

**The 2008 International Conference
Twenty Years and More: Research into Minority Religions, New Religious
Movements and 'the New Spirituality'**

Organized by INFORM and CESNUR in association with ISORECEA
London School of Economics, April 16-20, 2008



At the end of the Kami Way: a closed door. Traces of an esoteric Shîntō in the first part of the Kojiki, and its possible influence in the genesis of New attractive Japanese Religious Movements.

*Antonio Soro
University of Sassari*

A paper presented at the [2008 International Conference](#), London, UK. Preliminary text, copyrighted by the author. Please do not quote without seeking the author's written consent.

CESNUR reproduces or quotes documents from the media and different sources on a number of religious issues. Unless otherwise indicated, the opinions expressed are those of the document's author(s), not of CESNUR or its directors.

The Japanese *Shîntō*, also known as ‘religion of nature’ was first introduced to Western culture in 1882 when Chamberlain published his translation of the *Kojiki* with the title of *Records of Ancient Matters*. People in the West have long been fascinated with the aesthetic sensibility of the Japanese cult, which, in their view, is an instinctive worship of the *Kami*, and of their manifestation in nature. This results in the perception of Japanese people as having a non-conscious or non-rational approach to religion as well as living spontaneously and in symbiosis with nature.

Thus, from a Western perspective it may be difficult to reconcile the notion of modern Japan with such an ‘elementary’ religion, one which lacks the theological structure of Christianity and Islam, a religion that unlike Buddhism is not founded upon complex philosophical principles; a simple religion on a par with the *Little Prince* story, and could be thought of more as an awareness of a spiritual realm with no transcendental spirit of its own, nor absolutes or infinities, nor even theological definitions.

To this day, there are scholars who maintain that the myths of the *Kojiki* served to trace the descent line from Amaterasu to the *Tenno*. Such a theory, however, can hardly explain the enduring force of those stories, nor can it account for the fact that Japanese people from various social and cultural backgrounds have long believed in those myths, and have long practiced the religious cult that is based on them. Likewise, it is unlikely that Japan’s imperial family, which holds a moral responsibility towards its people while also caring for its public image, would accept those ancient tales blindly unless they believed them to be crucial to local tradition.

Thus, one may say, what on the surface appears to be a simple or even banal story is, on the contrary, a deeply spiritual account that could nurture new religious movements, and as is the case with the Japanese *kami*, which may appeal to and influence the Western mind in modern times.

There are two basic principles or ‘truths’ at the heart of *Shîntō*. In the words of Fosco Maraini, the first is that all things in nature were not ‘made’ but rather begotten of the *kami*. Accordingly, all human beings, animals and objects are ‘fundamentally related’ to one another as if there existed between them a ‘secret form of kinship’. The second truth is based on what Maraini terms ‘the ontological cycles’ of nature, that is, the potential for human beings to become something else in a – a flower for instance – or again the possibility for a flower to become a cloud or a human being in another life. According to the Shinto faith therefore, there is one primordial matter; all things, whether animate or not, are one and the same, and we, as fallible human beings, tend to get lost in the night of multiplicity and fail to recognize alterity.

From a phenomenological point of view, *Shintō* and Judaism offer some interesting analogies. In a previous study, I have investigated one particular theophany, that of the Burning Bush which, as I suggested, strongly resembles the Japanese *kami*. Generally speaking, we may say that the *kami* perform a role similar to that which rabbis attribute to angels, that is they serve to guarantee the presence of the transcendental God on earth while saving His absolute purity from material contamination. In philosophical terms, it could be said that *Shintō* encourages a view of the Plotinian *eidōs* of nature as themselves *mimesis* of perfection.

The so-called Celestial *Kami*, and especially *Musubinokami*, *Takamimusubinokami*, and *Amenominakanushi* eschew simplistic classifications as do the *kami* that followed them. What about them? Can the stories in the *Kojiki* help us achieve a deeper knowledge of tradition?

The celestial *kami* inhabit the *Takama-no-hara* (the *Plain of High Heaven*), a wasteland that stretches above all everything. Reality springs from this infinite land, a place that has no beginning or end and of which nothing is known apart from the fact that all that exists comes from there. To some extent the *Takama-no-hara* is akin to the representation of the divine in the Cabbala's *En Sof*: we know very little of Him; in fact, all that we know is his Will; other manifestations of this divinity will be revealed to us as we descend into the *Malkut*.

As noted, there is no creation *ex nihilo* in the *Kojiki*; rather all existing entities are begotten of a homogenous matter and come from the land of *Takama-no-hara*. Quite simply, human reality and the *kami* of earth, as well as the celestial *kami* and *Takama-no-hara* are the same kind of reality. But each one is seen from a different state of existence. The downfall myth recurs in a number of traditions around the world (as epitomized in the *Sephirot* in the Cabbala). Thus, in the teleology of the *Kojiki*, despite his fall from *Takama-no-hara*, and the ensuing sense of disorientation – that is despite the fact that his state of existence changes – man still abides by the Will of the first three of the celestial *kami*.

Amenominakanushi is the 'Master of the August Centre of Heaven'. In a world in which everything moves this first celestial *kami* represents justice, symmetry and stability as well as being a universal and absolute reference point. The other two celestial *kami* operate simultaneously and are synchronous with *Amenominakanushi*.

Seen from the *Axis Mundi*, and guided by the law of *Amenominakanushi*, the universe is a masterpiece of harmony. Evil can enter this universe only if it falls down from *Takama-no-hara* and

manages to make victims of the existing beings who will then come to see differentiation and alterity where there was unity of matter.

An equivalent of this can be found in Gnostic mythology and in particular in the account of the descent to the *Hyle*, an infamous state of existence also known as the ‘Realm of the Demiurge’. The stories in the *Kojiki*, in fact, bear striking analogies with those of the Gnostic tradition. Thus, for instance, in the *Nihongi* (*The Chronicles of Japan*), it is said that once upon a time, “herbs and trees ... all things having the property of significant response, were favourable omens and auspicious signs produced by Heaven and Earth”. This seems to confirm that for *Shintō*, as much as for the Gnostic tradition, there exists a form of shamanic spirituality and a form of original and essential language. The equivalent of the Gnostic pre-Babelian language is for the Japanese religion of nature the idiom of a natural whole or an absolute unity.

The *Nihongi* quote above suggests a second important parallel that is worth considering here. In the Cabbala, the *Sefer-Yesirah* links the twenty two letters of the alphabet to the basic elements that form the world; all that exists in the world is the result of varying combinations of the twenty-two letters in other words. In this way, the universe becomes a revelation of the divine *logos*, and deterministic laws are seen as sub-laws of the celestial laws of knowledge.

Gnosticism is mostly analogous with the celestial *kami*, the latter being derived from the *sygyzy* (the union of masculine and feminine in the *Pleroma*) by way of descent from *Takama-no-hara*, in a manner akin to the Gnostic aeons. Like Sophia, the last of the Gnostic aeons, in fact, Amaterasu is the last of the celestial *kami* in *Shintō*; she is the *kami* of light, a symbol of knowledge and therefore of wisdom.

The first celestial *kami* are androgynous. As Chamberlain writes in his translation of the *Kojiki*, these *kami* were ‘born alone, and hid their persons’. Celestial *kami* may well be androgynous, yet, as said, they were made in *sigizy*; at an earlier stage of their existence their sexuality was not taken into account as all *kami* were then self sufficient. Early signs of change can be seen already with Uhijini and his wife Suhijini though it is with Izanami and Izanagi that the original order is altered. Their names are emblematic of the change: while the former signifies ‘Male who invites’, the latter means ‘Female who invites’. There is with both a strong sense that something has not been accomplished – they both ‘invite’ but we don’t know whether the invitation leads on to something else – and a strong desire to re-establish a pleromatic union. Neither of them knows how to revert to

that state, so the sexual act is performed, and their *sygyzy* is consequently attained. Further stages downwards will end up in the lowest of the states of existence, to which human beings belong.

One aspect of the story of Izanami and Izanagi has largely been ignored. The pair wished to be mated, and so they built a pillar and circled around it each one in the opposite direction. When they met, Izanagi spoke first, and in doing so she violated a fundamental rule – it is the man who should speak first. The pair had a deformed child. The ritualistic rotation around the same axis symbolises a hypostatic event; it is a tribute to Amenominakanushi, who will guard the sexual act that is about to be consumed. The episode evokes an analogous incident in Gnostic mythology where Sophia attempts to overcome a man and is thereupon punished (once fallen, Sophia gives birth to Yaladabaoth, a monstrous being, a distorted version of the divine who symbolises both the vitiated union that begot him and the corruption of a fundamental ethic law by the female character). The next time that Izanami and Izanagi prepare for the sexual act they renew the ritual, paying attention to the law, with each one performing the role that is expected of them. Their offspring is a perfectly sane ‘child’ this time.

Once all the beings in *Takama-no-hara* have fallen from it and have entered a realm of multiplicity, the *Kami Way* is summoned to restore them to that celestial wasteland, or to recall Plotinus’s image, it seeks to bring them from the place that has no ontological dignity back to the *ineffable* place (*ἀρρητον*). This positive image of the world is found both in *Shintō* and in the philosophy of Plotinus. The former, for instance, believes that salvation will be attained by way of knowledge and goodness. Likewise, Plotinus sees beauty and goodness as one and the same thing. The good and the beauty of the soul are achieved by imitation of God, for all goodness and beauty come from God.

The possibility of recovery does not alter the fact that the original purity has been corrupted, and owing to the unruly behaviour of Susanowo gone, lost forever: Amaterasu/Sophia falls in to the dark world of multiplicity; for her to be reconciled with unity and order is necessary. The *Shintō* faith seems to suggest a process of dissociation through which men will become monads again, they will become *logoi* and be part of God’s Creation once more; they will recover their celestial state of existence where everybody and everything, human beings, animals, plants and stones, will speak one and the same idiom, the language of the God.

The *Kojiki* appears to account for various stages or ages of the world. Thus, its account of the long night when Amaterasu hid in the Heavenly Cave recalls a description of the *Kali Yuga*, the Iron Age

in the Hindu *Purana*, and the shortest of the four cyclical times that make up the *Manvantara*. This is the time when man gains new knowledge while also receding to a lower moral and spiritual state of existence. In the *Kojiki* we learn of Susanowo who flayed a piebald horse, then made a hole in the roof of his sister's house, and threw the dead horse into her circle of weaving women. As a result, Amaterasu, the goddess of light, ran as far as she could to a rocky cave in a quiet corner of Heaven and she blocked the entrance with a boulder. She spent a long time there – ‘the long night as it is called’ – while the world outside was left in complete darkness and terror. The story recalls also the Chinese myth of Nu-kua¹ who seeks to repair a breach in the sky that had been caused by a giant.

The blocking of daylight in the story of Amaterasu is a metaphor of the fourth stage of cycle, the dark season, when the earth is cold and predators dominate in wild forests. The question is, then, is there an analogy between the Amaterasu story and the last of the *Yuga*? The Amaterasu episode seems to suggest the possibility that there may be an analogy indeed. There, the birds sing in the dark to give hope. Similarly, in the *Purana* during the *Kali Yuga* people are encouraged to invoke the ‘holy name, the holy name, the holy name of the Lord’ in order to be salvaged, so too in the *Kojiki* Amenouzume performs a loud and scandalous dance (she is naked) outside the Heavenly Cave where Amaterasu is hiding. The dance causes the *kami* to laugh so loud that a curious Amaterasu opens the entrance to the cave and is promptly grabbed by Amenotajikarawo who will not let her in again. The scene may appear somewhat funny at first, yet it is profoundly dramatic in its teleological vision of reality and portrayal of the human condition. Degradation is clearly associated with the occultation of the solar *kami*, thus that at its lowest point a state of existence is caught up in decay and horrendous darkness.

When all hope seems to be lost, however, a small ray of light is seen from afar. Thus, in the *Kali Yuga*, all devastating and negative forces are dispensed with, and eventually a new order and true wisdom are restored to human beings. To quote from the *Purana*:

Righteousness remained to the extent of one-fourth only. Arrived in the age of darkness, Vishnu became black; practices enjoyed by the Vedas, works of righteousness, and rites of sacrificed ceased. Calamities, diseases, fatigue, faults, such as anger, etc., distresses, anxiety, hunger, fear prevailed. As the age revolves,

¹ Cf. R. Guénon, *The fissures in the Great Wall*, in *The reign of quantity and the signs of the times*, tr. by Lord Northbourne.

righteousness again declines; when this takes place, the people also decline. When they decay, the impulse which actuate them also decay. The practices generated by this declension of the Yugas frustrate men's aims. Such is the *Kali Yuga*, which has existed for a short time. Those who are long-lived act in conformity with the character of the age².

When all that is left is decline, there comes Righteousness again, and a new cycle begins. It is a new dawn.

In conclusion, can it be said that Shîntō is a religion *a la Little Prince*? Maybe it can, or maybe not. If one takes time and goes through the pages of Exúpery it will be found that behind an apparently trivial story there is something else to enrapture; like an ancient sun, the *Kami Way* is a mesmerizing gnosis that will seduce the reader with its strange names and unusual rituals.

I consider the opening of the *Kojiki* as a 'closed door' behind which lies hidden a secret and long forgotten path which, to paraphrase Guénon, will take us from Tokyo to Jerusalem, and on to Rome and Mecca. Who knows whether anybody owns the key to that door, perhaps it has gone lost somewhere in a philological and esoteric labyrinth, amidst the ideograms of the *Kojiki*. For some the key would have disclosed cosmogonic myths, but for a few it would have brought them the gift of an unspeakable knowledge. To this day, the magic and enthralling light of an ancient sun seems to come through that door. We may look at the light and yet be unaware of what it is, or we may recognize it in one of its numerous manifestations. And should we recognize it, we could not help but be enthralled by it. What if someone today, like Yasumaro back then, were to find the key to that door, I wonder?

² J. Dowson, *A classical dictionary of Hindu mythology and religion, geography, history and literature*, Rupa & Co, Calcutta, p. 383.