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**Theories and Methods in
Japanese Studies: Current State and
Future Developments**

Papers in Honor of Josef Kreiner

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Klaus Antoni
The Divine Country: On State and Religion in Modern
Japan

1. Preface

Japan's present-day image is that of a Far Eastern economic powerhouse. Yet in the face of high tech and economic achievements, one tends to overlook the fact that this hypermodern success story rests on extremely traditional, even archaic, underpinnings. Today, Japan is the most ancient monarchy in existence, with the imperial family claiming a historic legacy that dates back well into prehistoric times. This ancient core of the Japanese state remains hidden to most observers, especially in Tokyo, a city that has become synonymous with the furious and hectic pace of modernization. Nonetheless, it is in Tokyo, of all places, where we can have a good look at the other Japan that lurks beneath the westernized surface. In the middle of Tokyo's banking district, right in the city center, is a vast area inaccessible to the public. It includes large stretches of woodland and even some rice fields which add to the rural flair in the midst of the teeming metropolis. Yet this almost surreal idyll is not a landscaped garden or an urban greenery like Central Park in New York, but rather a »void in the center« of Japan, as an observer once aptly termed it. It houses Japan's official and also its alleged spiritual center – the imperial palace. Carefully shielded from both the public and court bureaucracy, it is here that the imperial family, led by its 125th *Tennō* (as official chronology has it), resides in the middle of their own world in the capital city of Tokyo. Even though the late Shōwa *Tennō*, the father of the current emperor, was asked to renounce his status of »living deity«, Japanese emperors in reality still draw on this source for both their moral and spiritual authority, as was evident from the great, religiously orchestrated funeral and later accession ceremonies in 1989 and 1990. Surveys constantly yield high approval rates for the institution of *Tennō* and empire. However, almost no Japanese citizen will think of religious motifs when answering the questions of an interviewer. Rather, they perceive the *Tennō* as what the constitution explicitly names him to be: the »symbol of Japan«. As long as the *Tennō* resides in mysterious seclusion as on an island in the middle of Tōkyō and holds his daily rites there, Japan is assured of inner unity. Thus there is a sense of continuity in Japanese matters which, considering its total breakdown in 1945, seems quite surprising. Especially the ritual events triggered by the death and succession of Shōwa *Tennō* have highlighted the need

to penetrate beyond the current image of Japan. Influenced by the largely non-historic education of the immediate postwar era, foreign observers and analysts have all too willingly subscribed to the view of the historical juncture as a »zero hour«, »1945« – the myth of a supposedly clear-slated beginning – was thought to hold true for Japan as well, serving as the premise for a »modern«, functionalist approach to history. Yet experience has taught us that history will overcome us exactly at that moment when we think we have successfully repressed it. In my opinion, this holds true for Japan as well. The task of critical historic research is to throw light on the transitional phases and periods of great change since they set the stage for the times ahead. Only time will tell if the role of the current *Tennō* represents a re-interpretation of the relation between Shintō and imperial family, and between state and religion. Current debates on Shintō and politics, e.g. in respect to the Yasukuni shrine, clearly show the importance of such questions for the present-day position of Japan in a globalized world.

The view of history plays a decisive role in this matter. Even today, the constructs of ideology obscure our knowledge of the religious history of modern Japan, especially of the dynamics of prewar and wartime State Shintō. Here lies the key to separating historical facts from ideological fictions. Such a critical view on modern Japanese Shintō history has its own history which begins with the work of one of the most prominent japanologists of the late 19th century: Basil Hall Chamberlain (1850-1935). And with him we will start our tour through the world of inventions, traditions, historical facts, and fictions.

2. Inventions

2.1 Basil Hall Chamberlain

Throughout the Taishō and early Shōwa reigns, State Shintō and its *kokutai* dogma continued to evolve into a »fundamentalist«, *Tennō*-based state ideology. Criticism in those years seems to have been rare, with most Japanese intellectuals either making their peace with the dominant *Zeitgeist* or actually endorsing it. A striking example is Inoue Tetsujirō, who during the 1930s and 1940s thoroughly transformed himself to become a fanatic Shintō nationalist.¹

When the political climate became more repressive, threatening to ideologize both the intellectual and religious spheres, critical voices at home grew scarcer, although foreign observers in Japan voiced their dissent every now and then. While these observers were sometimes intimately acquainted with Japanese affairs they were not obliged to conform as rigorously as their Japanese counterparts.

1 Cf. Antoni 1990 and Nawrocki 1998.

A few artists and scholars in Japan and abroad confronted and criticized these subtle ideological constructions, among them Karl Florenz, who had done research on the written aspects of Shintō history during the last decades of the nineteenth century. Karl Florenz's studies on Shintō were on a strictly scientific and comparative basis.² However, the most important work on this topic that we should consider is that of another foreign scholar in Japan, one who dealt with the subject in a surprisingly pointed, and even polemical fashion – and that is none other than the nestor of philological Japanese studies, Basil Hall Chamberlain (1850–1935).

Unparalleled as a linguist and translator of historic sources (especially the *Kojiki* (1883, repr. 1981), which is of paramount importance in this context), Chamberlain possessed an intimate knowledge of authentic cultural tradition and ancient texts. He enjoyed more wide-spread fame as author of an insightful collection of miscellanies, *Things Japanese*, which impressed readers with its array of informative and amusing facts about Japan (Chamberlain 1890). Few people know, however, that he included a postscript in the fifth edition of this book (Chamberlain 1927) that hardly conforms to the image of a serene and easy-going scholar but instead shakes up readers even today with its frankly uttered disaffection and verbal daring. This essay first appeared in 1912 as a publication under the auspices of an organization with the tell-tale name »Rationalist Press Association«.³ In it, Chamberlain strongly censures contemporary Japanese intellectual trends using the most outspoken and undiplomatic terms. The title of this essay, *The Invention of a New Religion*, neatly sums up what Chamberlain intends to criticize. Incidentally, he introduces the term »invention« in this essay which only recently had figured as a central concept (»invented tradition«) in Hobsbawm's research.

At the very start of his essay, Chamberlain makes the sarcastic remark that contemporary Japan provides a good model for anyone trying to figure out how to put together a religion for worldly ends. Even though this presupposes a number of existing conditions, such as a feeling of reverence for the *Tennō*, he claims (CHAMBERLAIN 1927: 561) that state bureaucrats were busying themselves transforming archaic images into new theories to suit their needs (and, in a broader sense, to those of the Japanese people). »Shintō, a primitive nature cult, which had fallen into discredit, was taken out of its cupboard and dusted,« in order to displace Buddhism as the people's religion. Thus describes Chamberlain the current religious situation at the time. It is solely

2 For studies on Shintō published by Karl Florenz, see Antoni 1998: 302–303.

3 In his obituary for Basil Hall Chamberlain, Harold Parlett mentions: »His last contribution in the field of Japanese knowledge was a small pamphlet entitled *The Invention of a New Religion*, an arresting essay but unpalatable to many Japanese« (in: *Bulletin of the School of Oriental Studies, University of London* 8, 1, pp. 284–285).

the Japanese government, he maintains, that keeps insisting on the myth of the direct solar lineage of the *Tennō*. Even the right to conduct funerals and, later on, marriages, which used to be none of the Shintō priests' business, was assigned to them then.

Thus, Shintō was made to widen its influence to encompass more and more aspects of daily life, so that political and military progress would be attributed to the wonderful influence of the *Tennō* and his divine ancestors in the end. Chamberlain reprovingly adds that at all the important Shintō shrines, guns looted from the Russians and the Chinese were on display so that Shintō, nationalism, and imperialism became inseparable in the public mind. He goes on to claim that schools, the army, and the navy were re-aligned according to imperialist designs (Chamberlain 1927: 563).

Criticism of state mythology was not permissible if it contradicted the so-called »historical facts« such as the monarchy's purported founding date of 660 BC. Japanese scholars at the time were well aware that concrete records of Japanese history were no older than the fifth century AD. Still, they demanded uncritical acceptance of all elements of national historic legends, and woe to him who dared depart from this path!

Thenceforth was everything based on these »absurd dates« (Chamberlain 1927: 563), irrespective of the fact that the sources that bore mythological information also contained early historical records. This also ignored the fact that early Japanese tales and customs were infused with Chinese themes which made it an impossible task to properly assess what was »indigenous« about them at all. Similarly, moral ideals, especially loyalty and filial piety toward the emperor's descendants, had once been taken over from the Chinese.

»The new Japanese religion of loyalty and patriotism has emerged into the light of day« – yet as simple as it may have been, Chamberlain claims that ideal was enabling the Japanese to do great deeds. The new Japanese religion was based on veneration of the *Tennō*, and his divine ancestors and also on the belief that the Japanese nation was superior to every other nation since the *Tennō* through his divinity, was superior to all other emperors. Early history textbooks stated that Japan was created before all other countries. Thus, the fact that Japan condescended to deal with foreign nations in order to accept insignificant mechanical devices should be perceived as an act of pure grace.

Chamberlain (1927: 565) goes on to say that in reality especially simple folk like farmers hardly identified with the new doctrines, instead clinging to the Buddhist faith passed on from their ancestors (p. 567). The new religion suffered from the lack of any kind of scripture. This gap was filled by the proclamation of imperial rescripts and their respective commentaries with such lofty diction that many people could not understand them. Here Chamberlain makes an insightful point. He notes that although there is good reason

to assume that Japan may have some difficulty in convincing foreign nations of the truth of these dogmas, the reverse seemed to be true. As a matter of fact, Western nations had shown great interest in Japan's purportedly legendary past and its fabulous virtues. Japanese officials were only too eager to expound them.

Japan thus availed itself of the foreigners' credulity (Chamberlain 1927: 568) who had to rely on whatever they were told and could not find out if it was true by consulting the original sources. Furthermore, learning the language was in itself a formidable task for any foreigner. As a result, the Japanese knew everything about Europe, while Europeans only learned those facts about Japan that were deemed beneficial to Japanese interests. This was also why neo-Japanese myths found their way into English textbooks, newspapers, and encyclopedias.

It was true, Chamberlain grants, that some Europeans in Japan were in fact denouncing the bureaucrats' actions in respect to the new cult that did not permit of any kind of criticism or scientific research (that, incidentally, being the reason for the persecution of Japanese liberals that came to be labeled as »traitors«). Nevertheless, as Chamberlain concludes his controversial essay, the government considered it of the utmost importance that its substitute religion was being generally adopted, although they knew all along it was false.

So much for Basil Chamberlain. Decades before Hobsbawm (Hobsbawm and Ranger 1983) published his epoch-making inquiries into »invented traditions«, Chamberlain came up with this polemic pamphlet on State Shintō as an »invented religion«. His voice does not belong to one who, judging from a safe distance historically and geographically, intends to criticize. Rather, he knows what he is writing about and has an impeccable reputation for competence, basing his judgments on firsthand experience while chafing at the brazen distortion of historical facts.

No one even came close to rivaling Chamberlain for his intimate knowledge of Japanese (religious) history and philology. He was well-acquainted with the historical sources, and it was this knowledge that lent significance to his critique. Instead of pandering to the dominant *Zeitgeist*, Chamberlain put forward his opinion in the contemporary debate based on his intimate knowledge of historical sources. The voice of the enlightened scholar and cultural anthropologist, who managed to decipher the patterns of ideological reasoning, seldom rang out with such clarity.

Chamberlain shows us beyond a doubt that knowledge of the actual historical sources is indispensable when trying to the »inventions« that have been artfully crafted in the course of cultural history.

2.2 Eric J. Hobsbawm

Hardly any other academic »discovery« has had such a revolutionary influence in this respect as that of the above-mentioned »invented traditions«. Its most basic insight is that the antagonism of »tradition« and »modernity«, which – not just in the case of Japan – appear so concise and stringent, are not sufficient to describe complex historical processes, but require at least one additional category: that of the »invented« traditions. Supposedly reliable traditions, which convey a certain cultural identity, often appear in the light of critical and historical examination not only questionable and unreliable, but also as »inventions« of the modern age.

The Austro-British scholar Eric J. Hobsbawm and his colleagues are to be thanked for their pioneering studies in this area which have shed light on the worldwide genesis of such artificial traditions.⁴ It is not difficult to recognize the pattern of development in Japan as well, especially since the Meiji period. The examples of reinterpretation, manipulation, and utilization of existing cultural elements in the sense of »invented traditions« in modern and contemporary Japan are many.

Hobsbawm's observations have also shaped the view within Japanese Studies that the process of the manipulation or even the invention of traditions is by no means limited to Japan. Japan is not an exception in which »tradition« and »modernity« have entered a »unique« relationship. On the contrary, the case of Japan proves to be an especially incisive example of a process of global proportions, which can be understood within the context of the formation of nation states. The exploitation of traditions is a standard course of action in this process in which the construction of religiously justified, national, and nationalistic ideologies play central roles.

At this point, another author, Dietmar Rothermund, in my view, undertakes the critical methodological step forward toward clarification. Rothermund, a historian who studies modern India and especially the ideology of Hindu nationalism, focuses on the term »traditionalism« in his research.⁵ This is an incredibly useful tool for the analytical separation of

4 In the collection of essays compiled by Hobsbawm and Ranger (1983), *The Invention of Tradition*, the national systems of tradition in various Western nation states are examined in a series of articles for their true historical validity. The studies all come to the conclusion that an immensely large number of those traditions purported to be ancient or often archaic are in reality products of the modern age, specifically, from the end of the 19th century.

5 In a short but programmatic article published in 1989, in which the major theoretical ideas underlying this kind of historical criticism of ideology are summarized, the author establishes that tradition is »lived tradition with all its contradictions and inconsistencies; [politically motivated] traditionalism on the other hand is an

traditions. Rothermund defines »traditionalism« as: »the deliberately selective interpretation of traditions [...], which aims to establish solidarity, and thus either simply denies those elements which are not reconcilable with this aim or apologetically tries to reinterpret them« (Rothermund 1989: 144–145; translation by K.A.)⁶.

Using this basic concept, Rothermund critically analyzes the issues involved in »artificial« and »genuine« tradition, in regional special cases and universal structure, in symbol and idea.

2.3 Dietmar Rothermund

With the concept of »traditionalism«, the author provides a very expedient category for the analysis of genuine and »invented« tradition. In his work from 1970, Rothermund refers to the universal character of traditionalistic constructions that support modern national ideologies:

Traditionalism is a phenomenon that can be observed in many nations in a transitional phase of cultural and political development. Tradition is a many splendoured thing, it encompasses a variety of social structures and ideas which are frequently contradictory. Traditionalism, however, is a conscious attempt at streamlining tradition so as to fit a particular need for a useful past. This need arises when a people wants to acquire a national identity and looks for some common denominator. This common denominator is usually found in a reconstructed tradition of social, cultural and religious solidarity. (Rothermund 1970: 35).

In a more recent publication on this topic, the author refers to the fact »that modern traditionalism is of universal meaning and therefore it is not possible to conceive/describe ›universalism‹ and ›traditionalism‹ as inconsistent contrasts« (Rothermund 1997: 188). Traditionalism plays the crucial role in expressing national identity. Traditionalists select, systematize, and create ideological systems, in which heterogeneous cultural traditions are used to create a homogeneous national ideology. The purpose of this finding of identity is national solidarity, which seeks to reduce social and religious differences. It becomes clear, as Rothermund writes, »that the finding of identity for the purpose of solidarity is the goal of ›traditionalists‹« (Rothermund 1989: 147).

Traditionalism in some regard resembles nativism of cultural anthropology – e.g., in the »attempt to re-establish a ›pure‹ tradition« (Rothermund 1989: 145) – but it is per se an instrument of political ideology that strives for national

ideology, a mental construction – and therefore often conflicts with lived tradition« (Rothermund 1989: 144; translation by K.A.).

6 Original text: »die bewusst selektive Traditions-Interpretation [...] die Solidaritätsstiftung zum Ziel hat und deshalb solche Elemente der Tradition, die mit diesem Ziel nicht vereinbar sind, entweder schlicht verleugnet oder aber apologetisch umzudeuten versucht.«

consensus. In the search for a concrete example of a »traditionalistic« linkage between the shaping of identity and the creation of solidarity the author takes on the ideas of the Indian national revolutionist Vinayak Damodar Savarkar (see Rothermund 1997: 174 – 181).

Savarkar's nationalism centers in the conception of »Punjabhumi«, a Sanskrit neologism, which literally is translated as »the country (*bhumi*), in which one gains religious merit (*punya*)« (Rothermund 1989: 146). This expression implicates »that this opportunity is only given to this particular country, India.« Rothermund continues as follows:

This way, Savarkar succeeded in finding some common grounds for the characteristics of the modern territorial nation state, which corresponded to the Indian tradition. Here the linkage between identity shaping and solidarity creation becomes particularly clear. With a clear and simple definition of the »Hindu's« identity a comprehensive solidarity is constituted. But at the same time an obvious (social) exclusion results from this: The Indian Muslim, who naturally cannot regard India as his »Punjabhumi«, is excluded from this solidarity. (Rothermund 1989: 146)⁷

At the very least, this description of a »religiously justified traditionalism of solidarity« will catch a Japanologist's attention, because the structures of modern Japanese religious nationalism can be found here: the Japanese *shinkoku* (»land of the gods«) and the Hinduist Punjabhumi seem to be almost interchangeable. Rothermund (1997: 185) also remarks – with reference to the research in Japanese studies – that one can characterize the theories of Atsutane Hirata as »best-quality traditionalism of solidarity«.

3. Milestones

As becomes clear from the works of Chamberlain, Hobsbawm, and Rothermund, it is not possible to deal with religion and especially with modern State Shintō without clear reference to history as a dynamic process. Thus, some factors relevant to Japanese cultural history will be discussed now to provide a solid basis for a more detailed look at the matter.

7 Original text: »Es gelang Savarkar auf diese Weise, die Charakteristika des modernen territorialen Nationalstaats auf einen Nenner zu bringen, der der indischen Tradition entsprach. Die Verbindung von Identitätsfindung und Solidaritätsstiftung wird hier besonders deutlich. Mit einer klaren und einfachen Definition der Identität des »Hindus« wird eine umfassende Solidarität begründet. Dabei ergibt sich aber auch eine ebenso klare Ausgrenzung: Der indische Muslim, der selbstverständlich Indien nicht als sein »Punjabhumi« betrachten kann, ist von dieser Solidarität ausgeschlossen.«

3.1 *A Brief Outline of Ancient Japanese History (Until 1868)*

State Shintōist dogma explaining the foundation of the Japanese empire, which is ascribed to the mythical first emperor Jimmu *Tennō*, who is said to have established his reign in 660 BC, was viewed as fact in modern Japan until the end of the Pacific War. Declarations of this kind can still be heard in and outside of Japan today, and the day of the »National Foundation« (February 11) has been elevated to a national holiday once more.

Despite this fact, it has been archeologically and historically proven that this national foundation by a »Jimmu *Tennō*« is only a legend, which has nothing to do with historical facts. Historical research shows that the Japanese state developed only gradually, as did the Japanese language. Only approximately 1000 years after the fictitious founding year of 660 BC can we talk of a state developing out of several small principalities in Japan. This state developed its basic form in the 5th century, through its contact with China.

Through this contact, the Japanese rulers obtained – besides Buddhism – also Confucianism, and with it the methods of ruling a central state. From then on, the Japanese rulers called themselves »divine ruler« (*Tennō*), thereby following the Chinese model, and claimed sovereign rule sustained by a host of civil servants. Yet, in contrast to China, where the power of the son of heaven was rested on a mandate from heaven (which theoretically could also be withdrawn), the *Tennō* and his family based their reign solemnly on their alleged heavenly descent: they regarded themselves part of the direct lineal succession of the mythical deities of heaven, especially of the sun goddess Amaterasu Ōmikami. This legitimization is basically still valid today. Although the emperor renounced his own divinity on January 1, 1946 (declaration of *ningen sengen*), yielding to the pressure of the victorious powers, the current *Tennō* Akihito is officially regarded as the »125th *Tennō*« in this direct lineal succession, which goes back to the sun goddess. The religious-genealogic ideology can be seen here in its most obvious form.

3.2 *The Modern Age*

The history of modern Japan began with a paradox. At the start, which is axiomatically set to the year 1868, was an event, which seems anything but »modern«: the Meiji restoration. For in that year, the political and social order that marked Japan during the Tokugawa period, came to an end, and the Meiji restoration of 1868 – based on the idea of the reinstatement of an alleged archaic divine emperorship – thus began.

If the foundations of modern Japan and its concept of the state are to be discussed, this – apparent – contradiction cannot be ignored. Through the forced opening of the country by the West, the Meiji restoration resulted in the retrospective ideology of »reconstructing« earlier patterns of power.

During the Meiji period, this traditionalistic idea (see discussion above) was transformed into a comprehensive, religiously and politically founded state ideology, which revolved around the formation of a specific Japanese »national polity« (*kokutai*). Until Japan's defeat in 1945, the official concept of the Japanese state was bound to this »shintōistically« based *kokutai* ideology which held the *Tennō* at its very center.

Since the onset of the Meiji restoration, the more »modern« Japan became in regard to technology, science, and economics, the more entrenched the Shintō-based state ideology became in regard to its national self-image. The veneration of the emperor was elevated to a state cult, mandatory for the entire nation, and the emperor became the metaphysical and mystic-mythical nucleus of the nation seen as one big family.

3.3 Legitimation of the Imperial House

Two aspects were crucial in this context: the legitimation of imperial power and the formulation, or fabrication, of a truly Japanese antiquity based on the *kokugaku* nativism of Edo times, especially the way Motoori Norinaga and Hirata Atsutane had imagined the past

Let us go back as far as sources will allow us to go. Here, the oldest written documents of Japan are of key importance. One is the *Kojiki*, »Records of Ancient Matters«, from 712 AD, and another is the *Nihongi*, the »Annals of Japan«, from 720 AD. These works are drafted as historical documents and describe the official version of history from its mythical early beginnings nearly to the time of their recording. At the same time, they are regarded, to a certain extent, to be the »holy books« of Shintō by the traditional circles of Shintō since Motoori Norinaga; this applies especially to the *Kojiki*.

The opening chapters of these books are of particular importance as they set down the mythical traditions of the country and therefore the – even today – religiously binding basis of »official« Shintō. Here, we find reports on the creation of the world, the gods and their deeds, the origin of the imperial house, and the consolidation of its power.

Thus, a basic feature of Japanese mythology can already be perceived: it serves to legitimize the power of the imperial house. This is closely linked to events that occurred during Japanese antiquity, specifically during the 6th, 7th, and 8th centuries. Until that time, the Japanese islands were politically dismembered into a number of local territories, which were each under the jurisdiction of the most powerful family and/or clan (*uji*) of that region. The chiefs of these families did not only have a ruling function, but also presided over their clan territory in religious matters. The genealogies of these families have been handed down through the myths, and of course a spiritually

emphasized position was attributed to the politically most powerful family among them.

Yet the situation drastically changed by the 6th century at the latest. The clans combined to form larger and larger territories – whether voluntarily or by force still remains to be seen – until one clan, the so-called »Sun Dynasty« reached hegemony over Yamato, the Japanese central area in the present-day region of Nara.

The question of state administration for this newly created and yet very instable political entity and for control over this vast territory naturally arose as an existential problem. The solution to this problem was found on mainland China, »the Central Kingdom«, with its dominant culture and art of state. Thereupon, everything that promised to guarantee a consolidation of the polity was systematically introduced to Japan. Bureaucratic structures were installed according to the Chinese role model, a development which even appears quite practicable and reasonable in the modern sense. The state was completely sinicized, that is, set up according to the principles of Chinese culture. And Chinese culture in this context means, for the most part, the doctrines of Confucius and his successors.

At the center of this concept was the ideal state led by an equally ideal ruler, the »son of heaven«. Only a truly virtuous ruler could secure the prosperity of the state, because ruler and state are deeply intertwined in a mystical respect. If the emperor lost his individual virtue or turned away from the right path, then he could not only be dethroned, but the people even had the moral obligation to dethrone this ruler who was now dangerous to the polity. These ideas were clearly expressed by Confucian philosopher Mencius and came to Japan as a result of Japan's pervasion with Chinese ideas.

Significantly, it was this one point – the possible dethronement of an emperor – where Japan did not follow the Chinese model. The inertia of the old way of clan-thinking of the »Sun Dynasty«, which now ruled the whole country, was too strong to accept the idea of this loss of power, even if legally sanctioned. The Japanese rulers, called *Tennō* or, »divine ruler« by that time, regarded themselves as being on the same level as the Chinese emperor, and in fact even superior, and the imperial court systematically devised its own form of legitimation of imperial power, which deliberately disassociated itself from Confucianism.

This legitimation was created in the myths that were handed down by the ruling family, which reported the divine origin of the primogenitor of the imperial house and in which the living emperor is manifested as a direct descendant of the sun goddess. According to these legends, the sun goddess commanded the first human emperor and his descendants to rule over the land of Japan for all time and with only the members of a single dynasty

(*shinchoku*). A change in dynasty, as was common in China, was never to take place, and never were they allowed to renounce their claim to power.

This is the »political purpose« to which Ōbayashi Taryō (1982: 135), for example, refers to in his definition of Shintō, which basically defines the Japanese concept of a ruler that was developed by the philosophers at the Japanese imperial court in the 7th century in opposition to the superior Chinese cultural influence. The more the state became formally sinicized, that is, pervaded by Chinese elements, the clearer the image of a particular Japanese emperor in the sense of a descendant of divine nature became. Thus, everything was derived and received its meaning from him and/or from his divine ancestors. This deification of the emperor and eventually of the whole country is the essence of what is described by the word *Shintō*, the »way of the gods of Japan«. »The meaning of the term Shintō can clearly be [...] comprehended«, ascertains Nelly Naumann (1970: 13, translation by K.A.), »in the ideal concept of the Japanese divine emperorship, which comprises the divineness of the reigning emperors and their ruling mandate, which was bestowed upon them by the sun goddess.«⁸

This system, usually referred to as the »great tradition« of Shintō (a large part of folk belief is left out here), was born of the cultural confrontation between Japan and a vastly more advanced foreign culture, which was also considered to be superior by the Japanese. Nevertheless, Japan tried to adopt Chinese ways. An acculturation of these foreign cultural assets was possible without risk as long as the one thing of central importance, in this case the ruling interest of the imperial court, remained untouched. The rulers, who stimulated this process, were all devout Buddhists. However, Shintō supplied them with the political and metaphysical justification of their power, which laid beyond the bounds of Chinese state thinking.

Thus, in regard to the nature of Shintō, a basic political and legitimizing function is apparent from the very beginning.

However, it was not until the Japanese medieval period that an independent theology of Shintō developed. Although the emperor lost his direct ruling power to the warrior aristocracy and the *bakufu*, which nominally ruled on the behalf of the imperial house and was able to maintain this rule to a large extent until 1869, the increasingly distinctive belief of Japan as a country under the special protection of the gods, the *shinkoku* (»land of the gods«), spread within circles of Shintō theology. Through the origin myths, radical proponents of this concept eventually believed in not only a divine descendance of the imperial house, but even in the divinity of

8 Original text: »Die Bedeutung des Wortes Shintō kann [...] konkret erfaßt werden in der Idealvorstellung des japanischen Gott-Kaisertums, welche die Göttlichkeit der regierenden Kaiser und ihren von der Sonnengöttin verliehenen Herrschaftsauftrag umfaßt.«

the entire Japanese nation. For them, Japan was innately different from all other nations, being endowed with a unique, indigenous spirit – *Yamato damashii*, the »spirit of Yamato«. Thus, the Shintō based – or rather with Shintō identified – religious nationalism and traditionalism of modern Japan was born.

With this basis, Shintō theology turned its influence again toward politics at the start of the 18th century at the latest, when it began to shape the initial confrontations of Japan with the major European powers and, especially, with America.

4. Modern Mythological Research

From the second half of the Meiji period to the end of the Pacific War, Japanese mythology represented the spiritual basis of the modern Japanese state, its specific polity (*kokutai*), and State Shintō in general. The modern Japanese ideology of an incomparable »uniqueness« of its polity (*kokutai*), developed mainly by the Mito school of the Tokugawa period, was based solely on the legitimation offered by court mythology, which had been handed down in the records since the 8th century. An objective scientific study of these myths, especially from the perspective of critical cultural-historical comparison, inevitably had to clash with this sacrosanct state self-image, as can be illustrated by any number of cases. Any evidence of connections between the indigenous mythology and the traditions of the continental mainland or the southern archipelago would have shaken up the doctrine of an independent Japanese »divine country«.

Therefore, the importance of a serious comparative study of mythology during the post-war period cannot be overestimated. Instead of dogmatic recapitulations of the origin of the Japanese people and its ruling family, the realization of an extraordinarily complex and historically widely differentiated ethnogenesis and early nation building now became possible.

In light of these comparative analyses, the existence of formerly unrelated mythical groups within the total mythological narrative could be documented, which indicated, in the end, the originally heterogeneous structure of Japanese religions. This branch of analytical and comparative mythological research has only been truly possible since the end of World War II. One of its founders, scholar Tsuda Sōkichi, still had to endure retaliatory measures before and during the war, because contrary to the binding doctrine of that time, he did not regard the myths as historically correct records that legitimized the eternal power of the imperial court, as the *kokugaku* and later nationalists postulated. Instead, he disputed the foundation of the empire by »Jimmu Tennō« in the year 660 BC, a topic which is still widely accepted as a historical fact today, and explained the purely legendary character of these records.

Thus, since the end of the war, research on Japanese mythology and Shintō in general received an enormous impetus, and the way to an ideologically unbiased analysis finally opened. The discernment of the original heterogeneity of the mythical totality, very well organized in the literary records of the old sources, can be regarded as the most important result of comparative mythological research. It was realized that the Japanese myths were unique and without parallels in regions outside of Japan in only a few rare cases. And it also turned out that individual mythical episodes, e.g. the records of the origin of death, were also essentially part of the mythologies of neighboring cultures, such as China, Korea, and the Malay-Polynesian region. This resulted in the complete scientific deconstruction of State Shintō and its fundamental ideological basis.

The enlightening effect of this scientific research cannot be overestimated. Without the critical, cultural-historical, and comparative analyses of Japanese mythology,⁹ the dogmatic doctrines of the prewar political Shintō would have remained unchallenged today. These studies recognized the extremely complex and historically graded genesis of the Japanese culture and religions, whose origins were liberated from any artificially constructed and ideologically motivated ethno-centric isolation, and were put into a general framework, not only of East Asian history but of the whole history of mankind. The notion of the »homogeneity« of Japan, which was ideologically rather than religiously founded and was rooted in the traditionalistic (see above) constructions of premodern times, can therefore no longer be sustained. Japan can be considered an »island country« (*shimaguni*) geographically, but certainly not culturally!

Science has been able to document that certain mythical themes, which were interwoven into the systemized court mythology during historical times, originated from different ethnic groups that settled on the Japanese islands from the Asian mainland, Southeast Asia, and the South Seas during prehistorical times, thereby illustrating to the initial heterogeneity of the Japanese culture(s) and religion(s).

It goes without saying that the discovery of »foreign« – that is, Korean, southern Chinese, or Indonesian – elements within the Japanese mythology is not just of academic interest, but affects the very essence of the ideological self-image of Shintō as an explicit ethnocentric religious system and is therefore highly political in its implication.

Within this context, the mythological narratives themselves give perfect hints to understanding the original state of »religion and power« as well as the cultural heterogeneity in early Japan.

⁹ See, for example, Matsumura 1954–1958 ; Naumann 1971 and 1988; Ōbayashi 1973 and 1988.

A very good example is the »Izumo myth cycle« as viewed in the context of Japanese mythology. The Izumo myths open the door for a fascinating aspect of the whole problem of continuity vs. discontinuity in Shintō as well as of the cultural, regional, and political heterogeneity during Japanese history.

4.1 *Izumo Mythology*¹⁰

The *Kojiki* contains a myth cycle about the deity Susanoo and her descendant Ōkuninushi, the »ruler of the great land«, in which Amaterasu, the ancestress of the imperial house, does not play any role. This complex narrative, woven into the strand of mythological chronology, takes place in the landscape of Izumo. In this description of the otherwise wild and heady god Susanoo, the bad and violent aspects of his character are downplayed, and he appears in a considerably friendlier light. His status as the divine ruler of Izumo is eventually taken over by Ōkuninushi.

The deities of the Izumo line appear in the sources as so-called »terrestrial deities«, whereas those of the Amaterasu line pertain to the »heavenly deities«. The assembly of the heavenly gods decided to send a representative down to earth in order to demand heavenly rule on earth, a mythic episode called the »transfer of the land«, *kuniyuzuri*, which is frequently interpreted in historical terms as a clash between the independent region of Izumo and the new central state of Yamato. Several divine messengers are sent, but Ōkuninushi is able to defy them all. Finally, the subjugation succeeds: Ōkuninushi resigns and retreats to his palace in Kizuki. The Kizuki Shrine – today's Great Shrine of Izumo – is considered a historical relic of this divine palace.

After the subjugation of Ōkuninushi, the crucial episode in the imperial legitimation occurs. Amaterasu (Takamimusubi) gives her grandchild Ninigi no mikoto the duty of descending to earth and taking over the rule. No lineage other than that of the sun goddess was to hold sovereignty thereafter. The gods of the Izumo line were thus cast off and put into a subordinated position for the rest of all time.

4.2 *Hirata Atsutane*

It was Hirata Atsutane (1776–1843), probably the most important and also the most radical ideologist of Restoration Shintō, who played a major ideological role in associating the topics of »Izumo«, »legitimation of power«,

¹⁰ Much research on the mythology of Izumo has already been carried out; cf. *int. al.* Ishizuka (ed.) 1986; Itō 1973; Matsumae 1976; Matsumura 1958; Mishina 1971; Mizuno 1994 and 1972; Piggott 1989; Satō 1974; Senge (1968); Shintō Gakkai (ed.) 1968 and 1977; Torigoe 1966; Watanabe 1974.

and »the Other World« with the political and religious struggles in modern Japan (Antoni 1998: 147–148). This fanatic propagandist of »pure Shintō« had astonishingly also picked up aspects of Christian thinking and integrated these into his concept of Shintō (Odrönic 1967: 34), seeing an analog to Izanagi and Izanami in Adam and Eve; his reading of Christian texts possibly also influenced his vision of a life after death.¹¹ In Hirata's theology, the counterpart to the visible world, which according to *kokugaku* theology was ruled by Amaterasu herself, was to be found in the realm of the invisible, hidden world, in which no one other than the main deity of Izumo, Ōkuninushi, was regarded as ruler by him and other *kokugaku* theologians.¹² According to Hirata, Shintō ranked higher than all other religions and the divinity Musubi no kami (i.e. Takamimusubi) was the creator of all things; for him, the main divinities of other religions were therefore nothing but local manifestations of this Japanese deity of creation (Odrönic 1967: 35). In his work *Yūgenben*, for example, Hirata remarks on the relationship between the divinities (Takami) Musubi and Ōkuninushi:

When one grows old and dies, one's body will return to dust, but one's spirit (*tamashii*) will not disappear. Returning to the Hidden Realm (*kakuriyo*), it will be subject to the reign of Ōkuninushi no Ōkami, accept his commands, and from Heaven it will protect not only its descendants but all those related to it. These are the »hidden matters« (*kakurigoto*) of man, and this is the Way established by Musubi no Kami and governed by Ōkuninushi no Kami. It is for this reason that the [*Nihon Shoki*] states: »The hidden matters constitute Shinto.«¹³

The problem of Ōkuninushi being the god of the underworld played a surprisingly major role in one of the most complicated matters of religious and political struggles of the Meiji period, the so called »Pantheon Dispute«, an incident that marked a milestone in the development of State Shintō in modern Japan.¹⁴

Besides these questions concerning political theology and the development of State Shintō, there is another major problem in this respect that de-

11 For this topic cf. also Harold Bolitho's observations (2004).

12 Cf. especially the work of Hara Takeshi (1996: 36–66), in which he deals with Hirata's contribution to the development of the »ideology of Izumo« in detail.

13 Quoted from Kamata 2000: 305.

14 Since 1875, the Shintō clergy was split among themselves by the so called pantheon dispute (*saijin-ronsō*, cf. Hardacre 1989: 48ff.). The head priest of Great Shrine Izumo, Senge Takatomi (1845–1918) attacked the predominant role of Ise-jingū, and he demanded that the main deity of Izumo Shrine, i.e. Ōkuninushi no mikoto, should be included into the state-official pantheon as the lord of the underworld. His colleague at Ise-jingū, Tanaka Yoritsune (1836–1897) declined such a request. This cumulated into a dispute which eventually split the Shintō circle into two camps.

mands further research: why was Atsutane Hirata, like the *kokugaku* scholars Motoori Norinaga (1730–1801) and Hattori Nakatsune (1757–1824) before him, convinced that the god Ōkuninushi of Izumo should be the god of the Underworld? A thorough analysis of this question still remains a desideratum, although in recent times, a few works on this problem have been published, e.g. Mark McNally's dissertation (1998) on Hirata Atsutane and the so-called »*Sandaikō* debate«. But it should be noted here that Hattori Nakatsune's major work *Sandaikō* has been a topic of Western research on Shintō for a long period of time, as the publications of Ernest Satow (1882) and of Harry Harootunian one century later (1988) show. In a recent article, Endō Jun (2002), a scholar of Shintō history, gave a comprehensive account of the underlying cosmological strata. In his contribution entitled »The Cosmology of Shintō and National Identity in Modern Japan«, Endō states that there was an urgent need for Shintō to present a theology concerning the Other World (*takai*) in the Meiji era, because Buddhism – the most popular religion at that time – offered salvation after death. As a matter of fact, Endō continues, this kind of Shintō theology had already started to be formulated in the first half of the 19th century, before the Meiji Restoration. The purpose of Endō's research was, therefore, to review the development of these theologies and to examine their variations in the Meiji era. That these problems are not limited to theological thought in the modern or Edo period is shown by the works of Bernhard Scheid (2001 and 2002) on Urabe/Yoshida Shintō, which reveal the deep historical roots of the theological and intellectual dichotomy of the divinities Amaterasu vs. Ōkuninushi in terms of the visible vs. hidden worlds.

Thus, this case shows in a perfect matter that the questions of continuity vs. discontinuity in Shintō theological and political thought are not confined to modernity or even to the Edo period, but extend back to the days of antiquity. I hope to present in the near future a review article on the theological, ideological, and political aspects of Ōkuninushi as the god of the Underworld.

5. Résumé

The »modern age« in Japan did not start suddenly in 1868. The country did not slumber peacefully in the darkness of late-medieval feudalism before the Meiji restoration, waiting for enlightenment by the West. The intellectual framework of the Japanese modernism were already set up in principle by intellectual circles during the Edo period, and it was during the Meiji period when they were put into practice, blended together with the concepts of modernity imported from the West. Without the knowledge of premodern developments, the formation of the modern Japanese empire should be considered a miracle.

As mentioned earlier, Basil Hall Chamberlain published his controversial article on Shintō as an »invented religion« in 1912, long before Hobsbawm's

epoch-making research on »invented traditions«. Current research with a historically differentiated approach centers on the question if Shintō can indeed be said to be the metatemporal, immutable, and ethnically defined religion some believe it to be. In his programmatic essay on the historic development of Shintō, Kuroda Toshio (1993: 26) notes that this concept of Shintō developed simultaneously with the rise of modern nationalism, starting with *kokugaku* to the onset of Meiji era state Shintō and the separation of gods and Buddhas (*shinbutsu-bunri*). In the face of the ahistoric, holistic, and static view of »Shintō«¹⁵ prevalent today, such a historically founded approach, which is guided by scientific principles, hardly ever manages to affect public opinion in Japan nor abroad. In particular, the problem of how ideological constructions since Meiji times have (often subconsciously) helped to form this view of Shintō still needs to be addressed.

Nonetheless, it is hardly surprising that Chamberlain's elucidating contribution was printed in only one edition of his popular book *Things Japanese*. Demythologizing and deconstructing ideological concoctions is an unpopular pastime whereas myth-friendly generalizations and allegedly holistic expertise tend to find many more followers. Any analysis of the role of Shintō in regard to modernity should indeed start with the contributions made by the Hirata school, then shift to the various Edo period schools of Shintō orthodoxy in historic retrogression. Lastly, it should focus on the attempts at putting into practice the different schemes devised since the Meiji era. Yet such a philologically and historically conscious approach is difficult to pursue. As Chamberlain polemically protests, the only solution is to thoroughly scrutinize the body of current, authentic traditions. In order to be able to detect and recognize modernity's constructions at all, we need to take a good look at the »unedited« version of history, that is, at what has been passed down in the shape of literary and documentary texts from classical and ancient Japan. Only then will we get a good idea of the extent to which history has been edited and revised since Edo and Meiji times, making pre-modern Japan vanish behind a screen of dust. As has been recognized in regard to the Chinese history of ideas, there is a need to purge the texts of Chinese classics of the manipulations of the Han epoch. In my view, the significance of the Meiji era as an epoch of intense »re-editing« and distortion of pre-modern Japanese history has not yet been sufficiently appreciated, as illustrated, for example, by the events surrounding the *shinbutsu bunri* edicts of 1868. In the present situation, with Japan falling victim to the reverberations of its own self-image while being encouraged to assume a position of further isolation by the demands of a culturalist debate, Chamberlain's words of warning take on special significance. Regarding this question, all exponents of

15 The concept of Shintō as an ahistoric Japanese national religion has also been endorsed by researchers of Japanese folklore, prominent among them Yanagita Kunio (*koyu shinko*); cf. Kawada 1992 and Göbel 1991: 40, 44 *et seq.*

Japanese studies with a historically critical approach are called upon to make their contribution to improving our knowledge.

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