

Response to “Month without the Gods: Shinto and Authority in Early-Modern Japan”
by Yijian Zhong

The place of Okuninushi within the pantheon of *kami* proved a critical point of debate for those defining the modern parameters of Shinto in Japan during the second half of the nineteenth century. Having linked the project of forging a nation-state to the conceit of “restoring” eighth-century precedents of imperial rule, architects of Japan’s modern state declared shrines to be sites that conduct “rites of the state.” This declaration offered shrines and the priests associated with them the opportunity to radically redefine “Shinto” and to reorganize shrines into a hierarchy based on their proximity to the imperial institution. Following that logic, the Grand Shrines of Ise, which enshrined Amaterasu, the sun goddess and imperial progenitress, claimed the apex of that hierarchy of shrines. Indeed, few in Japan today would question the obvious stature of Ise as the pinnacle of Shinto shrines. Yet, the Grand Shrine of Izumo once challenged that hierarchy in the name of its chief deity, Okuninushi.

What Zhong provides us in this essay, then, is a substantial account of why Okuninushi emerged during the crucial decades of the Meiji era (1868-1912) as a rival to the emperor-centered Shinto associated with Ise. In what was called the “Pantheon Dispute,” priests aligned with Izumo demanded that Okuninushi be included in the pantheon of *kami* to be enshrined at the national headquarters of the Bureau of Shinto Affairs. That demand was far from an esoteric doctrinal issue. It concerned the possibility of including in the definition of Shinto soteriological concerns not directly linked to the political legitimacy of the imperial institution. Izumo lost that battle in 1880 and was, in Hara Takeshi’s deliberately hyperbolic words, “obliterated” (*massatsu sareta*).

Zhong asks us to consider the distance separating early-modern Shinto and its modern incarnation, defined and organized around the needs of a nation-state. In fact, I read this piece as a window onto the strategies employed by a ritual site to survive multiple transitions in the political economy of the Japanese archipelago. The medieval Izumo shrine relied on extensive land-holdings to finance its maintenance and ritual

calendar, but those land-holdings were lost or severely curtailed during the vicissitudes of the “warring states” period, between the late fifteenth and much of the sixteenth century. Izumo’s story conforms to the broader shift in the religious ecology of Japan as it moved towards the stability of the Tokugawa polity. Under the Tokugawa, Izumo secured a measure of revived patronage from the local daimyo and the shogunate, but its medieval landholdings were never fully restored. Fiscal pressures, then, served as the principal force acting upon the Izumo shrine and its hereditary priests, the Kitajima and Senge. The need to fund its calendar of rites and rebuild decaying or destroyed buildings led the shrine to raise funds by expanding interpretations of Okuninushi’s role as the *kami* who rules over the hidden realm and presides over the “month with(out) the gods.” Add to this a deliberate conflation of Okuninushi with Daikoku, a Buddhist deity of fortune, and we see the ingredients for transforming Izumo from a site serving the agrarian rhythms of its immediate locale to a devotional cult with adherents organized across the archipelago.

The assertion that this new, early-modern cult of Okuninushi is “national” raises some questions if we are going to pay attention to the shifts in political economy that Izumo navigates through its long history. The geographic expansion of Izumo’s sphere of proselytizing alone does not make it a national shrine in the absence of a clearer conception of what the nation is. Proto-nationalistic attitudes were clearly fostered in the early-modern period by the increasingly commercialized culture of travel, including pilgrimage, but none of that compares to the anxious discussion of “nationhood” that gripped the intellectual elite post-1868. In other words, Izumo’s eventual collision with a “national” Shinto in the late-nineteenth century only makes sense if we pay attention to the fact that its early-modern innovations occurred in a political economy that was not organized around the notion of a nation. Zhong, for example, observes that the early-modern doctrine of Okuninushi “relativized the authority of the imperial house and the Sun Goddess.” Yet, it is not clear that the imperial house and Amaterasu were endowed with sufficient authority in the early-modern period to be relativized. Pilgrimages to Ise, so popular during the period, were primarily directed towards Toyouke and the Outer Shrine, not Amaterasu and the Inner Shrine.

If anything, the latent-tension between Izumo and the imperial institution, reflected in the “land-surrender” account in *The Chronicle of Japan*, points us back to the

tomb period. It would be good to see whether and how interpretations of that account were politicized in the eighteenth and nineteenth-centuries. What is missing from Zhong's discussion here, and is likely to be part of his larger project, is an explanation of how the growing significance of Okuninushi intersected with the rise of *kokugaku* nativism from the late-eighteenth century onward. Hirata Atsutane, as Zhong notes, emphasized the significance of the hidden realm and the role of Okuninushi as the judge in the afterlife, largely in response to Christianity. How did the ideological and doctrinal projects of nativist scholars like him intersect with the early-modern innovations of Izumo? We are likely to get a better sense of how the "national" comes into focus at Izumo through these intersections.

The Grand Shrine of Izumo was not alone in navigating the shifts from the land-based medieval political economy to the commercialized political economy of the early-modern period. Sarah Thal's work on Kotohira and Nam-lin Hur's work on Asakusa Sensoji both demonstrate how ritual centers capitalized on the opportunity to combine prayer and play in the commercialized space of Tokugawa society. We would like to see how Izumo's innovations stand in relation to the broader shifts in order to fully assess what sort of authority these ritual sites cultivated during the early-modern period.

By illustrating the ritual and doctrinal innovations undertaken by the Izumo shrine during the early-modern period, Zhong further undermines any notion of a static "Shinto" tradition in Japan. Instead, we see a set of practices and beliefs that were reinterpreted in a context wherein the imperial institution was not the defining focal point of Shinto.

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