

Response to “Discursive Formation around ‘Shinto’ in Colonial Korea”
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The term ‘Shintō’ can be hard to understand because it has been a floating signifier of wide range. Its meanings have included ancient Japanese imperial genealogical texts; local folk shrines in the simplest sense; a rather one-sided descriptive term for the decentralized, syncretic, blended cultic-center animism (heavily dominated by Buddhism) of the entire pre-modern period; the nationalist, imperialist, non-Buddhist state-controlled unifying ideology (often referred to as ‘State Shintō’) gradually required from the populace by the Meiji, Taishō and Shōwa governments up to World War II, which hijacked the earlier meanings of ‘Shintō’; and most recently, the rump institutions of the postwar period, which continue entrepreneurially seeking, through festivals, tourism, propagandistic fantasy, and international public relations, to find some niche in a Japanese world which is no longer either imperialist or seriously animist. (It might be frankly suggested that the topic can be difficult because academic writing about Shintō frequently overlooks the issue of empty signification, while hiding the forest(s) in the trees of non-contextualized detail, and ignoring environmental facts such as that the largest traditional religious institution in recent Japan has actually been Jōdoshinshū Buddhism.)

For uninformed speakers of English, the semantics of ‘Shintō’ were long dominated by the later, modern cultural essentialist claims. However, in recent decades it has become clear, at least to academic specialists, that such restricted perceptions have been created instead through the hard work of factions of modernist, nationalist, racialist, authoritarian ideologists working with the early twentieth century governing regime. Choosing to turn away from other options such as Buddhism or liberal constitutionalism in the Meiji period, they invented (following some Tokugawa-period inspiration) an idea of ‘Shintō’ as a timeless unifying spiritual and imaginative essence of Japan. This ‘essence’ idea not only provided a political pathway for the Japanese government between Meiji and the end of World War II, it also filled an imaginative vacuum regarding how to think about a ‘Japan’ as its modern nation-statehood was constructed—perhaps especially among Westerners. In the idea’s success it became both profoundly influential and wildly

misleading. (While it stretches the metaphor, it is as if a hegemonic right-wing political party in twentieth-century Britain had successfully proposed to a massive part of the domestic as well as global public that the ‘essence of Englishness’ was actually found in a timeless White Druidism....)

Under the pressure of modern nationalism, there was little that was naïve about early twentieth century Japanese religion. The Japanese imperial ideology between Meiji and the end of World War II corrupted all forms of Japanese spiritual life, including Buddhism and Christianity (not to mention Kyoto School philosophy), which were similarly seduced and coerced into becoming part of the imperial project. Yet a difference between these major traditions and ‘Shintō’ as it has been understood in the twentieth century is that such Shintō was almost entirely a *creation* of that nationalist-imperialist project itself, without any independently long-established and elaborated roots such as those in Buddhism or Christianity. Thus the wind was really knocked out of ‘Shintō’s’ sails after 1945, and as an unfortunate consequence, since the other options had been previously denatured, Japan lost any deeply effective imaginative template for thinking about its modern self. Through the most recent half century it still has not found a replacement.

Isomae is the savviest, and probably most methodologically and politically critical, among contemporary Japanese scholars concerned with such historical permutations of ‘Shintō.’ What is strikingly interesting in this article, as in his other work, is the illumination of the remarkable internal contradictions in the State Shintō during the episode of the early twentieth century imperial period. For one thing, this Shintō succeeded in politically defining itself in the Japanese contemporary category called ‘morality,’ which was classified for legal purposes as ‘non-religious’ (thus avoiding the strictures of freedom of religion as guaranteed in the Meiji constitution). (Shintō has been entangled in a nest of definitional problems regarding ‘religion’ in modern Japan.) For another, despite its claims on ‘tradition,’ this Shintō had a modernist rationalist side, which actively tried to discourage actual local folk religious life in Japan and Korea. For another, while it claimed to be founded in the uniqueness of the Japanese imperial house,

the logic of empire demanded that the reach of that imperial institution's protective coverage be extended to embrace non-Japanese Asians, which was intrinsically subversive in structure. And for yet another, while it undoubtedly helped reinforce the Japanese resistance to Western colonial hegemony, it ended up supporting an equivalent kind of Japanese colonial hegemony over other Asians.

Isomae particularly wants attention paid to the latter, often negative influences which Shintō ideology, in coordination with the imperialist project, had on Asians outside of Japan. As he notes, in the early twentieth century it was, rather unfamiliarly, a discourse trying to operate at times at the level of a world religion. In Korea, not only did the Japanese promote the notion that the Japanese emperor served, and must be served by, everyone, but the ideologue Choe Nam-seon chimed in by proposing that the historical shamanistic kingship of Tan'gun in Korea, conceived transnationally, could be assimilated to Shintō as well. Unexpectedly, this began to produce a hybrid, 'Koreanized' kind of 'Shintō' that, while allegedly assimilated to the Japanese emperor, tended to display the daily-life energies of Korean shamanism.

However, Shintō thinkers were uncertain that such a kind of 'commonality' with Shintō should, or could, be used similarly elsewhere in Asia as a device of colonial governance. While all agreed that worship of the Japanese emperor had to be enforced for all subjects of the empire, the background conceptual stratagem for cultural commonality should be found, according to ethnologist Uno Enku, only in region-wide practices such as rice cultivation and ancestor religion, and in resistance to the imposition of westernization. Such were the aporias of the *kami*.

This short, rather elliptical piece provides a brief introduction to Isomae's ground-breaking contribution in bringing to Shintō studies a deeply layered perspective on the convolutions of 'Shintō' morphing through history as word and as empirical phenomenon. In particular, Isomae's work is energized by much more underlying inspiration from critical theory, postmodernism, and cultural studies than has been

provided by other scholars, and by a profound moral concern with the harms produced by ideologies imposed by elites.