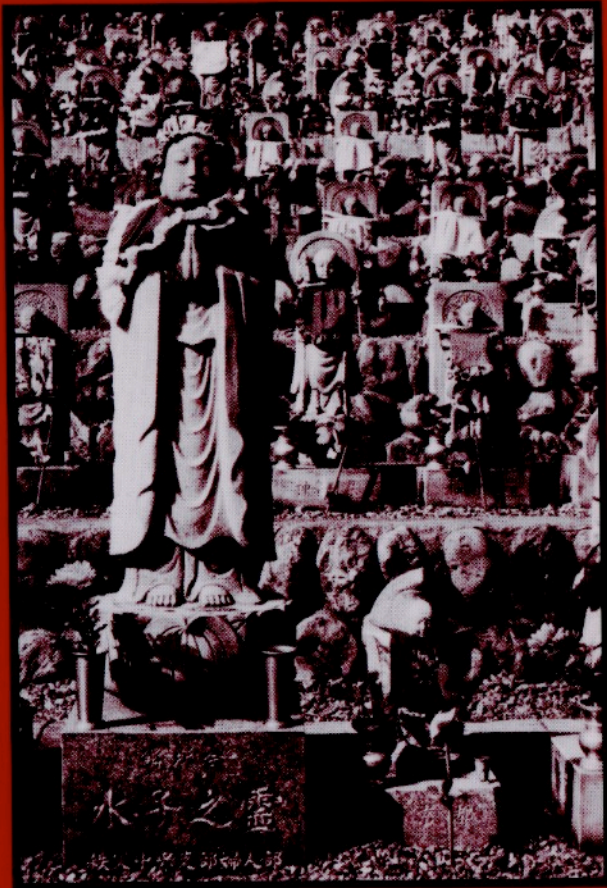


RELIGION & SOCIETY IN MODERN JAPAN



EDITED BY

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Religion and Society in Modern Japan

Selected Readings

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Contents

PREFACE, vii

PART 1 JAPANESE RELIGIOSITY

Introduction, 3

Shinto in the History of Japanese Religion

KURODA Toshio, 7

Religious Rituals in Shugendō

MIYAKE Hitoshi, 31

Religion in Contemporary Japanese Society

Jan SWYNGEDOUW, 49

PART 2 RELIGION AND THE STATE

Introduction, 75

Background Documents, 81

1 Meiji Constitution (1889), Article 28, 81

2 Imperial Rescript on Education (1890), 81

3 Memorandum on State Shinto, 3 December 1945, 82

4 Directive for the Disestablishment of State Shinto,
15 December 1945, 97

5 Emperor's Imperial Rescript Denying his Divinity,
1 January 1946, 102

6 Constitution of Japan, Articles 20 and 89, 104

The Revitalization of Japanese Civil Religion

K. Peter TAKAYAMA, 105

Yasukuni-Jinja and Folk Religion

Klaus ANTONI, 121

Many political leaders claim that Japan cannot be a free, sovereign nation, the master of its own fate, without the "right of belligerency." The outcome of this debate will have important implications for the future social order of Japan as well as its religio-political consciousness.

NOTE

* This essay first appeared in *Sociological Analysis* 48/4: 328-41 (1988). Reprinted by permission. K. Peter Takayama is Professor of Sociology in the Department of Sociology and Social Work, Memphis State University, Memphis, Tennessee.

¹ This court decision was reached almost twelve years after the time a local assemblyman filed suit against the Tsu City mayor. In 1965 Shinto priests performed a ground-breaking ceremony for a new city gymnasium, and for this service were paid in funds from the city budget. The assemblyman objected to having the priests paid out of public funds, believing that the constitutional guarantee of separation of religion and state had been violated. It was the Supreme Court's decision that the Shinto ceremony had been a commonly accepted practice in Japan for hundreds of years. The Court, reversing an earlier decision by the Nagoya High Court, expressed the final legal opinion that a Shinto ground-breaking ceremony should be understood as a traditional cultural custom rather than as a religious activity. Ground-breaking ceremonies are nothing extraordinary to the Japanese, but the court case gained national attention since until 1965 nobody had questioned something as ordinary as a ground-breaking ceremony.

Yasukuni-Jinja and Folk Religion

The Problem of Vengeful Spirits

Klaus ANTONI

ON 15 AUGUST 1985, the fortieth anniversary of the end of the Pacific War, then Prime Minister Nakasone Yasuhiro paid his respects to the country's war dead at Yasukuni Shrine in Tokyo. As the first official visit by a Japanese head of government since Japan's surrender, this gave rise to much discussion even in the Western press. We were told that Yasukuni, the shrine for the war dead, was a symbol of Japanese militarism and that therefore official visits imply a vindication of that former political system. But what is not understood in the West are the deeper roots of the problem.

The issue centers mainly on the question of whether the shrine is a mere *memorial*, to be compared to the Tombs of the Unknown Soldier in Western countries, or if it is a real *shrine* in the sense of a definite religious place, a holy site of the Shinto religion.

The political and ideological dimensions of this discussion are obvious. If the shrine is *not* a religious place, as it is declared by a strong and influential faction of the Association of Shinto Shrines (*Jinja Honchō*) then it could easily be taken under governmental control again, as it was until the end of the war. Those opposed to the official recognition of Yasukuni foresee a revival of so-called State Shinto, the allegedly nonreligious state cult from the Meiji period up to the end of the war, where the Shinto shrines were mere ceremonial stages for the celebration of folk "customs" in accordance with the fundamentals of *kokutai* thought (see below). Therefore the political dimension of the discussion is for the most part an extension of its religious aspect.

THE OFFICIAL CONCEPT OF THE YASUKUNI DEITIES

Originally founded under the name of Shōkonsha (shrine for calling the spirits of the dead) in Kyoto, the shrine was trans-

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ferred to Tokyo and its name changed to Yasukuni-jinja in June 1879.¹ The spirits of all those who had died in the fighting leading up to the Meiji Restoration—formally established in 1868—were transferred to Yasukuni from their previous places of enshrinement.

靖国

The name of the shrine, "Yasukuni," was bestowed by Emperor Meiji, who wrote the following in an address to the spirits deified there:

With a loyal and honest heart you have passed away, not worrying about your homes, not minding your own lives. Founded on these great and highly heroic deeds, our Great Empire is to rule as a peaceful land (*yasukuni*); so We renamed (this shrine) Yasukuni-jinja, "Shrine of the Peaceful Land" and made it an Imperial Shrine of Special Status (*bekkaku-kanpeisha*). We vow to make sacrifices of paper and silk (*mitegara*) and of laudatory congratulations, and, from now on forever, to worship and admire you.²

From that time on the spirits of all soldiers killed in the wars of Japan were enshrined on Kudan hill in Tokyo, the location of Yasukuni Shrine. For the soldiers and their families it became a source of deep pride that even the emperor paid his respects at the shrine and worshiped the divinities there, who were in fact the spirits of ordinary people.³

国体の本義

The programmatic script on the essentials of *kokutai* (nationalist) ideology, the *Kokutai no hongii* (1937), states:

The Emperor's deeds that remain with us are so many as to defy enumeration when we cite such things as how he enshrines as deities in Yasukuni shrine those loyal subjects that have sacrificed their lives for the nation since about the time of the Restoration, lauding their meritorious deeds without regard to standing or position, and how he poured out his great august heart in giving relief in times of natural calamities. (MONBUSHŌ 1937: 31; GAUNTLETT and HALL 1949: 77)

Everyone who died for the Empire in a war was deified and became a protecting god for the country, therefore the name of Yasukuni, "Peaceful Country." Moreover, this point was understood as an expression of imperial gratitude to the people, and served as a means of strengthening the new dynastic idea in post-Tokugawa times.

Since the Yasukuni shrine was founded during the Meiji period, it first of all has to be explained in the context of the ideological and religious worldview of this epoch. However, it is apparent that for a deeper understanding we must take religious ideas into consideration, which have their origins outside the sphere of this particular problem.

One of the specific traits of Meiji thought was the total disavowal of Buddhist ideas. But in fact we do find an historical parallel in Buddhism itself, which in turn further supports our understanding of the Yasukuni Shrine.

The term *yasukuni* may be read *ankoku* in Sino-Japanese pronunciation. We learn from history that in medieval times there existed so-called Ankoku-ji, temples whose names were written with the characters *an-koku*, "Peaceful Land." These characters were used also by Emperor Meiji to clarify the functions of the Yasukuni Shrine.

安国寺

The Ankoku temples were founded in the early fourteenth century by the first Ashikaga shogun Takauji and his brother Tadayoshi, following the advice of the famous Rinzaï Zen master Musō Kokushi. One of the motives for founding these temples was to elevate the Rinzaï faction of Zen into a position superior to that of the other Buddhist schools of the country.⁴ It was further intended to strengthen the power of the Ashikaga Bakufu, since the temples were administered by the Ashikaga family. But the system was not successful, and after the death of Takauji nearly all the Ankoku-ji temples disappeared. The political aspect of the temples' foundation appears to be predominant, but the religious dimension should not be neglected.

A parallel can be drawn between the systems of the medieval Ankoku-ji temples on the one hand and of the modern Yasukuni Shrine and its provincial Gokoku shrines⁵ on the other. The Ankoku-ji also were established in favor of the souls of fallen warriors, especially for the war dead of the Genkō-era (1331–1333) battles.⁶

George SANSOM (1981: 372) writes on the motives of Takauji:

He wanted to have in every province an emblem of the spread of his influence over all Japan. But also he hoped to create good feeling by his pious enterprise, which was meant to comfort the spirits of those who had perished in his campaigns, both friends and foes.

In an analysis of Buddhist temple names Dietrich SECKEL (1985) establishes a system of fourteen categories. His tenth category is of importance in our context. It contains temple names that deal with 1) the peace of the country, and 2) the protection of the country and the emperor.

SECKEL states that "pacification" (*chin*) and "peace" (*an*) are "just two aspects of the same thing" (1985: 204); so, along with Ankoku-ji, "temples for the peace of the country," we find names such as Chinkoku-ji, "temples for the pacification of the country." He adds,

The meanings of "calming" and pacification" are combined in the term *chin-an*, which then bifurcates, so to speak, into the two temple names of Chinkoku-ji and Ankoku-ji. The terms *chin*, *shizumeru* (to calm, to pacify), and *mamoru* (to protect) play a role also in Shinto: the cult of the gods (*kami*) is for a good part understood as the "pacification" of evil or dangerous powers and as a prevention against un auspicious influence. *Chinkon-sai* is the feast "to pacify" the souls of the dead that have become *kami*. (SECKEL 1985: 205)

It is clear that the connection between the two spheres of the Buddhist Ankoku-ji and the Shintoist Yasukuni shrine is deeper than a mere similarity based on the analogy of names; it is founded on similarities in the field of a religious conception.

From the viewpoint of pure historical comparison we could hardly find a greater contrast than the one that exists between these two areas. Ashikaga Takauji and the Northern Court of the Nanboku era in Japanese history were regarded as totally negative factors in history, at least according to the imperial historiography in the *Dainihon-shi* [History of great Japan] of the Mito school. Furthermore, Takauji was a follower of Musō Kokushi and therefore a patron of Buddhism. Despite all these differences between the medieval Ankoku temples and the Yasukuni shrine in historical, intellectual, and religious meaning, we face a nearly identical underlying religious idea: all are places intended to give the country peace through the deification of the fallen warriors of former wars.

As was pointed out above, the idea of the *pacification* of the souls of the dead plays a basic role within this idea. So it is crucial to investigate whether this aspect is of importance for understanding the Yasukuni Shrine problem.

THE HERETICAL INTERPRETATION

The Yasukuni problem was treated by several authors in academic discussion within the last years. Special mention should be made of the works of Ōe Shinobu (1984), MURAKAMI Shigeyoshi (1974), and Ernst LOKOWANDT (1978 and 1981). These authors demonstrated that the problem under consideration has its foundation in the history and the ideological background of the shrine.

A new, we might say heretical, definition of the Yasukuni gods, which even produced an academic incident in recent times, is discussed by certain authors (SHIMAGAWA 1985; ŌE 1984: 115–20). Here the emphasis for understanding the real nature of the Yasukuni gods is put not on the orthodox aspects of imperial gratitude and protection of the country, but rather on the state of mind of the soldiers themselves. Their will to live was crushed and their deaths seemed without meaning, leaving their spirits full of hatred and frustration. Therefore, SHIMAGAWA (1985: 19) states, in the very moment of their deaths they had become bitterly hating, vengeful gods—*onryō-gami*—a term very well known in the history of Japanese religion.

Onryō or *goryō*, the "vengeful spirits of the dead," are a specimen of deity whose cult flourished especially in the Heian period of Japanese history (794–1185). The first incident of a *goryōe*, a ceremony for the pacification of these vengeful spirits that were regarded as a great danger for the community of the living, is reported from the year 863. The most prominent *goryō* deity in history is Tenman-tenjin, the deified spirit of Sugawara Michizane, famous statesman and opponent of the Fujiwara family. His case shows all of the important elements of the historical *goryō* cult. A man of high social position dies an unnatural death caused either by a personal enemy or through political intrigue. His spirit is thus full of hate and bitterness.⁷

The monk Jien writes in his historical work *Gukanshō*, dating from about 1219:

The main point about a vengeful soul is that it bears a deep grudge and makes those who caused the grudge objects of its revenge even while the resentful person is still alive. When the vengeful soul is seeking to destroy the objects of its resentment,...the state is thrown into disorder by the slanders and lies it generates. The destruction of the people is brought about

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in exactly the same way. And if the vengeful soul is unable to obtain its revenge while in this visible world, it will do so from the realm of the invisible. (BROWN and ISHIDA 1979: 220–21)

聖 In medieval times the belief in vengeful souls (*goryō-shinkō*) flourished among the ordinary people as well. As HORI Ichirō (1968: 21) points out, it was mainly spread by Nenbutsu priests (*hijiri*), who taught the salvific value of chanting the name of Amida Buddha. In this belief, the mental state at the very moment of death was regarded as essential for the future fate of the soul. Everybody bearing a grudge in his heart while dying would become an *onryō*, while the others enjoyed rebirth in Amida's paradise. "Sometimes," HORI states, "Nenbutsu-hijiri advanced in the midst of battlefields to offer Nenbutsu to the spirits of those who had fallen, as well as to give dying soldiers assurance of salvation by Amida Butsu, urging them pray Nenbutsu" (1968: 123). This also provides the mental basis for interpreting the Yasukuni gods as *onryō*.

But there exists another item to be taken into consideration: the concept of *goryō* is an extremely *individualistic* one. The individual hatred and bitterness, the individual fear, do determine the fate of soul in the afterlife. But in the case of the Yasukuni Shrine it is a fact that the souls of all the war dead are enshrined as deities without regard to their former lives and the individual circumstances of their deaths.

THE CONCEPT OF "BAD DEATH"

Do we therefore have to reject the *onryō* concept of the Yasukuni gods as a whole? I do not think so. We know that the traditional Japanese attitude toward death was extremely negative and timorous. The living feared pollution by death, as we can see for the first time in the myths surrounding Izanagi and Izanami.⁸ Especially feared were the spirits of persons who died unnatural and premature deaths, or who died far from home as strangers.

With this belief we arrive at a *conceptual* and *general* instead of an *individual* view of the horrible fate of the soul that is widespread among many societies, especially among the peoples of Southeast Asia. As for the concept of premature and unnatural death, there exists the technical term of "bad death" in comparative religion.⁹ This term describes a

specific view of the dead, based on fear and horror on the side of the living. In this worldview, premature and abnormal ways of death are regarded as being the same by definition, since to suffer early death means that the deceased cannot live his full life to its natural end. Only unnatural causes can be responsible for such a sad and dangerous fate. For the spirit of the departed this kind of death results in not being able to enter the afterlife, that is, the other side and next stage of human existence, because it was not able to go through all the stages of life (cf. JENSEN 1960: 366).

The human being is taught through several rites of passage during the course of his or her life all the knowledge that the spirit of the dead needs to know in order to pass the interrogation at the entrance to the next world. One who dies too early cannot pass this examination; he will fall into a state of loneliness and must wander around homeless in the realm between the two worlds of the living and the dead, always trying to lure living people into his own horrible state of existence (see SELL 1955).

As stated before, within this idea the manner of death is important in determining the fate of the spirit of the dead. Therefore it is of great significance for the problem under consideration that among the different ways of unnatural deaths there are two that are always mentioned: the death of the childbearing mother—she becomes a very dangerous ghost—and the death of the warrior.¹⁰

From the Toradja of Sulawesi (Celebes), for example, we hear that the soul of a fallen warrior becomes a wicked ghost, called a *bolinde*, which tries to frighten and kill living people (SELL 1955: 178). On the islands of Solor and Adonare the war dead are hung on a pole outside the village like slaughtered pigs; only after four days will they be buried (SELL 1955: 232–33).

Several reports tell us how human communities try to protect themselves against the evil influences of the ghosts of dead warriors. In eastern Indonesia, on the island of Halmahera, the Galela build little shrines, called "soul huts," for the spirits of the dead in the vicinity of the house of the bereaved family. The ghosts, being homeless and lonesome, are thought to be most dangerous to the members of their own families. Through this kind of ceremony, the community tries to catch the troubled soul and thus make the ghost harmless.

On the island of Samoa in Polynesia, people try to pacify and comfort the soul by catching it. After they have done so, it is said, nobody has to fear the ghost any longer (SELL 1955: 39).

We learn from the examples shown here that in this kind of archaic worldview the dead warrior is anything but a hero; instead he becomes a "bad dead," one who is feared especially by his own relatives. They try to calm and pacify the spirit—as in the Indonesian case—by erecting a *shrine* for the soul. According to this conception the emotions of fear and horror lead to the worship of the dead warrior.

YASUKUNI SHRINE AND THE "BAD DEATH" OF THE SOLDIER

Since ancient times the motif of calming, pacifying, and appeasing evil powers—especially souls—has been a prominent aspect of Shinto religion. We hear, for example, about the *Mitamashizume-matsuri Chinkon-sai*, the "Feast of Pacification of Spirits," which is mentioned in the *Engishiki* of the tenth century. This ceremony had "as its purpose to prolong the life of the sovereign and pacify or soothe the ancestral spirits" (BOCK 1970, 1: 94–97).

Not much is recorded about the beliefs of the ordinary people of that time, probably because the writers of noble birth had little interest in the religious feelings of peasants and fishermen. But through folklore research we have information and descriptions about the fear of human ghosts, especially of those who recently died unnatural deaths.

In folk belief, one who died from natural causes is said to become a *hotoke*, a "Buddha." But those who die too early—especially the young and unmarried—will become "wandering spirits" who are perilous to the living. An impressive table showing the correlation between the manner of death and the future fate of the soul is given by Robert J. SMITH (1974: 55), who shows that all young people and unmarried adults dying abnormal deaths become "wandering spirits."

These spirits are called *muen-botoke*, "Buddhas without affiliation," or *gaki*, "hungry ghosts," originally a term for those who dwell in the second of the ten Buddhist worlds, suffering from eternal hunger and thirst. "From long ago," YANAGITA Kunio wrote, "people of Japan have had a dread of meeting such homeless spirits" (1970: 94).

In the folk belief of Okinawa, too, we find similar concepts of death. One who dies a violent death is said to become a

majimung spirit, which is extremely perilous to the living. It is able to materialize in any form and is satisfied only when it catches the soul of a living being (LEBRA 1966: 29–30).

In the early modern period of Japanese history, that is to say the Meiji era (late nineteenth century), it is quite conceivable that a people who held such views toward the "wandering soul" would feel especially sensitive about fallen soldiers, the largest group of young and mostly unmarried dead, many of whom died far from home. They were ideal examples of those who died a premature "bad death."

This surely is a concept identical to the idea of "bad death" described above. Folk belief preserves the conceptual fear of the "bad death" that is quite different from the individualistic view of *goryō-shinkō*. Not because of personal hatred or frustration, but because of a specific manner and/or time of death, the soul becomes a harmful ghost.

CONCLUSION

As we have seen above, the violent death of a warrior is widely regarded as a distinct kind of "bad death." It is obvious, in my opinion, that in Japan the fear of such ghosts existed since early times, given the existence of the Chinkoku-ji and Ankoku-ji temples. Their religious basis was not a specifically Buddhist one, but rested rather on archaic religious emotions and fears, which had their roots outside of Buddhism.

Seen from this standpoint we arrive at far-reaching conclusions. It is known that Japanese society from the Meiji to the early Shōwa period was based on an ideological system called "familism." The Confucian ethical maxims of *chū*, "loyalty," and *kō*, "filial piety," were blended into the ideal of the Japanese nation, which itself was regarded as an actual family with the emperor as its head.

This view of the *kokutai*, the "national body," "national polity," or "national entity" of Japan, was elaborated mainly by the philosophers of the Mito school of late Tokugawa Japan. It was the Mito scholar Aizawa Seishisai (1782–1863) who first introduced the term to the theoretical debate on the Japanese state in his work *Shinron* [A new discourse], in the year 1825. Here *kokutai* does not mean the "body" of any nation in general, but definitely and exclusively the specific characteristics of the Japanese nation only.

延喜式

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忠
孝

Although the heterogeneous elements of *kokutai* thought—the Confucian concepts of loyalty and filial piety, and the Kokugaku idea of Japan as a “land of the gods” (*shinkoku*)—were known to the philosophical world of Japan since long before, it was the ideologists of the Imperial Restoration who developed a form of *kokutai* based on the idea of the uniqueness of the Japanese nation.

In the Meiji period this became the official concept of the state. Japan was regarded as a great family. Since all Japanese citizens were thought to be descendants of the mythical ancestors with the Imperial line as their head—an idea based on Japanese mythology and elaborated by the Kokugaku scholar Hirata Atsutane—the result was a concept of the Japanese nation as a real family, not merely a family-like body.

The famous Imperial Rescript on Education, dated 30 October 1890, states (official translation):

Know ye, Our Subjects:

Our Imperial Ancestors have founded Our Empire on a basis broad and everlasting and have deeply and firmly implanted virtue; Our subjects ever united in loyalty and filial piety have from generation to generation illustrated the beauty thereof. This is the glory of the fundamental character of Our Empire....

The Way here set forth is indeed the teaching bequeathed by Our Imperial Ancestors, to be observed alike by Their Descendants and the subjects, infallible for all ages and true in all places. It is Our wish to lay it to heart in all reverence, in common with you, Our subjects, that We may thus attain to the same virtue.

Wilbur M. FRIDELL (1970: 829) writes on the family state ideology of the late Meiji years:

Filial piety practiced in the individual family became, without change, loyalty to the comprehensive or national family. The traditional patterns and values of the individual family must be strengthened and maintained,...for it was the individual family system which supported the comprehensive (national) family system and thereby preserved *kokutai*.

But this concept of *kokutai* contains a specific risk within the context discussed here. If one single family has to fear the souls of members who died from unnatural causes, so, of course, the nation as a whole (as the “family of families”) has to fear the totality of members who die such bad deaths. To

calm and pacify them, and—we remember the East Indonesian case—to make them harmless, a shrine has to be erected and specific ceremonies have to be undertaken. In these the religious fears of the ordinary people, based on the folk belief in evil ghosts, can be calmed.

In Tokugawa times the cult of the heroic warrior was associated with the bushi class. After the Restoration everybody, regardless of status and social position, could serve in the army. This, in my opinion, created a political need to change the fear of wandering spirits into a feeling of pride in the heroism of the war dead.

That this is not mere speculation is shown by the words of the Imperial Rescript presented by Emperor Meiji on the occasion of founding the Kyoto Shōkonsha, dated 10 May 1868. Much is said in this rescript about imperial gratitude and the loyalty of the dead; but in one short sentence the other—the horrible—side of heroism becomes visible. In this sentence it is said that the shrine is also erected with the intention of soothing and pacifying the souls of the dead.¹²

Even in the ongoing discussion on the status of the Yasukuni Shrine this aspect can be clearly seen in documents related to the shrine. In a bill dated June 1969, which was introduced to achieve governmental control over the shrine by denying its religious nature, we find, among the stated aims of the Yasukuni Shrine, the orthodox view that it serves to express the admiration of the entire people for those who sacrificed themselves for the sake of the country. But it is also stated that the shrine shall pacify and appease them. Ceremonies and feasts, says the text, shall be conducted in order to pacify the spirits of the fallen soldiers.

From this it is clear that the country in fact becomes a *yasukuni*, a “peaceful land,” because the warriors as “bad dead” are no longer a threat and danger to it. In this view the country is protected *from* instead of being protected *by* the spirits of the fallen warriors.

NOTES

* This article first appeared in *Asian Folklore Studies* 47 (1988): 123–36. Reprinted by permission. Klaus Antoni is Professor of Japanology at Trier University, Germany.

¹ Cf. the documents in MURAKAMI 1974: 107; LOKOWANDT 1978: 328–29, No. D 94; KAWADA 1982: 66–67.

² Translation based on the Japanese original of the address (MURAKAMI 1974: 109). The translation given by the shrine office differs in several ways: "You have given your lives for your country. You sacrificed yourselves to make the country peaceful. This shrine was established to invoke your spirits. We call the Shrine the Yasukuni (to make the country peaceful) Shrine. We are sure to continue to offer prayers forever for the sake of your spirits" (YASUKUNI JINJA SHAMUSHO 1975: 1).

³ HOLTOM (1963, 5) illustrates this point by discussing the case of a liberal university professor who, in the year 1938, asked publicly whether a man of clearly bad character could become a deity of the shrine too. He was attacked for this by official sources: "He was accused of having insulted the national structure and of having heaped indignity on the sacred spirits of the warrior dead and the holy cause in which they had given their lives.... The sacred quality of the divine emperor attaches to a Japanese the supreme command of an emperor who can do nothing wrong.... 'No matter how much of a wrongdoer, no matter how evil, a Japanese subject may have been, when once he has taken his stand on the field of battle, all his past sins are entirely atoned for and they become as nothing'."

⁴ Most of the Ankoku temples were not newly built—they merely received new names and were incorporated into the new system. It is said that the first Ankoku-ji was the former Kumeta temple in Izumi Province, which was renamed in 1338. See MATSUNAGA 1974–76, vol. II: 223–27; AKAMATSU and YAMPOLSKY 1977, 313–15.

⁵ Parallel to Yasukuni-jinja, the national shrine for the war dead, there exists in every prefecture a prefectural shrine for the war dead under the name of Gokoku-jinja (Shrine for the protection of the country). These shrines were until 1939 registered as regional Shōkonsha. See LOKOWANDT 1978: 96, n. 351; KAWADA 1982: 68.

⁶ Cf. AKAMATSU and YAMPOLSKY 1977, 314; MATSUNAGA 1974–1976, II: 226.

⁷ Two descriptive works were published in recent years regarding the historical *goryō* complex, TUBIELEWICZ 1980 and PLUTSCHOW 1983. Here the fate of Sugawara Michizane and other prominent figures, such as Prince Sawara, is discussed in detail.

⁸ According to Japanese mythology, Izanagi-no-mikoto purified himself after his visit to the land of the dead (see CHAMBERLAIN 1982, 44–49).

⁹ The term "bad death" is a direct translation of the German "der schlimme Tod," which is a technical term in the field of the history of religions. In 1955 Hans Joachim Sell published his great work on this concept of death among the Indonesian peoples.

¹⁰ SELL (1955: 3) lists, among others, the following categories of dead persons: women who die during childbirth, fallen warriors, dead children, murdered persons, and victims of accidental death, suicide, and execution.

Traditional Religious Institutions