

Response to “Discursive Formation around ‘Shinto’ in Colonial Korea”
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Reflecting his impressively broad range, Jun’ichi Isomae’s analysis of Shinto in colonial Korea offers tantalizing hints to a variety of questions beyond the fields of religion and cultural studies. From my own perspective as a specialist of modern Japanese international history, this paper suggests provocative new ways to approach modern Japanese history, the study of empire and global history.

First, the shift of emphasis from Shinto’s exclusive association with the Japanese nation to the status of a “world religion” nicely echoes growing recognition among historians of the intimate connection between state and empire in early twentieth century Japan. As Oguma Eiji, Louise Young, Janis Mimura and others have forcefully demonstrated, we can no longer consider early twentieth century Japan as anything but a burgeoning empire, where concepts of “national” identity increasingly incorporated visions of a culturally and racially mixed realm spanning both formal and informal imperial territories and where developments on the imperial periphery had transformative effects upon developments back home. Isomae provides here a fascinating glimpse of how such imperial consciousness may have characterized discourses in the religious realm as well. And just as Oguma described the idea of a “homogeneous nation” (*tanitsu minzoku*) as the product of military defeat in 1945, this paper identifies the idea of Shinto as “national religion” as the artificial creation of a people stripped of their empire after the Asia-Pacific War.

The association of Shinto not merely with the rise of an authoritarian state but with a burgeoning empire also offers a refreshing new way to connect the history of modern Japanese imperialism to the global history of empire. Specialists of nineteenth and early twentieth century European empires in Asia and Africa have long stressed ways in which protestant missions supported the colonial policies of their respective governments and shared contemporary

conceptions of racial and gender difference. For their part, Japan specialists have identified pan-Asianist sentiments among Japanese Buddhists in the nineteenth century and highlighted their complicity in some of the most strident assimilationist policies in twentieth century Korea (see Richard Jaffe and Nam-lin Hur, respectively). Even when viewed in the context of Japanese empire building, Shinto is typically associated not with the universalist aspirations of Christianity or Buddhism but with the spiritual needs of the Japanese people only (see, for example, Thomas David DuBois).

In this context, Isomae's notion of Shinto as a "world religion" is all the more striking. The paper hints to the importance of universalist doctrines generally in modern empire building. But most remarkable is the degree to which the author characterizes Shinto universalism less as a figment of Japanese imagination thrust upon unsuspecting Koreans than, in the manner of recent work on early twentieth century Japanese pan-Asianism (à la Prasenjit Duara and Cemil Aydin), something with evident transnational appeal. One of the most enthusiastic proponents of universalist Shinto in this paper is, after all, the Korean intellectual Choe Nam-seon. Isomae's deft description of Choe's appropriation of universalist Shinto not for the sake of assimilation with Japan but as a strategy to shift the universalist center from Japan to Korea offers a fascinating display of Korean agency. In so doing, it strongly echoes emphases in the new imperial history on the complexities of colonial rule. Isomae's suggestion that Choe not only destabilized a Japan-centric Shinto but, in fact, helped transform the meaning of religion in Korea presents a striking vision of subaltern power, indeed.

The exploratory nature of this brief thought piece, of course, cautions against too quick an embrace of its provocations. First, the sweeping attempt to "trace the development of the discourse about religion among Japanese intellectuals from the early twentieth century through the 1940s" (p. 1) risks oversimplification and generates eerie echoes of an earlier historiography that located the roots of the Asia-Pacific War in the nineteenth century. The presentation here implies a connection between the earliest appearance of a universalist concept of Shinto under

Japanese historian Kume Kunitaka in 1892 and the equally wide-ranging concept of “overcoming modernity” embraced by the so-called Kyoto School during the Asia-Pacific War. But given that Kume’s 1892 essay was a critique of the outmoded nature of Shinto, a more plausible connection might be less with those wartime voices describing Shinto as a universal religion than with those such as religious ethnologist Uno Enku, who decried Shinto’s cultural parochialism.

More to the point, despite the impressive hint that the modern history of Shinto resonates with our understanding of modern Christianity, modern Buddhism and the socio-cultural history of modern empire, it is surprising to see this essay end in yet another ode to Japanese exceptionalism. Imperialism in general, as Isomae avers, is certainly “nothing more than a system of violent exploitation.” (p. 8) But the “intellectual corruption” (p. 10) that prevailed in wartime Japan, particularly in the contradictions of the Kyoto School, seems here to plague Japan’s imperial experience more than anywhere else.

With Isomae’s concept of Shinto as “world religion,” in other words, we cannot escape the persistent historiographical stigmatization of an aberrant modern Japanese nation and empire. On the other hand, the exceptional nature of Japanese exploitation implied here seems also to carry unusual grounds for hope. We may decry the appalling brutality of Japanese empire building. But embodied in that physical and cultural violence, Isomae suggests, is an unusual gift to Japan’s subject peoples of a powerful “logic of resistance.” (p. 10)