

Response to Yijiang Zhong's "Month without the Gods: Shinto and Authority in Early Modern Japan"

Over the past decade a succession of studies focused on specific temples, shrines, and other sites has expanded and contextualized our understanding of Japanese religious life at the local and regional levels prior to the twentieth century.¹ Yijiang Zhong's research into the history of Izumo Shrine, and the diverse attempts to cultivate and consolidate social and religious authority centered on it, helps bring this picture of premodern religiosity in the archipelago into even greater focus. In contributing to this body of historiography, Zhong explores many of the same themes and trends identified in related studies, but does so within the unique spatial and discursive context of Izumo Shrine.

One of the most noticeable themes that emerges from this, and previous studies, is the relationship between change at specific religious sites and the economic and political developments occurring around them. The vagaries of economic and political upheavals—whether due to crop failures, loss of land-holding rights, or war—could prompt shrine or temple administrators to expound novel doctrinal claims or promote new forms of popular practice in an effort to attain financial stability. In the case of Izumo, it was the elevation of the deity Ōkuninushi to a central place in the Shinto pantheon and the dispatch of *oshi* (御師) “respected teachers” to proselytize well beyond the immediate locale of the shrine itself. That the shrine was enmeshed in a set of complex ties of economic (inter)dependence is clear from Zhong's account of the *oshi* at Izumo, which began as a guild of innkeepers with exclusive rights for renting rooms to visiting pilgrims and gradually emerged as a special class of itinerant preachers, ritual specialists, and fundraisers for the shrine. Unable to secure a stable

¹ Barbara Ambros, *Emplacing a Pilgrimage: The Ōyama Cult and Regional Religion in Early Modern Japan* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2008); Helen Hardacre, *Religion and Society in Nineteenth-Century Japan: A Study of the Southern Kanto Region, Using Late Edo and Early Meiji Gazeteers* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Center for Japanese Studies, 2002); Nam-lin Hur, *Prayer and Play in Late Tokugawa Japan: Asakusa Sensōji and Edo Society* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2000); D. Max Moerman, *Localizing Paradise: Kumano Pilgrimage and the Religious Landscape of Premodern Japan* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2005); and Sarah Thal, *Rearranging the Landscape of the Gods: The Politics of a Pilgrimage Site in Japan, 1573-1912* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005).

economic base locally, shrine administrators sought to foster a wide-ranging network of support for the cult of Ōkuninushi, anchored by pilgrimage associations (*kō* 講) that would expand to become nearly coterminous with the entire archipelago.

Another major theme highlighted by previous studies, and again brought under consideration in Zhong's research, is the intricate web of combinatory forms of religious practice and discourse. As Zhong notes, “The complex theological discourse and multiple modes of representation mobilized by the Izumo shrine priests and preachers constituted a kind of tool kit which enabled their preaching to expand into various kinds of communal spaces and organize followers of the Izumo gods into different types of communities” (p. 40). In addition to Izumo Shrine's putative Shinto identity, we learn that a significant portion of the shrine's ritual activity prior to the seventeenth century was coordinated by Buddhist clergy and, during the rule of the Mori house, was dominated by sutra recitation. Later on, in an effort to displace this Buddhist influence (as well as that of the competing Sange house), the Kitajima house head priest, Hirotaka, deployed Chinese *yin yang* and geomantic ideas to bolster his argument for the tenth month as one of ritual primacy as the “month with(out) gods.” This rhetoric resonated with Kurosawa Sekisai, an official from Matsue domain, who visited Izumo province as part of an official domain inspection tour in 1653. Like most domain officials in the Tokugawa period, Kurosawa was steeped in Neo-Confucian thought; moreover, he had studied under the renowned Hayashi Razan (1583-1657), a scholar and shogunal advisor who embraced a notion of Shinto that could be incorporated into a broader philosophical framework of Neo-Confucianism. Zhong observes an interesting element in Kurosawa's account of the shrine, namely, the tension between a Neo-Confucian metaphysics reluctant to recognize the literal existence of “gods” and an underlying intellectual commitment to an emerging mode of thought that sought to valorize Japanese, rather than Sino-centric, social and cultural forms. The important point, though, is that shrine priests' ability to represent their agenda in Neo-Confucian terms was crucial to obtaining ideological

legitimacy and securing official support.

Another effective item in the Izumo priests' "tool kit" was the syncretic practice of associating local deities with Buddhas and bodhisattvas, now referred to as *shinbutsu shūgō* (神仏習合). This practice was frequently explained in terms of the theory of *honji suijaku* (本地垂迹), literally "original ground, residual trace," which posited that Shinto *kami* were simply local manifestations of bodhisattvas. This theory, which privileged a Buddhist "original ground," would later be challenged by an "inverted *honji suijaku*" (反本地垂迹) that gave greater primacy to indigenous *kami*.² Zhong's outline of the process by which Ōkuninushi came to be co-identified with the popular god of fortune, Daikoku, shows how this type of combinatory deity could be produced. Though it is not immediately clear from the research presented in the present paper, I wonder if the priests at Izumo made conscious use of this "inverted *honji suijaku*" in an effort to benefit from the conflation of the deities while maintaining a privileged position for Shinto vis-à-vis Buddhism. Taken together, a complex picture emerges from these various examples of a shrine, once heavily influenced by Buddhist ritualists, whose Shinto administrators deployed *yin yang* theories and Neo-Confucian thought to bolster their theological claims for the primacy of a native deity, Ōkuninushi, which they cross-identified with an esoteric-Buddhist deity of Hindu origin.

In the interest of suggesting potential avenues for dialogue with scholars in other fields of religious or historical studies, I want to ask, finally, how might we engage Zhong's examination of Izumo, Shinto, and Japan in a comparative context? One possible starting point is to look for similarly situated religious sites, especially those not in the immediate vicinity of centers of political power, that cultivated a religious and economic base that progressively reached beyond locale and region to a geographic field that was (or would soon be) imagined as "national" in scope. Looking to European history, studies on the appearance

² An excellent introduction to the history of these complex syncretic practices in English is Mark Teeuwen and Fabio Rambelli, eds., *Buddhas and Kami in Japan: Honji Suijaku as a Combinatory Paradigm* (London: RoutledgeCurzon, 2002).

in the nineteenth century of major pilgrimage sites in Lourdes and Marpingen have revealed the significance of those sites in the imagining of national and religious identities for Catholics in France and Germany, respectively.³ Even if a more careful comparison of these cases reveals far more differences than similarities, considering Izumo alongside sites like Lourdes and Marpingen may suggest new ways to think about the complex interplay of popular religious practice, religious identity, and conceptions of nationhood that emerged in the nineteenth century.

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³ Ruth Harris, *Lourdes: Body and Spirit in the Secular Age* (New York: Viking, 1999); David Blackbourn, *Marpingen: Apparitions of the Virgin Mary in a Nineteenth-Century German Village* (New York: Knopf, 2004).