

SHINTOISM: NATURE'S OWN RELIGION

Akiko Kobayashi*

1. Introduction

Japan is a nation of islands that are strewn in the Pacific Ocean, and is a country of mountain ranges, which run from North to South traversing the archipelago. The sources of its rivers that flow like a network of blood vessels lie in these mountain ranges. The island nation of Japan is a land of lakes, forests and water sources, and a land of rice cultivation.

In the Jomon period (from circa 800 to 300 BCE) the people's life was based on fishing and harvesting shellfish. Remains from this period have been found in many parts of Japan, and it has been discovered that the people of that time practiced a primitive, religion based on nature and worship of nature. The word 'Shinto' is derived from two Chinese words, namely, *Shin*, meaning God or spirit, and *Tao* or *Do*, meaning way. Therefore, Shintoism means the way of gods. The Japanese designation of this religion is *Kamino Michi*, the way of *Kami*. In the period mentioned above, the Japanese worshipped the nature together with the spirits of the ancestors. There was also some rudimentary concept of God in the concept of *Kami*, who, it was believed, was God of goodness and also of evil. Buddhism came to Japan in the sixth century CE. In the ninth century CE there were earnest efforts to fuse these two religions together. From this period onwards Shintoism and Buddhism grew and worked together. This fusion is known as the *Ryobu Shinto*, the two-sided Shinto. But in the course of time Buddhism dominated Shintoism. However, in the eighteenth century there was a mighty renaissance of Shintoism. In 1868 Shintoism was accepted and proclaimed as the State religion of Japan. This was instrumental for the unification of Japan and for fostering patriotism and nationalism among the people. Of course, it has imbibed influences from Confucianism, Taoism and Buddhism. After the Second World War Shintoism lost its status as State religion. Religious centres and shrines were removed from the State supervision and ownership.

*Mrs. Akiko Kobayashi has served as the priestess of Meiji shrine of Tokyo. Now she is the priestess of the Shinto shrine in Goryo, Japan.

Strictly speaking Shintoism does not have sacred scriptures. But there are some texts, which the Japanese consider as holy. The contents of these books are mixture of religious principles and concepts, and texts that promote patriotism and explain the national history. Thus the book *Kojiki* (712 CE) is a chronicle of ancient events, *Nihongi* (720 CE) is historical review of Japan till 697 and *Yengishiki* (927 CE) is book of religious observances.

The religious allegiance in Japan is very loose and ambiguous. Many Buddhists would confess that they consider themselves also as Shintoists. Likewise many Shintoists have no hesitation to designate themselves as Buddhists. However, we may say that there are around three million Shintoists in Japan. As is clear, this is only an approximation.

2. Shinto and Rice Cultivation

The unique form of religion known today as Shinto or Shintoism came into existence after the rice cultivation was introduced in Japan. A feature of rice cultivation in Japan is that the rice fields are created using an irrigation system from the ample water resources of the river systems. The people of that time were able to grow rice based on their instinctive knowledge of the complex climate and their detailed understanding of the subtle shifts in the weather acquired by observing the changes in the seasons. The climate of Japan is mild and blessed with plentiful rain, both good conditions for the cultivation of rice. However, at the same time, Japan is frequently plagued by natural disasters such as typhoons, torrential rain and consequent floods, cold spells and droughts.

In order to grow rice in such a climate, it was essential to create a network of paddy fields fed by irrigation systems that can be regulated according to the changes of seasons and climate. This was only possible with the cooperation of the entire community and the application of their total technical resources. This was a massive undertaking that the people worked together to achieve, it.

Rice has a higher nutritive and calorie value than other grains, and can serve as basic food for a large number of people. Indeed, rice cultivation is the core element and mainstay in Japan's agriculture, and for

the Japanese, rice is the source of life itself. The yearly work cycle and prayers for a good harvest extend from planting and germination of the rice shoots to harvesting the crops. The religious culture and customs built around this ceremony and celebration of rice cultivation can be designated of as the origin of Shinto religion.

The awe and reverence the Japanese feel toward nature come from the fact that the elements of nature have two aspects: destructive and protective. The elements can sometimes rage in fury and are beyond the control humans. This face of nature is awe-inspiring. At the same time elements support, sustain and protect life, growth and reproduction, and therefore, man feels love and gratitude towards nature for the bounty it provides. Thus, the feelings of the Japanese people towards nature are based on these two aspects of their relationship with it, awe and gratitude.

The Japanese believe that the multitude of the wonders of nature and its many aspects have a sacredness and mystery of their own. Nature and elemental world are sacred and divine. The Japanese attribution of divinity and sacredness to nature and elements is evidently exemplified and eminently manifested in their attitude to the cultivation of rice and in the ceremonies and celebrations related to rice cultivation.

3. Festivals of Nature

The festivals of Shinto start with the "Toshigoi no Matsuri" (a religious event to pray for the healthy growth of rice during the year, held in the beginning of the year), and extend to the festival of thanks giving for the rice harvest in the autumn. Festivals are held several times after the sowing of rice, and they match to the stages of growth of the rice. Shinto rituals and events, each with its own special regional features, are held in every district centering on the shrines.

In today's, Japan there is a sharp decrease in the number of farms, and Japan depends on imported rice for 70% of the food consumed.

The delicate touch, the reverential attitude and psychological attachment needed for rice farming gave rise to the sense of oneness with nature. The farmer feels that he is part of rice fields, and the changes in the rice plants reflect also in the life of the cultivator. These attitudes and

sense of sacredness are, unfortunately, showing a tendency of decline due to the lifestyle of present day Japanese. Thus, the Shinto priesthood has developed a sense of urgency and danger. They are closely examining the probable future of mankind, and feel the need to rethink Shinto from the ecological viewpoint.

Shinto, with its close relationship with agriculture, especially rice cultivation, can be thought of as a spiritual approach to nature and as a religion, which preaches the attainment of self-control and consequent self purification and final salvation of human beings in and through the nature.

4. Shinto from the Ecological Viewpoint

"Harmonious coexistence with nature and mutual prosperity" is a key phrase in the Shinto way of life. Thus, Shinto in conceptual level shows the way to two apparently conflicting entities to coexist and prosper at the same time and place without clashing with each other, namely, man and nature. For example, man's role is to manage and conserve the mountains and water, and build paddy fields. This also requires mankind to match its life cycle to the cycle of the seasons of the year rather than trying to rule and destroy nature. Man has to adapt to and adopt the rhythm of life in the nature. In this way, it is possible to achieve sustained harmony. Rice cultivation in Japan is not simply a process of producing food for human consumption and extracting nourishment for humans by force from nature. Rather, it is an act of worship and entails human involvement in the nature for one's own spiritual well being and physical growth. Therefore, it is the bounden duty of humans to create an environment in which the nature is loved, cared and respected.

People in Japan used to cut down trees and use the timber. However, they always planted new trees and they did not strip the hills and mountains bare of vegetation. The sources of the water for paddy fields come from the mountains, and that is where Shinto shrines were built. In ancient days a Shinto shrine without a bounteous and luxuriant nature around it was almost unthinkable. Trees and plants were essential parts of a shrine. The surrounding forest areas were considered to be sacred to the gods and these trees are never touched. Not only were these sacred areas

protected, but the people in those days also maintained the mountains and forests in such a way that they preserved water sources.

Every year in the spring, the farmers held a feast with rituals and ceremonies to invite the mountain gods down to their villages and they worshiped them as the gods of the rice fields. They asked the gods to protect their rice until autumn, the period when the rice is harvested. After the rice crop had been harvested, they held another feast in which they asked the gods to return to the mountains. These Shinto ceremonies are a form of the wisdom of the ancient people in which they expressed their intimate relation to nature and wanted to inculcate this healthy attitude to the succeeding generations. In these particular feasts in which they invoked the mountain gods to come down to the village and stay with them till the rice is harvested are symbolic of a deeper dimension of their life and activities. These rituals in fact, are symbols and signs of the life-giving water flowing from the mountains to their fields and protecting and nourishing the rice plants. Thus they transposed the cycle of water circulation, needed for rice cultivation, into the form of these ceremonies, and considered them very precious and of great value

In order to coexist with nature, the yearly cycle of life, death and the regeneration, human beings had to exercise strict self-control. They believed they should not seek to plunder the nature, the home of the gods. They should restrict themselves to tap the natural resources only in the measure that could be regenerated, and they tailored their lives within this framework. They always exercised moderation and made this a rule of life, and they always lived in a state of constant awareness of nature.

We feel that this Shinto-wisdom is relevant to life today. We must all realize that this earth of ours has very limited resources, and all life forms, including human beings, have to complete their life cycles in nature. Thus, now more than ever, we must all comprehend this truth and reform our present way of life for the sake of the future of the race. This is the message of Shinto.

Now, I would like to mention "Amaterasu Ohmikami", the supreme Goddess among all the deities and gods of Japan.

5. "Amaterasu Ohmikami" and the "Way" to the Cultivation of Rice

"Amaterasu Ohmikami" is the sun goddess and the ancestral deity of the Imperial household. There are many interpretations on the subject of "Amaterasu Ohmikami", mythological, theological and philosophical. In this paper, I would like to focus on "Amaterasu Ohmikami" from the viewpoint of a Shinto priestess. According to the *Kojiki*, "Amaterasu Ohmikami" was formed from the left eye of her father, "Izanagi". "Izanagi" and "Izanami" were a married couple, and they were also the gods who gave birth to the land of Japan and created its nature. "Amaterasu Ohmikami" was entrusted by her father with the rule of "Takama no Hara" (the plane of high heaven).

The Shinto faith places the utmost importance to the fact that "Amaterasu Ohmikami" showed us how to cultivate rice. "Amaterasu Ohmikami" sent her grandson to earth with the mission of maintaining peace in Japan. She gave him a sheaf of rice ears (seeds) and told him to use them to rule the country by cultivating rice plants. According to "Nihon Shoki", "Amaterasu Ohmikami" also gave the people barley, millet, soyabean, red adzuki beans and silk worms. It is also very interesting to note that, in addition to giving human being clothing and food, "Amaterasu Ohmikami" also cultivated rice and worked on a loom herself. Thus, though she is the supreme deity, she cultivated rice in the fields of "Takama no Hara" to offer rice to the gods as their food and wove clothing for the gods, in addition to the performance of the duties of the supreme deity. "Amaterasu Ohmikami" was also a priestess.

We can discern an important fact here. That is to say, "Amaterasu Ohmikami" was not only the supreme deity and goddess of grain; she was also a teacher. She taught human beings how to grow rice, the "Way" of rice cultivation, the right way of the harvesting process, a complex and time consuming process. Thus, we see that the cultivation of rice was the start of Shinto and formed the foundations of Japan's culture. Shinto was born from the womb of the land of Japan, and this land was the mother and matrix where the Japanese grew rice. Rice was life for the ancient Japanese.

Here I used the expression "the Way of rice cultivation." In Japanese, the term "Way" (*Do*) encompasses the act, method and rules relating to the creation of tangible and intangible things empowered by the human spirit. This concept also includes the human spirit (soul) per se. Therefore, 'Way' can mean the human spirit and the power of the human spirit with which humans execute spiritual and material things.

The word "Way" (*Do*) is also used to describe traditional arts, skills and techniques as well as the martial arts. Thus, this concept covers the arts such as flower arrangement (*ka-do*), calligraphy (*sho-do*), aroma appreciation (*ko-do*), the tea ceremony (*sa-do*), Japanese fencing (*ken-do*) and Japanese art of self-defense (*ju-do*). Even in modern times, craftsmen, artisans and merchants who have mastered their trades, still use the word "Way" (*Do*) to designate their specialization.

The word (*Do*) is also used for "techniques and technologies"; but it then implies total dedication of heart and soul.

In addition to signifying human spirit and its creations, arts and crafts, techniques and technologies, "Way" (*Do*) also has a religious connotation. It is the path/way that leads to the gods. To rephrase this, it means the "Way" people strive to fulfil the commands the gods place on each human being and accept these commands as the will of the gods. "Amaterasu Ohmikami" engaged in rice cultivation in heaven, and this skill was transferred to the human beings on earth as their "Way" of life. This, then, is the "Way" of rice cultivation and also the beginning of Shinto. The word "Shinto", in fact, means the way of gods (Shinto = *Shin-do*, the "Way" of the gods).

The most important ceremony in "Takama no Hara" is the "Niiname no Matsuri". This is the autumn harvest festival held at all Shinto shrines. This ancient "Niiname" ceremony is still performed today by the Imperial house with the great solemnity and fanfare.

"Amaterasu Ohmikami" is considered to be an ancestor of the Emperor of Japan, and he himself performs the role of the high priest of this goddess, and in a special ritual he makes an offering to the gods of new rice grown in the paddy fields of the Imperial Palace. Then the Emperor and the gods partake of this sanctified rice.

The sun goddess, her involvement in the life of the people through rice cultivation, her high priest, the emperor, her other priests and especially priestesses: all these have imprinted deep marks in the collective psyche and sub-conscience of the Japanese people. These all are melted together in the minds of the people and is personified as the goddess "Amaterasu Ohmikami".

For more than 1,500 years, "Amaterasu Ohmikami" has dwelt at Ise, a land in deep forests surrounded by many lakes. The unmarried daughter of every Emperor was sent to Ise shrine from the imperial capital to serve as an "Itsukinomiko", high priestess. This meant that she renounced everything in this world and totally dedicated her life to the service of "Amaterasu Ohmikami". She led a life of radical renunciation, self-purification and total surrender to the goddess. The concept of priestesses thus extends from "Amaterasu Ohmikami" to the "Itsukinomiko" imperial daughters, who acted as high priestesses. Seventy-four imperial daughters of the Emperor had served as "Itsukinomiko". Then this custom was abolished at the beginning of the 14th century.

The "Hime-Hiko" system practiced by many clans around the nation ended in ancient times. It was like this: in major shrines young maidens served in the worship and some acted as "Miko" maidens performing ceremonial dances. However, in most cases "Miko" just assisted the priests. Eventually the role of these maidens and priestesses disappeared from the world of shrines (at least superficially). The women who could no longer occupy these positions as priestesses retreated into the world of the private citizens. However, it was like a river flowing underground. The flow has continued and has surfaced in recent times as Shinto priestesses in duty of the shrines.

6. Conclusion

We cannot imagine Shinto religion without its intense and comprehensive relationship with nature. The word 'Shinto' (Shin-do) may mean the way of the gods. But in reality it is the way of the nature and the way to the nature and the way to salvation through nature. A Shinto believer cannot conceive gods beyond and besides the nature. As we have seen, the origin of this religion is deeply rooted in the rituals, celebrations,

customs and traditions related to rice cultivation of the Japanese people. Later priests and priestesses were introduced to officiate many of these communitarian acts. The name 'Shinto-religion' was given to these forms of worship and celebrations.

Most of the religions of the world originated from the mystical-spiritual experience of their charismatic founders. Christ's life, message, death and resurrection gave humanity the Christianity. The Buddha's enlightenment under the Bodhi tree gave birth to Buddhism. Mohammed's experience of divine revelation in the desert cave was the starting point of Islam. Thus Mahavira and Guru Nanak had had radical divine experience or enlightenment; and the result was Jainism and Sikhism. We may not be able to show a founder or date/period of origin for Hinduism. It would be more appropriate to say that the origin of Shinto religion was from the collective experience of the divine through nature of the Japanese people. Therefore, the health and wellbeing of nature is of paramount importance for Shintoism.