor of the Nakatomi Deity Chieftains; Toin, ancestor of the Mionobe Deity Chieftains; and Takehi, ancestor of the Ōtomo Deity Chieftains, saying: "The sagacity of Our predecessor on the throne, the Emperor Miki-iri-hiko-inie, was displayed in wisdom: he was reverential, intelligent, and capable. He was profoundly unassuming, and his disposition was to cherish self-abnegation. He adjusted the machinery of government, and did solemn worship to the Gods of Heaven and Earth. He practiced self-restraint and was watchful as to his personal conduct. Every day he was heedful for that day. Thus the weal of the people was sufficient, and the Empire was at peace. And now, under Our reign, shall there be any remissness in the worship of the Gods of Heaven and Earth?"

3rd month, 10th day. The Great Goddess Amaterasu was taken from

---

⁴ The great activity.
⁵ The tombs of men of rank at this period of Japanese history consisted of a round mound of earth varying in size according to the station of the person interred, and containing a vault of megalithic stones, with an entrance gallery similar to those of the Imperial Mausoleum, but of much smaller size. Many of these are still to be seen in Japan, especially in the provinces near Yato. Of course it is utterly impossible to pass from hand to hand stones of the size used in constructing these tombs.
⁶ Both these men are named in Sujin Tenno's reign, 10th year, eighty-five years before according to the traditional reckoning. [Ed.]
⁷ This speech is thoroughly Chinese. It contains numerous phrases borrowed from the Chinese classics.