

**Comment**  
**on**  
**Discursive Formation around “Shinto” in Colonial Korea**  
**By Isomae Jun’ichi**

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A number of problematic assertions and misconceptions can be noted in Isomae Jun’ichi’s ‘Discursive Formation around “Shinto” in Colonial Korea.’ I would not deny such an observation. But, in spite of the shortcomings in his article, I will not use space in my short commentary to point them out, for such a futile task would take the readers’ focus away from the central topic addressed by the author. The strength of his article lies in his effort to highlight dubious tendencies in the academic study of religions in Japan’s academy and in Japanese Studies in area studies programs outside Japan.

It is a truism that the study of the so-called religions has been vulnerable to many sorts of political influence and has been manipulated by a variety of funding sources, not to mention the traditional academies founded and continually financed by the religions authorities themselves. What is customarily referred to as Shinto is no exception in this regard, and Shinto study is an exemplary instance that shows how impossible it is to sustain intellectual objectivity in the face of political and

funding maneuvers by many forces. Isomae Jun'ichi draws attention to one of the many sites of possible interventions in the study of Shinto, and thereby he suggests a different framework in which the history of Shinto can be written as a part of the history of imperial nationalisms. What is significant in this article is his demonstration of the dynamics of the academic study of religions through an analysis of how it can be dominated by political/religious authorities and funding sources – although some new critical possibilities were cultivated in the midst of hegemonic domination.

Before reading Isomae's article, however, we have to acknowledge that how to write a history of Shinto is irresolubly tied up, on the one hand, with how to write the history of Emperorism (*Tennô-sei*, Isomae uses the conventional Marxian term 'Emperor System') and, on the other, with the history of Imperialisms. The system of Emperorism was established in the Meiji Restoration (1868) as an entirely new form of political legitimacy and also as the apparatus of totalization and individualization – an apparatus of power by which, at the same time, to produce individuals and integrate them into the totality of a new community called "nation" – for the newly emerging nation-state of Japan<sup>1</sup>. Emperorism was a most typical case of the "invention of tradition," to which twenty-six centuries of the

continuing lineage of the Imperial Family was ascribed. Consequently, already in the late nineteenth century, massive and deliberate historical distortion was underway as far as the historical account of Emperorism was concerned. It is in this fabricated history of Emperorism – generally called the State History of Imperial Lineage (*Kôkoku Shikan*) – that the institutional origin of Shinto was inscribed. Subsequently Japan was occupied by the Allied Powers after its defeat, and the State History of Imperial Lineage was dismantled. The general headquarters for the Supreme Commander of Allied Powers gave this version of Shinto a specific name, “State Shinto,” but the deliberate fabrication of the Shinto history did not stop after the collapse of the Japanese Empire and the independence of Japan’s former colonies. There have been specific conditions without which a particular version of the Shinto history would not have continued.

In this juncture, Isomae Jun’ichi’s essay intersects with the on-going history-writing on the subject of Shinto. A number of his moves show the construction of critical argumentation by which to disclose the political implications of how religions were studied, classified and utilized as excuses for certain policies. The first theme, for which Isomae is well-known in his scholarship and many publications, is the term “religion” (*shûkyô*) itself. He does not overlook how the term

was introduced to Japan, and under what directives Japanese scholars began to apply this term in order to describe the social and cultural reality of the Korean Peninsula; he discusses how the issue of religion was already implicated in the topic of Emperorism; how the Japanese State insisted that Emperor worship belonged to the realm of morality rather than to religious faith, so as to maintain the claim of religious freedom in accordance with international law; and how Emperorism became a general context in which struggles over the status of Shinto were fought. Furthermore, he argues that, in the 1930's when many policies of total mobilization were implemented one by one, "the Governor-General adopted a discourse of Religious Revival as the official policy, in order to proliferate Emperor ideology using the State Shinto system in Korean society." Evidently Emperorism was perceived to be a part of universalistic ideology to civilize and integrate Koreans into the nation of Japan.

As has been frequently noted in the colonial activities of Christian missionaries, some local intellectuals of the colonized population tried to redefine the colonizer's religion, expropriate it from the Japanese and appropriate it into the context of East Asia at large. And, in response to the local intellectual's attempt to expropriate Shinto, as in the case of Katsuhiko Kakei, the Governor-General of Korea

began to turn it into a universal phenomenon in accordance with the claimed universal reach of Emperorism. Under the reign of Imperial Nationalism, Isomae wants to show us a dynamic of colonial totalization and appropriation against anti-colonial expropriation and deterritorialization.

Why is this dynamic of colonial universality and resisting singularity erased or overlooked in today's academic study of Shinto? We must take into account the very conditions under which the study of religions was re-established after the collapse of the Japanese Empire and the establishment of the United States' hegemony in East Asia.

The first condition to consider is the status of the Emperor in postwar Japan. It is well known that, already in 1942, less than one year after the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor, the United States' policy makers began studying how to occupy Japan after the war. Probably learning from the Japanese failure in the governance of occupied China in the 1930's, many policy makers proposed occupying Japan under the name of the Japanese Emperor, rather than directly colonizing it. The immediate model they could refer to was Manchukuo – ruled by a nominal head, Pu Yi, the last emperor of the Qing dynasty – the state of Manchuria, whose administrative, legislative and judiciary organs were completely under Japanese control. Even

though it claimed to be independent, it is no mistake to call Manchukuo a colony of Japan.

Instead of dismantling Emperorism, therefore, US policy makers proposed in their preliminary study of the occupation of Japan using Emperor Hirohito as a puppet in order to effectively govern occupied Japan. They must have been inspired by the example of Manchukuo. But, of course, they wanted to improve on the Japanese model. To make sure that their policy would work effectively, even during the war, the American propaganda machine did not vilify Hirohito. Instead, its target was the figure of Tōjō Hideki, prime minister of the wartime cabinet (1941 – 1944)<sup>2</sup>.

Emperorism was re-instituted after Japan's defeat. Hirohito's life was totally at the mercy of the American whim. Even though the legal status of the Emperor was entirely different between the Meiji Constitution and the postwar Constitution, the entire myth of Emperorism was allowed to continue for the sake of the effective governance of Japan by the United States. Postwar Japan was a Manchukuo for Americans. The Japanese conservatives, including wartime bureaucrats, industrialists and even class-A war criminals, earnestly endorsed this policy of the United States since they were afraid of being expelled from their positions of

dominance; they took a free ride on the American plan and tried to build their own legitimacy in terms of the continuation of Emperorism.

In short, the United States maintained the de facto system of colonization by giving the Japanese a sense of national identity and independence after the Asia-Pacific War. American policies toward Japan were further enhanced by endowing Japan with the pseudo-position of being an imperial power over the vast territories of the former Greater East Asian Co-prosperity Sphere in East Asia and Southeast Asia, as if Japan were a butler of the East Asian House of the American Empire<sup>3</sup>. Americans gave the Japanese their nationalism. In other words, Japanese nationalism became an exceptionally effective instrument for the American governance of Japan. Perhaps, the term “colonialism” might be inadequate for this type of remote control, or we should revise a new analytical model for this sort of colonial governmentality.

Shinto was, of course, implicated in this rearrangement and re-establishment of Emperorism. One of the most important revisions of Emperorism and Shinto after the war was the re-definition of Shinto along the line of ethnic nationalism. Shinto became a particularistic religion specific to the Japanese ethnicity. Until 1945, the Japanese State did not yield to ethnic nationalism (*minzoku shugi*) and, as historical

evidence amply shows, brutally oppressed the ethnic nationalist movement in the colonies because such a movement more often than not refused national integration and could easily lead to an anti-colonial independence movement. Isomae's analysis of pre-war Korea demonstrates why the Japanese Imperial Nationalism could not afford a particularistic orientation toward ethnic nationalism. Instead, the Japanese Government held anti-ethnic imperial nationalism as a norm, to emphasize the integration of all minority groups into the nation.<sup>4</sup>

As a matter of fact, Japanese imperial nationalism manifested typical features of imperial nationalism, but as soon as Japan's defeat was unavoidable, most Japanese intellectuals, industrialists and politicians turned to ethnic nationalism. Within a decade after the defeat, Emperorism was reformulated for an ethnic nation of Japan. Not only Japanese scholars but also American scholars of Japanese Studies began to stress Emperorism as an expression of Japan's ethnic nationalism.<sup>5</sup> In accordance with this revision, the history of Shinto was also rewritten.

It is the time for us to once again rewrite the history of Shinto and begin to critically review the conditions of scholarship on religions transnationally in East Asia and across the Pacific.

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<sup>1</sup> Please refer to Michel Foucault's analysis of Pastoral Power in *Lectures at the Collège de France, 1977-1978, Security, Territory, Population*, Graham Burchell trans. Palgrave. 2007. See: Naoki Sakai, "The Body of the Nation: the Pastorate, the Emperor System and the Society of Sympathy of Japan's Intellectual Modernization," in *Biopolitics, Ethics and Subjectivation*, Alian Brossat, Yuan-Horng Chu, Rada Ivekovic, Joyce C. H. Liu eds. Paris, L'Harmattan, 2011: 91-120.

<sup>2</sup> See: Edwin O. Reischauer, Memorandum on Policy towards Japan. September 14, 1942; with material collected by War Department General Staff, Organization and Training Division, G-3. Concerning "Enlightenment of loyal American citizens of Japanese descent into Army and Navy," 17 December 1942; 291.2, Army-AG Classified Decimeal File 1940-1942; Records of the Adjunct General's Office, 1917, Record Group 407; Entry 360; Box 147; National Archives at College Park, MD. Also see: Takeshi Fujitani, "The Reischauer Momo: Mr. Moto, Hirohito, and Japanese American soldiers," *Critical Asian Studies*, 33:3, 2001.

<sup>3</sup> Let us return to the well-known history of U. S. Foreign policy at the onset of the Cold War. In the last few years of the 1940's, the U. S. policy towards the Far East took a one hundred eighty degree turn. Consequently, Japan regained the status of an imperial power in East Asia. This drastic change of American foreign policies is recognizable in the 28 February 1948 Review of Current Trends in U. S. Foreign Policy written by George Kennan, head of the US State Department Policy Planning Staff. Kennan argued, "We should cease to talk about vague and ... unreal objectives such as human rights, the raising of the living standards, and democratization," and must "deal in straight power concepts," not "hampered by idealistic slogans" about "altruism and world-benefaction." He specified the new role in the global design to be given to Japan: "To devise policies with respect to Japan which assure the security of those islands from communist penetration and domination as from Soviet military attack, and which will permit the economic potential of that country to become again an important force in the Far East, responsive to the interests of peace and stability in the Pacific area." The new U. S. foreign policy aims at the retention of the vast economic gap separating "our enormous wealth from the poverty of others," which Kennan called "the position of disparity" (6.3% of the world population owns 50% of world wealth), and for this end, the U. S. must give up "unrealistic objectives such as human rights, the raising of the living standards, and democratization in East Asia." This drastic change of American foreign policy allowed anti-communist forces and wartime bureaucrats and industrialists, including class-A war criminals such as Kishi Nobusuke, Sasakawa Ryôichi, and Shôriki Matsutarô, to return to the mainstream of Japanese politics.

<sup>4</sup> Let us not overlook the fact that racial differentiation was maintained precisely because of this normalcy of the universalism of national integration. As Étienne Balibar routinely emphasizes, racism is a sort of universalism.

<sup>5</sup> For strategic reasons, it was absolutely necessary for American experts on Japan to portray Japanese nationalism as ethnic particularism. One might mention a number of leading Japanologists — such as Edwin Reischauer and Robert Bellah — who engaged in the construction of an consensus that the Japanese are a particularistic people. As to the universalistic undertone of the Japanese State ideology, see: Naoki Sakai, "Modernity and Its Critique: The Problem of Universalism and Particularism." *The South Atlantic Quarterly, Postmodernism and Japan* 87, no. 3 (1988): 475-504.