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Floating Signifiers: The Plural Significance of the Grand Shrine of Ise and the Incessant Re-signification of Shinto

Fabio RAMBELLI

According to received understanding, the Grand Shrine of Ise (Ise Jingū 伊勢神宮), as the center of the Shinto tradition, plays an essential role in the history of Japanese culture. However, premodern documents concerning Ise Shinto show that such understanding are mostly modern and contemporary results of multiple reinterpretations of Ise's role throughout history. This article proposes a semiotic approach to understand some instances in which aspects of the cultural meanings attributed to the Grand Shrine of Ise—symbolism, rituals, and representations—have been re-contextualized, re-signified, and reinvented. In particular, this article suggests that emphasis on Shinto continuity tends to ignore cultural and discursive contexts and, even more crucially, the distinction between forms (signifiers) and their contents (signified), thus resulting in a more or less voluntary erasure of traces of historical and conceptual change. A semiotic approach will show that much of the Shinto tradition at Ise consists in the preservation, transmission, and repetition of ritualized *forms* without clearly defined *meanings*; this aspect in turn has produced an ongoing “quest for significance” regarding the Shinto tradition in general, and Ise in particular. This paper is a contribution toward a different kind of understanding, open to the diversity and plurality of sources, approaches, and sensibilities that characterize the history of Ise and of Shinto in general, away from reductionism that characterizes received discourses on Shinto.

Keywords: Shinto (history), Ise shrine, *shikinen sengū* (periodic dismantling and reconstruction of Ise shrines), Maruyama Masao, Yamaguchi Masao, Shinto architecture, Japanese intellectual history (Shinto), semiotics (Japanese religions), Shinto (ontology and theory of representation), Japanese cultural heritage, cultural semiotics (Japan)

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Japanese gods do not appreciate true things; they do not accept things that are not fabricated by means of a device.

Yamaguchi Masao¹

Ise's cultural centrality is normally understood in terms of tradition and continuity, as something that does not change over the ages; if change does occur, it only affects superficial, lesser aspects of the tradition. In addition, the history of Ise is also, especially since the nativist (*kokugaku* 国学) interventions in the Edo period, the history of a quasi-normative discourse about Shinto in general.

At least in some cases, such forms of received understanding of Ise, and Shinto in general, are related to deeply felt beliefs about ethical values and the nature of Japanese civilization. As individual beliefs, more or less inscribed in intersubjective normative discourses about Shinto and Japaneseness, they are perfectly legitimate. However, individual or intersubjective beliefs should not be the sole guides to the scholarly study of the history of Ise.

Even a cursory look at premodern documents about Ise Shinto shows clearly that current, received understandings are to a large extent modern and contemporary results of multiple reinterpretations of Ise's role throughout history. In them, emphasis on tradition clearly belies multiple and conflicting palimpsests of re-invention of tradition. In this article, I will try to identify some particularly important instances in which aspects of the cultural meanings attributed to the Grand Shrine of Ise—its symbolism, rituals, and representations—were re-contextualized, re-signified, and reinvented.² I will do so by proposing a methodological reorientation in the ways to envision the history of Ise by outlining the elements of a semiotic approach. Central to such an approach is the distinction between signifiers (perceptual forms and actions), signified (meanings), codes associating the two, and contexts in which signification takes place. I envision semiotics as an open field that addresses issues related to the production, storage, transmission and transformation of signs and texts, including the roles of actors, institutions, and their contexts and ideological backgrounds and implications. In this article, I argue that studies emphasizing continuity tend to ignore cultural and discursive contexts and, even more crucially, the distinctions between forms (signifiers) and their contents (signified), thus resulting in a more or less voluntary erasure of traces of historical and conceptual change.

A striking element that emerges from such a semiotic approach is what we might call a “quest for significance” (both in the sense of meaning and importance) that has engaged scholars, priests, and laypeople. Indeed, much of the Ise Shinto tradition consists in the preservation, transmission, and repetition of ritual and ritualized *forms* without clearly defined *meanings*. While such emphasis on forms might well be one of the features of Shinto in general—as distinct, for example, from a Buddhist emphasis on understanding and, therefore, on meaning—, commentators have nevertheless struggled to identify a deeper, if not ultimate significance for those forms, which has led to a radical, quasi-fundamentalistic simplification of Ise's role and its significance in the history of Shinto and Japanese religions in general.

1 Yamaguchi 1991, p. 64.

2 In this article, the term “Grand Shrine of Ise” indicates that institution in the modern era. However, I prefer to use “Ise shrines” to refer to Ise in premodern times, when the two shrines (Naikū and Gekū) were independent of and in competition with each other.

While this paper is emphatically not a critique of individual beliefs about Ise or Shinto (I hold no personal beliefs on that, and have no personal commitment to ideals of Japaneseness), it does attempt to provide an alternative framework for the study of Ise and Shinto in general in the hope of contributing to a different kind of understanding, more open to the diversity and plurality of sources, approaches, and sensibilities that characterize the history of Ise and Shinto in general—and away from nativistic reductionism that has characterized quasi-normative discourses on Shinto.

The “Centrality” of Ise: What Exactly Is Ise Central for and to What?

Modern and contemporary accounts agree on the Grand Shrine of Ise’s centrality in Shinto. This centrality is based on the antiquity of the shrine, on its symbolic value as a “starting point” (*genten* 原点) of Japanese civilization, and on its direct connections to the supreme Shinto god, Amaterasu Ōmikami 天照大神 on the one hand, and with her descendant on earth, the Japanese emperor on the other. Thus, received accounts present the Ise shrines as a central junction in discourses connecting the gods, Shinto, the nation state, and the emperor. This understanding is well summarized by a page on the website of the Jinja Honchō 神社本庁 (Association of Shinto Shrines):

Among many Shinto shrines, Ise Jingu, the Grand Shrine of Ise is the most revered shrine in Japan. The compound consists of two primary buildings, the *Kotaijingu* and the *Toyouke-Daijingu*. The *Kotaijingu* is also called “*Naiku*,” where the supreme deity *Amaterasu-Omikami* has been worshipped for 2,000 years, as the predecessor of the Imperial Household and the supreme deity of Shinto.³

The connections between Shinto, Ise shrines, and the emperor are further clarified on another Jinja Honchō web page:

In Shinto, the Emperor of Japan (*Tenno*) is believed to be a descendant of *Amaterasu-Omikami* (the Sun Goddess) who is enshrined in the Grand Shrine of Ise. Since the founding of the nation, *Tenno* himself has conducted Shinto rituals in the Imperial Palace to pray to the deities centering on *Amaterasu-Omikami* for the happiness of the people, for the long continuation of the nation, and for world peace.

There are clergymen and women in the shrines of the Imperial Palace who assist *Tenno* to perform the rites. *Tenno* performs these rites around 40 times a year. This is perhaps why there are some scholars who call *Tenno* “the highest priest” of Shinto.⁴

The passage above reveals a number of “public secrets”: specifically, the Japanese emperor can be considered “the highest priest” of Shinto; he performs religious rituals in the Imperial Palace; and Shinto priests are employed by the Imperial Household Agency to perform religious rituals together with the emperor. Most Japanese people are not aware of any of these facts, or, if they are, they just choose not to pay attention to them because of their delicate

³ At <http://www.jinjahoncho.or.jp/en/ise/index.html> (last checked on May 31, 2014).

⁴ At <http://www.jinjahoncho.or.jp/en/shinto/index.html> (last checked on May 31, 2014).

nature in terms of separation of state and religion as sanctioned by the Constitution.⁵ However, for Jinja Honchō these are essential components in its definition of the Grand Shrine of Ise as a focal point connecting Shinto, the emperor, and the state.

The Ise shrines, on the other hand, do not hesitate to mobilize the German architect Bruno Taut (1880–1938) to stress their own uniqueness and utmost sacredness:

Mr. Bruno Taut, a famous German architect, had compared it with the Pantheon in Greece, saying “This is the greatest of the world’s buildings. It integrates the fragrant Japanese cypress and the miscanthus grass of its roof into a harmonized structure. It leaves all the potential competitors far behind. Little is known of the age when this style was established, and nothing of the men who made it. Perhaps it was created and dropped down from Heaven.”⁶

An important aspect of Ise shrine’s symbolism is its antiquity associated with its continuous and unchanging existence as a highly venerated cult site: “Naiku ... was founded about 2000 years ago. Geku ... was founded about 1500 years ago. [...] Many generations of our ancestors have worshiped at the Jingu, which exists now just as it was at its beginning.”⁷

A particularly important element in this discourse about continuity and unchanging tradition is the ceremony of periodical demolition and reconstruction of the Ise shrines (*shikinen sengū* 式年遷宮) that takes place every twenty years at the Inner and the Outer shrines. The shrine describes this ceremony as follows:

Since late in the 7th century A.D., this ceremonial system, referred to as Shikinen Sengu, has been conducted for 1300 years. The first Shikinen Sengu was performed in the period of the 41st Emperor Jito, the wife of the 40th Emperor Tenmu who established this system. Since then, with only a few exceptions, this ceremonial system has been continued and the 61st Shikinen Sengu was conducted in 1993.⁸

In spite of this emphasis on continuity, this statement does not tell us why the ceremony was established only seven centuries after the supposed creation of the shrine (according to the anachronistic date system based on Japanese mythology and accepted by the shrine); it also downplays the many times in which the ceremony was delayed or canceled altogether.

5 It is interesting to note that the Japanese website of Jinja Honchō is more elusive on the connections of the emperor with Shinto, as it limits itself to mentioning that “at the Imperial Residence, His Majesty the Emperor performs rituals to pray for peacefulness in Japan and among its citizens and for world peace”: see <http://www.jinjahoncho.or.jp/izana/> (last accessed on June 3, 2014).

6 At <http://www.isejingu.or.jp/english/naigu/naigu5.htm> (last checked on May 31, 2014). Bruno Taut, one of the most influential Modernist architects, played an important role in spreading knowledge in the West about Japanese traditional architecture such as Katsura Rikyū 桂離宮 and the Ise shrines, while at the same time contributing to the modernist reevaluation of traditional aesthetic values in Japan. On the latter theme, see Reynolds 2001; Isozaki 2006.

7 From the Grand Shrine of Ise’s official web site in English at <http://www.isejingu.or.jp/english/isemairi/isemairi.htm> (last checked on May 31, 2014).

8 At <http://www.isejingu.or.jp/english/sikinen/sikinen.htm> (last checked on May 31, 2014).

Centrality or Dispersion? Ise in Japanese Religious History

Even though the centrality of Ise as defined above is closely related to the creation of the modern Japanese nation state, the impact of modernism, and postwar transformations, references to Ise (both its symbolism and institutions) can indeed be found in countless texts and documents from the Heian period to the early modern and modern eras. Yet, contemporary statements stressing unbroken continuity with the past are peculiarly oblivious of the past. For instance, in the first half of the twentieth century (and above all in the wartime period), the Grand Shrine of Ise was the top of a nationalized network of shrines connected to the emperor (a lynchpin of what is known as State Shinto or *kokka shintō* 国家神道). During that time, authors were particularly creative in developing new ways to describe centrality from within a larger, international context. Let me present a few examples from various sources dating to the first half of the twentieth century. Scholar of constitutional law Uesugi Shinkichi 上杉慎吉 (1878–1929) wrote:

It is now most clear that the salvation of the entire human race is the mission of our empire. [...] Now if all the world should come to look up to the virtue of our emperor and should come to live under that influence, then there could be light for the future of humanity. Thus the world can be saved from destruction. Thus life can be lived within the realms of goodness and beauty.⁹

Shinto philosopher Katō Genchi 加藤玄智 (1873–1965) stated: “The Emperor is Incarnate Deity and occupies in Japanese faith the position which Jehovah occupied in Judaism.”¹⁰ Another author wrote: “What is the essence or nature of Amaterasu Omikami? It signifies the sublime and mightiest power of the nation, namely the throne” and “represents the divine soul of the ruler of the empire, the Emperor.”¹¹ Kakehi Katsuhiko 笥克彦 (1872–1961), another influential legal scholar, expanded on the role of the emperor thus: “We say the Emperor is like a father and mother to us... We who exist today were born through the august power of the Emperor... Assuming that there were no Emperor, not one of us could by any possibility have been born.”¹² Elsewhere, we find the following argument: “The Emperor is not to be worshipped exclusively by the Japanese, nor to be represented as Emperor of Japan alone. The Emperor governs Japan and is the Emperor of mankind the world over. He rules the universe with Amaterasu-o-Mikami and Taka-mi-Musubi-no-Mikami.”¹³ As we can see, only a few decades ago, the characterizations of the Japanese Emperor and his ties with Ise (through the goddess Amaterasu) were quite different from received discourses today, and Ise was envisioned by some as a quasi-cosmic religious center.

This was not the first time that Ise was imagined as a cosmic center. Earlier, in the middle ages, Ise’s centrality did not concern Shinto—which did not yet exist as an organized discourse, not to mention religion—, but was rather a matter of cosmology. Texts argued that Tenshō Daijin 天照大神 (the medieval name of Amaterasu Ōmikami in Buddhist terminology) was enshrined at Ise because on the bottom of the sea in front of the shrines

⁹ Quoted in Ballou 1945, pp. 182–83.

¹⁰ Ballou 1945, p. 183.

¹¹ Ballou 1945, p. 186.

¹² Ballou 1945, p. 189.

¹³ Ballou 1945, pp. 189–90.

was located a sacred script, the most sacred mantra of the cosmic Buddha Mahāvairocana (*Dainichi no inmon* 大日ノ印文); the exact point where that script was located was in fact the place where the gods Izanami and Izanagi created Japan in order to spread Buddhism.¹⁴ Other texts identified the central pillar of the Outer shrine (*shin no mihashira* 心御柱) with Mount Sumeru, the cosmic mountain at the center of the human world.¹⁵

However, centrality was not the only feature characterizing the Ise shrines. In fact, it is possible to argue that throughout most of its history the symbolism of Ise was associated with dispersion, rather than centrality. Let us consider a few examples of such symbolic dispersion.

The establishment of the Inner shrine (Naikū 内宮) at Ise during the reign of Empress Jitō 持統天皇 in 690 marked a marginalization of Amaterasu, whose main shrine was moved *away* from the court. The *Nihon shoki* 日本書紀 records that Emperor Sujin 崇神天皇 “dreaded the power” of Amaterasu, who at the time was worshiped at the imperial residence; he ordered his daughter Toyosukiiribime no Mikoto 豊鍬入姫命 to worship the goddess outside of the palace, in the village of Kasanui 笠縫 in Yamato.¹⁶ Under the next emperor, Suinin 垂仁天皇, the imperial princess Yamatohime no Mikoto 倭姫命 was entrusted with Amaterasu’s worship. In search for a suitable place to worship the goddess, Yamatohime traveled through the provinces of Ōmi, Mino, and Ise, where she finally enshrined Amaterasu in the present location of the Inner shrine.¹⁷

This marginalization of the Ise shrines and their deities, rather than their centrality, was further emphasized by the scattering away of the three imperial regalia (*sanshu no jingi* 三種の神器). As is well known, only the jewel (Yasakani no magatama 八咫瓊勾玉) is located at the imperial palace, whereas the sword (Kusanagi no tsurugi 草薙の劍) is at the Atsuta shrine 熱田神宮 in Nagoya and the mirror (Yata no kagami 八咫鏡) at the Inner shrine in Ise. Yoshida Kanetomo 吉田兼俱 (1435–1511) even spread the news that the mirror (together with other sacred objects) had fled from Ise to his own shrine, Saijōsho Daigengū 齋場所大元宮, in 1489, and was able to convince Emperor Go-Tsuchimikado 後土御門 (r. 1464–1500). The dispersion of the central symbols of the *imperium* corresponds to the gradual development, from the middle ages until the end of the Tokugawa period, of enthronement rituals (*sokui kanjō* 即位灌頂) to be performed at various temple-shrine complexes for Buddhist monks, shrine priests, and perhaps also laypeople, in what amounts to a vast hollowing out of the imperial institution and the proliferation of its symbolism in various directions away from state authority and political power.¹⁸ In this context, Shinto consecration rituals (*jingi kanjō* 神祇灌頂) claimed to transform the initiand into the “emperor” so that he could realize his kami-nature as a shortcut to becoming aware of his innate buddhahood and thus to becoming a buddha in the present body (*sokushin*

14 On this subject, see Yamamoto 1998.

15 On the cosmic centrality of Ise, see for instance *Bikisho*, especially pp. 505–521; *Keiran shūyōshū*, p. 518c.

16 *Nihon shoki*, entry for Sujin 6 (traditional date: 92 B.C.), in *Nihon koten bungaku taikei*, vol. 67, p. 238; English trans. in Aston 1972, pp. 151–52.

17 *Nihon shoki*, entry for Suinin 25/3 (traditional date: 5 B.C.), in *Nihon koten bungaku taikei*, vol. 67, pp. 269–70; Aston 1972, p. 176. Interestingly, the establishment of the Outer shrine is not mentioned in the *Nihon shoki*. The *Kojiki* limits itself to mentioning the Outer shrine and its deity Toyuuke (sic) (*Kojiki*, p. 127); it has been suggested that this might be a later interpolation.

18 On enthronement rituals, see Matsumoto 2005; Kawakami 2007.

jōbutsu 即身成仏).¹⁹ This form of imperial imagery, widely diffused in the late medieval and early modern periods in Japan by authors involved with the production and circulation of discourses on the kami, was certainly not something that the Meiji government, not to mention today's Jinja Honchō, would have appreciated.

Analogous processes of marginalization and diffusion also affected various premodern understandings and representations of the Grand Shrine of Ise, their deities, symbolism, and rituals. Let us look at a few examples.

In the corpus of texts known as Ise Shinto 伊勢神道 or Watarai Shinto 度会神道, produced by members of the Watarai family, the sacerdotal lineage in charge of the Outer shrine, we notice the adoption of Chinese thought from the Song dynasty to boost the Outer shrine's status, as is particularly evident in the *Ruijū jingi hongen* 類從神祇本源 (1320) by Watarai Ieyuki 度会家行 (1256–1351).²⁰ Subsequently, Confucian authors of the Edo period interested in Japanese matters also attempted to explain Shinto, and Ise in particular, in light of Neo-Confucian ideas.²¹

On the other hand, within the framework of medieval Buddhist discourses about the kami, Buddhist authors from major combinatory cult sites (Hie 比叡/日吉 and Miwa 三輪, among others) stressed the sacred power and magnificence of their own deities in relation to Tenshō Daijin in Ise. Thus, Hie Sannō 比叡山王 texts claimed that the Sannō deity, a Japanese manifestation of Buddha Śākyamuni, was not only identical with Tenshō Daijin, but also the protector of Vulture Peak in India and of Mount Tiantai in China. As the supreme god not only in Japan, but also in India and China, Sannō Daigongen 山王大権現 exceeded by far the glory of the emperor's ancestral deity. Notably, the *Keiran shūyōshū* 溪嵐拾葉集 even maintains that the gods of Hie shrine were unconditioned and absolute, the very essence of Dharma.²² On the Shingon 真言 side of the Buddhist spectrum, authors at Ōmiwa shrine 大神神社 in Yamato stressed the primacy of their deity by claiming that it had been present in Japan since the mythical Age of the Gods, and thus much longer than Tenshō Daijin, who only descended during the reign of emperor Suinin. Ōmiwa authors also emphasized the superior salvific power of their deity and their shrine by claiming that Mt. Miwa 三輪山 was in fact both karmic shape (*eshō* 依正) and Dharma substance (*hottai* 法体) of the deity. This mountain was thus not just the mere physical body of the deity (*shintai* 神体), but the place where becoming Buddha in this very body (*sokushin jōbutsu*) coincides with plants becoming buddhas (*sōmoku jōbutsu* 草木成仏). It was the ultimate overcoming of the distinctions between individual and environment, subject and object: a perfected Buddha-land.²³

Subsequently, Yoshida Kanetomo, the founder of Yoshida Shinto 吉田神道, proposed an original threefold typology of forms of Shinto, in which his own Yuiitsu 唯一 Shinto had the status of "original and fundamental" (*genpon sōgen* 元本宗源), thus surpassing existing combinatory kami cults and even the two shrines of Ise. Specifically, he claimed that his

19 Shinto consecration rituals were based on the elusive text known as *Reikiki* 麗氣記, which is deeply related to the Age of the Gods section in *Nihon shoki* and thus also to the mythical foundations of the *imperium*, Shinto, and Ise. On this subject, see Rambelli 2002b.

20 For a discussion on the role of Chinese thought in Watarai Shinto texts, see Rambelli 2009.

21 For a brief overview of Confucian Shinto, still a little studied subject in the West, see Endō 2003.

22 See *Yōtenki*, pp. 73, 81; *Sange yōryakuki*, pp. 6–7; *Keiran shūyōshū*, p. 414. For a general history of Hie shrine, see Breen and Teeuwen 2010, pp. 66–128.

23 *Miwa Daimyōjin engi*, pp. 95–104; on this subject, and for an English translation of this central text, see Andreeva 2011, pp. 245–95. On the concept of *sōmoku jōbutsu*, see Rambelli 2007, esp. pp. 11–57.

own brand of Shinto was the result of “a direct transmission by the kami, the one doctrine expounded at the time of the creation of the cosmos.”²⁴ In more detail, it was:

a most subtle and obscure transmission that has taken place between Kuni-no-tokotachi-no-mikoto, who is the origin of the incommensurable yin and yang, and Amaterasu-ō-kami. This kami then transmitted it to Ame-no-koyane-no-mikoto. Since that time all the way down to this degenerate age of decadence, this Shinto has drawn on the primeval water of chaos and has not even once been corrupted by a single drop of the Three Teachings [Confucianism, Daoism, Buddhism].²⁵

In this way, Kanetomo tried to bypass centuries of kami discourses, and especially the primacy of the Ise shrines, by claiming to be the sole recipient of the primeval teachings of the first god in the *Nihon shoki*, Kuni no Tokotachi no Mikoto 国常立尊.

Later, during the Edo period, nativist authors, Motoori Norinaga 本居宣長 (1730–1801) *in primis*, endeavored to restore the prestige and supremacy of the Inner shrine of Ise, especially against claims by the Outer shrine, by emphasizing the master narrative of the *Kojiki* and Amaterasu's role in it.²⁶

How can we understand the massive amount of references to Ise in many different texts from different traditions? We can certainly see this phenomenon as an indication of Ise's importance and centrality as a set of signifiers and semiotic formations to be exploited and fashioned. However, this proliferation of discourses also displays the Ise shrines' lack of control over their own symbolism and semiotic systems, which points to Ise's very lack of ideological centrality and to the overall decentralization of Shinto discourses throughout much of Japanese history.

Ise's *Basso Ostinato*

Ise symbolism is normally related to a few basic concepts of Shinto, which we find reiterated in various forms at least since Kitabatake Chikafusa's 北畠親房 *Jinnō shōtōki* 神皇正統記 (1338–43): Japan as a sacred land created by the gods, ruled by an unbroken lineage of emperors, themselves descendants from the main Shinto deity, Amaterasu, who is worshiped at Ise.²⁷ In this way, we find a strong, causal series of connections uniting the kami—above all Amaterasu, Japan, the emperor (or, more precisely, the *imperium* as a symbolic and political system, rather than specific individuals), and the Ise shrines.

This image evokes the characterization of Shinto and ancient myths in general provided by intellectual historian Maruyama Masao 丸山眞男 (1914–96) as an “ancient layer” (*kosō* 古層), or “*basso ostinato*” that pervades Japanese culture and its historical discourses. According to Maruyama, at the background of this stubborn ancient layer there is a “homogeneity,” which “can only be defined exceptional when compared to the other ‘civilized countries’ in the world.” It is this purported homogeneity of Japan that lies at the

24 *Yuiitsu shintō myōbō yōshū*, p. 249. English translation in Grapard 1992, p. 160. On Yoshida Shinto, see also Scheid 2001a, 2001b. On medieval typologies of kami, see also Rambelli 2009, esp. pp. 244–50.

25 *Yuiitsu shintō myōbō yōshū*, p. 239; English translation in Grapard 1992, p. 157.

26 See Motoori Norinaga, *Ise nikū sakitake no ben*, in *Motoori Norinaga zenshū*, vol. 9; see also Motoori 1995.

27 See *Jinnō shōtōki*; see also Varley 1980.

background of this “ancient layer.”²⁸ Maruyama’s argument is very similar to the ideas that constitute the focus of approaches based on Japanese culture’s supposedly fundamental layer (*kisō bunkaron* 基層文化論), an important branch of the expansive discourse known as *Nihonjinron* 日本人論 (theories on the Japanese) or *Nihon bunkaron* 日本文化論 (theories on Japanese culture).

Recently, religious historian Sueki Fumihiko 末木文美士 has resurrected Maruyama’s idea of the “ancient layer,” for which he nevertheless proposes a different interpretation. Sueki stresses that acknowledging the existence of an unchangeable mode of thought that permeates history (Maruyama’s *basso ostinato*) would mean to fall into “metaphysical determinism.” Instead, he suggests that, as ideas are not created out of thin air but depend on unsaid constraints coming to us from the past, the very idea of an “ancient layer” is itself historically produced, not as a “discovery” (which presupposes reified and substantive cultural elements) but rather as a “precipitation” or “deposit” (*chinden* 沈澱) from the past.²⁹ We could say that deposits or residues from the past are elements belonging either to the order of the signifier or to that of the signified, that accumulate and so contribute to determining contemporary and future discursive formations. It would be wrong, however, to take those scattered elements, fragments of past discursive formations, as constituting a whole, which could in turn be envisioned as the core value of a culture. Much of the cultural past is in fact the result of targeted remembering (or, perhaps, de-forgetting?) and reordering of scattered elements from the past on the basis of intersubjective time-maps.³⁰

The original myths of Shinto do emphasize the preference, indicated by Amaterasu and her cohort of heavenly kami (*amatsukami* 天津神) as a whole, for order and purity, which are expressed in terms of conquest and subjugation of preexisting local gods (the earthly kami or *kunitsukami* 国津神) and periodical rites of purification. As we can see, however, the series Amaterasu–Japan–the emperor (the imperium)—the Ise shrines is merely a list of signifiers (names, places, objects, institutions); very little in terms of meaning can be ascertained about them in their original formulations in the *Kojiki* and *Nihon shoki*. A fundamental mistake committed by many interpreters is that of attributing stable, unchanging meanings to this set of apparently stable signifiers. They ignore the multiple recontextualization of both signifiers and signifieds and the incessant activity of code-shifting (associating different sets of signifieds with more or less stable signifiers) that has taken place throughout history. Instead, we should always ask: Is Shinto the same religious field as *jindō* 神道 or *shindō* 神道?³¹ Is “Amaterasu Ōmikami” the same deity as “Tenshō Daijin”? Is Nara period “Japan” the same as the Japan of today? Haven’t the emperor’s role and his institutions changed? Is the enormous amount of institutional, ritual, and doctrinal transformations that affected the Grand Shrine of Ise throughout history less relevant than its continuous existence in the same place? And also, perhaps more fundamentally, what counts, in all these cases, as being the “same”?

Certainly, finding significance in the series Amaterasu–Japan–the emperor (the imperium)—the Ise shrines and the doctrinal, intellectual, and material elements associated

28 Maruyama developed this argument in an essay entitled “Rekishī ishiki to ‘kosō’” 歴史意識と「古層」; now included in Maruyama 1993.

29 Sueki 2006, pp. 2–5.

30 For an analysis of cultural memory and reconstructions of the past, see Zerubavel 2003.

31 On the concept of *jindō* as a Buddhist discourse on Japanese local deities, see Teeuwen 2002; similarly, *shindō* would refer to a discourse on Japanese local gods based on Chinese religious thought.

with it has been the task of countless authors and interpreters throughout the ages, who have addressed the following questions, among others: What kind of kami is Amaterasu and what are her main features and teachings? What is the nature of Japan's sacredness and what role do the kami play in it? What is the actual role of the imperial office and of each individual emperor? Are emperors uniquely divine, or are they rather mere emissaries of the gods and/or witnesses of the gods' ancient deliberations? Are they rulers, priests, or both (or neither)?

Furthermore, the answers to these questions (always open to multiple interventions and interpretations) were generally formulated from within specific, localized intellectual contexts and institutional frameworks. Thus, we should keep in mind that any such discourse was formulated according to a specific Buddhist intellectual context as it was understood in the specific institutional framework of temple-shrine X, priestly lineage A, and author Alpha; or according to a specific Confucian intellectual context as it was understood in the specific institutional framework of academy Y, family lineage B, and author Beta; or, again, according to a specific "Shinto" intellectual context as it was understood in the specific institutional framework of shrine Z, priestly lineage C, and author Gamma; or, yet again, according to a specific nativist intellectual context as it was understood in the specific institutional framework of academy W, lineage D, and author Delta.

The quest for significance was relentless, but, no matter what the authors claimed to the contrary, it always resulted in an incessant drift *away* from the original accounts, which were perhaps too simple, superficial, and essentially *empty* of content to satisfy seekers of Japanese authenticities and essences.

The Ontology of Ise: A Quest for Significance

Anthropologist and cultural historian Yamaguchi Masao 山口昌男 once said that the periodic rebuilding of the Ise shrines raises issues pertaining to the conceptualization of time and historical continuity.³² These are also ontological questions: What is the status of an object that has been rebuilt every twenty years? At any given moment, is it old (as a supposedly exact replica of a primordial model) or new (having just being built a few years before)? Is the essence of the building in the original plan, or rather in its actualized result? Or, perhaps, is it in the building process itself? A discussion of Umberto Eco's semiotics of architecture can give us some important clues to address these questions.³³

According to Eco, each architectural structure is a signifier connected with a set of signifieds. In the case of the Ise shrines, their signified on the primary level of denotation is the set of their functions, clearly established in the ritual calendar and culturally defined—in short, a mode of worship and interaction with the sacred. On a secondary level of connotation, the shrines refer to a set of "symbolic" elements, such as general conceptions of religious practice, ideas about cosmology, representations of the sacred, and forms of power. In other words, the Ise shrines connote the "overall ideology" or conceptual system that has produced them and controls their practical and symbolic functions. It is important to note that primary functions can exist only in the presence of symbolic functions. As Eco explains, "'symbolic' connotations of an object . . . are no less 'useful' than its 'functional' denotations."³⁴ In some cases, symbolic functions can be even more important than practical functions.

32 Personal communication, May 2000.

33 Eco 1980, pp. 189–249.

34 Eco 1980, p. 206.

All these elements are intersubjective, culturally determined, and codified (or codifiable in principle). Expanding on Eco's theory, it is possible to distinguish further among the following orders of significance. On the plane of denotation, the Ise shrines as cultural artifacts are signs of their functions; as such, they signify what people normally do at a Shinto shrine in a given culture and historical period. In addition, there are a number of connotative planes:

- (a) theological meaning (doctrinal status of the shrines; nature of the representation of the sacred in the shrines; religious goals to be attained through practice at the shrines, etc.);
- (b) cosmological meaning (relation between the Ise shrines and the structure of the universe);
- (c) ideological meaning (the Ise shrines as meaning and ensuring health for the emperor, good harvests, peace in the country, world peace, and so forth, all defined according to lineage, historical period, etc.).

Umberto Eco is well aware that architectural meanings change throughout history, and proposes six examples of semiotic transformations involving permanence and loss of old functions and acquisitions of new ones.³⁵ In our specific case of the Ise shrines, transformation in a broad sense (including destruction of previous semiotic elements) can operate on any (or all) of these levels. Accordingly, the denial of cosmological meaning produces forms of individually interiorized practices: the denial of theological meaning could empty the shrines of their religious significance but would still preserve them as cultural artifacts or heritage sites (as examples of architectural history, national identity, popular virtue, etc.). And, indeed, throughout history the meanings of the Ise shrines have been variously altered, replaced, neglected, forgotten through actions on the signifier (the shrine itself, whole or parts thereof), the signified (one or more of the semantic levels indicated above), and the code connecting signifier and signified.³⁶

All this helps us understand how statements about meaning and significance, or about historical continuity and change, are not simple labels attached to objects, but involve both conceptual structures and material components. A look at the current understanding of the meaning of the periodical reconstruction of the Ise shrines (*shikinen sengū*) that took place most recently in 2013 will further clarify this point.

The Japanese web site of Grand Shrine of Ise explains the ceremony thus: "In addition to being a grand ceremony of the Imperial Household, for the shrine it is also a great endeavor that actualizes its own eternity."³⁷ The English web site of the shrine provides a more articulate explanation:

By performing the Shikinen Sengu, we renew our minds by remembering that our ancestors had enshrined Amaterasu Omikami in Ise, and praying that the Emperor will live long, and that peace will prevail in Japan and the world. It also involves the wish that Japanese traditional culture should be transmitted to the next generation. The renewal of the buildings and of the treasures has been conducted in the same

³⁵ Eco 1980, pp. 210–12.

³⁶ The above discussion is based on Rambelli and Reinders 2012, pp. 199–201.

³⁷ At <http://www.isejingu.or.jp/sikinen.html> (last checked June 1, 2014).

traditional way ever since the first Shikinen Sengu had been performed 1300 years ago. The scientific development makes manual technology obsolete in some fields. However, by performing the Shikinen Sengu, traditional technologies are preserved.³⁸

The unchanging religious connection between Amaterasu, Ise, the emperor, and Japan, supposedly dating back to the ancient time of the “ancestors,” is mentioned at the very outset of this passage. However, the web site places particular emphasis on the preservation of “Japanese traditional culture” and technologies—preservation that is ensured by the continuous performance of the reconstruction ceremony. Similar ideas, although expressed in slightly vaguer terms, can also be found in Jinja Honchō’s own web site explaining the meaning of the *shikinen sengū*: “By doing this, Japanese people renew their mind and faith in the deities and ensure the continuity of rejuvenation for the divine spirits. Traditional Japanese culture and skills are also passed on to the next generation.³⁹ In this passage, Ise’s reconstruction makes it possible for divine spirits (the kami?) to be always new (rejuvenated), and thus present and active. Translated in less spiritual terms, does it not rather mean that the performance of the ceremony is a stalwart against obsolescence and oblivion of kami cults associated with Ise? If it is so, then the meaning of this important ceremony lies not in its doctrinal content (which is never made explicit), but rather in its function as a preservation of past architectural forms, construction technologies, and other rituals related to them. “Preserving material objects is not the only way to conserve a heritage,” according to David Lowenthal. “The great Ise Shinto temple in Japan is dismantled every twenty years and replaced by a faithful replica built of similar materials exactly as before. Physical continuity signifies less to the Japanese than perpetuating the techniques and rituals of re-creation.”⁴⁰

Thus, we could say that Ise shrine’s periodical reconstruction aims at producing “an abstract idea of continuity with the past rooted in the material presence of a certain object in a certain place, but past practices, ways of life, world views (the cultural meaning of that object) are all but lost.”⁴¹ In this sense, at least, Ise ritual rebuilding can be understood, paradoxically, as a form of iconoclasm, albeit benevolent, in which sacred objects are destroyed and replaced with the intention to preserve them better, in a process that ends up generating cultural amnesia about the past.⁴² This brings to mind the well-known statement by Ernest Renan concerning the idea of nation: “The essence of a nation is that all individuals have many things in common, and also that all of them have forgotten many things.”⁴³ We could reformulate this statement in order to apply it to the various changes that have affected the Ise shrines throughout history: “The essence of the Grand Shrine of Ise is that all the new shrines after their reconstruction have many things in common, and also that people have forgotten a lot of things about them.” A similar definition would work for Shinto history as well: “The essence of Shinto is that all shrines have many things in common, and also that people have forgotten a lot of things about them.”

38 At <http://www.isejingu.or.jp/english/sikinen/sikinen.htm> (last checked June 1, 2014).

39 At <http://www.jinjahoncho.or.jp/en/ise/index.html> (last checked on June 1, 2014).

40 Lowenthal 1985, pp. 384–85.

41 Rambelli and Reinders 2012, p. 183.

42 On this particular understanding of iconoclasm, see Rambelli and Reinders 2012, esp. pp. 171–203.

43 In Renan 1947–1961, vol. 1, p. 892.

Contemporary Shinto authors are not alone in trying to give meaning to Ise's *shikinen sengū* despite the lack of original documents on this ceremony. On the occasion of the first reconstruction in the Shōwa period, which took place in 1929, there was a debate involving priests and scholars about the ultimate reason/meaning of this ritual. The official position of the Grand Shrine of Ise at that time was that “purity and cleanliness constitute the foundation” of Shinto and a basic feature of the Japanese national character (*kokuminsei* 国民性); the periodic reconstruction ritual ensures that the kami are always enshrined in a clean place. This position is still widely accepted today. However, this interpretation was immediately contested, as authors argued that if this emphasis on purity and cleanliness were true, it would imply that shrines that are not periodically rebuilt are in fact polluted places. Others suggested that periodic reconstruction was an attempt, fostered by the wisdom of early emperors, to preserve the pristine form of the Ise shrines, the most important in the realm, from the diffusion of Buddhism and foreign influences, because these shrines represent the “pure keystone” (*seiso* 清楚) of Japan since ancient times. This interpretation is at the basis of the idea that the Grand Shrine of Ise is the “starting point” (*genten*) of Japan and its civilization. A third interpretation suggested that reconstruction is necessary in order to preserve the “majesty” (*songen* 尊嚴) of the shrine.⁴⁴ However, it is interesting to note that a former high prelate of the Grand Shrine of Ise, Sakurai Katsunoshin 桜井勝之進, presented a simpler but more problematic interpretation, when he wrote that Ise's reconstruction was not based on “overblown ideals such as the preservation of the past,” but on a more realistic reason (*genjitsuteki na riyū* 現実的な理由), namely, fear of divine punishment (*shinbatsu* 神罰) and natural calamities.⁴⁵

As we can see, even priests of Ise shrine and scholars at Kōgakkan University 皇学館大学 have not been able to agree on a unified, definitive answer to explain the periodic reconstruction. In fact, what strikes the reader is the very lack of even a historical ground upon which answers can be provided, as the oldest surviving documents do not offer explanations for the ceremony. Motoori Norinaga acknowledged the conundrum, and in a move surprising for his time, decided to embrace it: he argued that what pertains to the kami is unfathomable, and we only have to accept this fact and worship them in the prescribed way. This point has been reinforced by contemporary Shinto theologian Ueda Kenji 上田賢治. In a discussion of Motoori Norinaga's treatment of the evil nature of kami, Ueda wrote:⁴⁶

Among the kami are “not only good kami, but evil as well, and their minds and acts are likewise in accord with their natures,” with the result that they are not to be treated “in consideration of whether they are in accord with right and wrong,” but “merely to be offered fervent worship, in awe of their wrath.” The ancient way in which that worship is to be performed is “first, to make all things pure and undefiled, allowing of no pollution, then to make offerings of the best foods one has, or to perform enjoyments such as koto and flute, songs and dancing.” [...] As a result, the correct observance of worship is of utmost importance, and humans have no need to consider else beside.⁴⁷

44 These interpretations are summarized in Sakurai 2003, pp. 31–37.

45 Sakurai 2003, p. 4. Note that Sakurai considered divine punishment (*shinbatsu*) “a more realistic reason” to perform the *shikinen sengū* than historical or doctrinal considerations.

46 The quotation marks in the passage refer to Norinaga's own words from *Naobi no mitama*, in *Motoori Norinaga zenshū*, vol. 9, p. 61.

47 Ueda 1998; online version at <http://www2.kokugakuin.ac.jp/ijcc/wp/cpjr/kami/ueda.html#rtnoteXIII>.

For Norinaga, then, the actions and intentions of the kami should not be subjected to intellectual scrutiny and interpretation “in consideration of whether they are in accord with [human and therefore flawed ideas of] right and wrong.” Instead, the kami are “merely to be offered fervent worship, in awe of their wrath,” according to ancient ways of worship. Norinaga even made a case about the fundamental unintelligibility of the kami. He wrote:

The acts of the deities lie not in the realm of ordinary logic, in a form easily discernible to humans. No matter how clever one may be, there are limits to a person’s intelligence. [...] The reason the acts of the *kami* sound far-fetched and seem unreal, despite their truth, is that they occur in place that is quite beyond the limits of human understanding, with the result that people hearing of these acts find them far removed from the working of the human mind and hence difficult to comprehend and believe.⁴⁸

However, this should not surprise the interpreter. Norinaga continues: “The universe itself and all its creatures are miraculous, and the principles of the purported sages cannot meet the challenge of providing an exhaustive account of it. [...] We also must realize that the acts of the kami are infinite in their mystery.”⁴⁹ In fact, Norinaga argues, using a provocative paradox, that the kami’s mysterious and incomprehensible nature is the best proof that the deeds of kami as narrated in the ancient texts, are true: “Just such instances rather help us realize that the events of the divine age are true and not mere fabrications. If this were something that had been created by a later emperor, would he have created something so vapid as to be beyond belief?”⁵⁰

In other words, the ancient Japanese would not have written such absurd things about the kami if these things had not been true. Even if Norinaga was right and matters related to the kami in *Kojiki* and other ancient texts were true, their meaning would still elude us forever.

Ise as an Empty Signifier

A key issue here is how to interpret this *basso ostinato* constituted by Ise and its role in Shinto and Japanese culture. It goes without saying that this amounts to providing a definition of Shinto; it also entails the need to distinguish between Ise as a *discourse* (space, deities, lore, rituals, symbolism, etc.) and the Ise shrines as a specific *institution* rooted in history and society. (One has the impression that sometime these two levels are not clearly differentiated in treatments on the subject.)

Norman Havens, elaborating on a threefold typology of approaches to Shinto studies outlined by Inoue Nobutaka 井上順孝, refers to them as:

the “air,” “onion,” and “pearl” strategies of definition, reflecting the views that Shinto is variously the “air we breathe,” an onion that, once peeled, leaves nothing behind, or, is rather like a pearl—lots of accretions around a small but distinct core.⁵¹

48 Quoted in Heisig et al. 2011, p. 480.

49 Heisig et al. 2011, p. 482.

50 Heisig et al. 2011, p. 480.

51 Havens 2006, p. 15. Havens refers to Inoue Nobutaka’s postface to Inoue 1998, p. 245. (The English translation of Inoue 1998, Inoue et al. 2003, omits Inoue’s original postface quoted by Havens.)

In this typology, the *basso ostinato* could be envisioned, with different results, as the air in the environment, the core of the pearl, or the different layers of the onion. Other authors, especially Nishida Nagao 西田長男, have envisioned Shinto as a naked body that can be covered by different sets of clothes belonging to different cultural codes, without losing its individual identity because of that. This image is in itself a simplification of early modern and modern concepts such as *wakon kansai* 和魂漢才 (Yamato spirit and Chinese arts) and *wakon yōsai* 和魂洋才 (Yamato spirit and Western technologies), which assumed that foreign elements did not affect the Yamato spirit's own nature and essence. In this case, the *basso continuo* is the drone sound produced by the Yamato spirit.

In spite of their visual and intuitive impact, the three images evoked by Inoue and Havens are not sufficient to create sophisticated working models for the study of the history of Ise (not to mention the history of Shinto), as they do not clarify the following questions: Is Ise a complex cultural unit, more or less stable, endowed with its own set of meanings? In other words, does it belong to the order of the signified in the semiotic system of Japanese culture? Or, rather, is it a combination of forms, a set of signifiers, that can be associated with any kind of meaning—varying according to historical period, religious and ideological orientation, social background, etc.? Furthermore, can the Ise cultural unit function as a code, associating signifiers and signifieds from different discourses and cultural spheres?

I would like to argue that Ise has played all of these roles. Of course, several people and groups have developed over time different discourses (perhaps, more or less interrelated) on Ise and its role. In this sense, Ise is a complex semantic unit. On the other hand, in many cases Ise has been taken as an empty signifier that could be filled with any kind of meaning (Buddhist, Confucian, Daoist, internationalist and nativist, local and universal). At times, Ise could even work as a code or semiotic shifter, joining and mediating between different sets of representations—as, for instance, by connecting a different shrine (Ōmiwa or Hie, say) to the emperor through the use of relations with the goddess Amaterasu, or by transforming the Ise region into the center of the universe by associating the Outer shrine's central pillar (*shin no mihashira*) with Mount Sumeru.

It is important to distinguish these three different semiotic orders (the signifier, the signified, and the code) when we study Ise—or, for that matter, issues related to Shinto and, more generally, Japanese cultural identity. Whenever we are dealing with any given phenomenon, one should always determine whether that phenomenon is being used as a signified (which can be conveyed in different forms and can change over time), as a signifier (a rather stable means to convey a plurality of meanings), or as a code-shifter operating transformations within a certain cultural field.

In this context, the notion of “floating signifier” appears to be particularly useful. First proposed by Claude Lévi-Strauss “to represent an undetermined quantity of signification, in itself void of meaning and thus apt to receive any meaning”; as such, a “floating signifier” possesses “symbolic value zero.”⁵² It may be used by different interpreters to convey different signifieds. As Claes Wrangel wrote:

52 Lévi-Strauss 1987, pp. 63–64.

The empty signifier is the discursive centre, what Laclau & Mouffe calls a nodal point, i.e. a privileged element that gathers up a range of differential elements, and binds them together into a discursive formation. But it is only by emptying a certain signifier of its content that this process can be achieved. Its emptiness makes it possible for it to signify the discourse as a whole. The power of a certain signifier is therefore coterminous with its emptiness. It is only through this emptiness that it can articulate different elements around it, and thus produce a discursive formation.⁵³

Throughout history, various elements of Ise have been emptied of their previous meanings and functions in order to be used in different semiotic configurations (different interpretations of Shinto, different political visions, different ritual systems). It is here perhaps that the sense of Ise's centrality emerged: not as a substantial feature, but as the result of semiotic operations of transformations that have continuously re-shaped and re-configured Ise from within their own contexts. Thus, the various occurrences of Ise-related symbolism in disparate contexts do not necessarily point to Ise's centrality to and ubiquity in Shinto discourse; nor are they indications of Ise's essential value for Japanese culture and identity. On the contrary, they could simply indicate that Ise was merely used as an empty signifier to convey different and contrasting sets of meaning and values, thus undermining any attempt to unify, homogenize, and structure the multifarious field of Japanese religiosity.

The same can be said of the components of Maruyama's *basso ostinato*. Are they semantic units or empty forms/signifiers? Authors normally assume the former, but it may be the case that this *basso ostinato* is in fact an instance of the latter. If it is so, then the four elements forming this drone sound (the sacredness of Japan, the emperor, Amaterasu Ōmikami, and the Ise shrines) are not signifieds of essential values, but empty forms, floating signifiers that can be appropriated and used in different contexts whenever a discourse tries to unify a diverse and unwieldy field. Why then these four terms? In a sense, ancient Japanese mythology as it is recorded in *Kojiki* and *Nihon shoki* does not contain much that can be used for re-mythologization and re-enchantment of historical realities; these few terms are pretty much all that is available. Indeed, the history of Shinto as a religious tradition is peculiar in that it is not based on a *religious* text: the *Kojiki* and the *Nihon shoki* were primarily historical records, and myths about the kami occupy only a fraction of these works. Thus, *Kojiki* and *Nihon shoki*, when treated as closed works (selectively separated from the vast intertextuality produced to explain them), become sorts of prison houses of language and representation, in which discourse is reduced to a few simple key terms—whose meaning is nevertheless decided not in advance by the original texts themselves but by the orientations of the interpreters. Medieval authors (and, to a lesser extent, early modern Confucian authors as well) tried to escape this prison house by treating these texts as open works and expanding their signification beyond the narrow limits of the literality of the myths. Nativism and most of what followed it (especially neo-nativism) have been attempts at reducing the plurality of meaning to a narrow authoritarian and chauvinistic interpretation.

53 Wrangel 2007 (at <http://thatsnotit.wordpress.com/2007/05/03/towards-a-modified-discourse-theory-pt-1-laclaus-empty-signifier/> (last accessed on June 1, 2014). Wrangel refers to Laclau and Mouffe 1985, esp. p. 112.

Basil Hall Chamberlain (1850–1935) was a direct witness to a number of re-signification processes in the Meiji period that resulted in the creation of a new form of Shinto, which he calls “Mikado-worship and Japan-worship.” He wrote that this “new Japanese religion” is not a “spontaneously generated phenomenon”: “Every manufacture presupposes a material out of which it is made, every present a past on which it rests. But the twentieth-century Japanese religion of loyalty and patriotism is quite new, for in it pre-existing ideas have been sifted, altered, freshly compounded, turned into new uses, and have found a new centre of gravity.”⁵⁴ This is a good rendering of the semiotic processes described above.

Concluding Remarks: A Culture Centered on the Signifier?

We have seen that normative forms of modern Shinto in general, and statements related to the Ise shrines in particular, display a characteristic emphasis on forms and signifiers. In itself, this is not particularly unique or strange. Cultural semiotics has developed two general typologies of cultures: one that gives great importance to expression (signifiers), the other privileging content (signifieds). The former are cultures that “represent themselves as a set of regulated *texts*,” whereas the latter envision themselves as “systems of *rules* that determine the creation of texts.”⁵⁵ Cultures oriented toward the expression and regulated texts prefer precedents, past models (including series of citations from selected texts), and their repetition.⁵⁶ In contrast, cultures centered on the content (meaning) emphasize rules for generating new forms and texts and variant behaviors and practices.⁵⁷

Thus, we could say that at least some forms of Shinto privilege correct action/performance and representation/display, rather than intellectual speculation. Several hypotheses can be formulated in order to explain this attitude. It could be the result of broader cultural orientations (emphasis on the signifier); it could be based on Chinese Confucian ritual culture, which also emphasizes correctness and exteriority; or it could just be a consequence of the fact that the basic doctrines, whatever they were, were not included in the *Kojiki* and the *Nihon shoki* and have been lost. Be that as it may, this emphasis on following the correct procedures (as they are established by some form of authority) without questioning them, dovetailed unusually well with the dictates of modern Japanese militaristic authoritarianism as synthesized in the *Kokutai no hongī* 国体の本義, which is all about the Japanese people following unquestioningly the way of the kami (*kannagara no michi* 神ながらの道) as ordered by the emperor.⁵⁸ Today, it is shrine authorities themselves who often encourage referential emptiness. Their reasons are not clear or explicit, but we can imagine that their motivation lies in tradition, in the desire to leave spaces open for future resignification/recoding, and in their care to avoid problematic political implications. In any case, the vast use of empty signifiers does not imply that Ise (and Shinto in general, for that matter) is a meaningless cultural arena; on the contrary, invisibility, secrecy or hiddenness have often been used in Japan to enhance sacredness, cultural value, and the possibility of a proliferation of meaning.⁵⁹

54 See Chamberlain 1912 (internet resource at <http://www.gutenberg.org/files/2510/2510-h/2510-h.htm>; last accessed on June 1, 2014).

55 Lotman and Uspenkij 1995, pp. 50–51.

56 Lotman and Uspenkij 1995, p. 53.

57 Lotman and Uspenkij 1995, p. 57.

58 See *Kokutai no hongī*.

59 On the role of secrecy in Japanese religion and culture, see Rambelli 2002a; Scheid and Teeuwen 2006.

Of course, emphasis on expression is not the whole story about Shinto. We should not forget that this unquestioning performativity of empty signifiers was only *one* of the main threads of the Shinto traditions centered on Ise, the other being a strong drive to conceptual proliferation and innovation. Countless authors since at least the Heian period have tried to make sense of the kami and their cultural systems by attributing various meanings to myths, rituals, and representations (including art forms and objects). These interpretive traditions, which are instances of cultural attitudes oriented toward signifieds (since they privilege the creation of new interpretations, and sometime of new forms, rather than the preservation of old forms), include those known under the rubrics of Ryōbu 兩部 Shinto, Confucian (Juka 儒家) Shinto, but also some nativist schools (that of Hirata Atsutane 平田篤胤 *in primis*). These traditions lasted for centuries and were for a long time the dominant forms of discourses about the kami (even before Shinto became an established religion). Perhaps, we can see a return to proliferation of new forms in the Shintoesque dimension that characterizes much of contemporary pop culture (manga, anime, and video games) and contemporary religiosity (tourist “pilgrimages” in search of good restaurants and nice spas, the fad for power spots, etc. as advertised by the media) in Japan. Also in this sense, what we now call Shinto has always been a vast and fluid field of possibilities and alternatives, so diverse and multifarious as to defy reduction to just one. Here lies the beauty and strength of Shinto, and perhaps of Japanese culture as a whole.

Ultimately, however, intellectual speculation may just be one of the “devices” used to fabricate those things that please the kami, as Yamaguchi Masao (via Gunji Masakatsu 郡司正勝) said in the statement that opens this essay. In a sense, the significance of conceptual discourses on the kami could well lie in the intellectual labor and semiotic devices necessary for their production as kinds of “conceptual installations”—another form of offering to the deities. Conceptualizations are always somehow separated from the kami, whose “true” and ultimate meaning they are unable to provide. This in turn may be ultimately related (if Motoori Norinaga is correct) to the very nature of the kami, as either immaterial and disembodied spirits or obscurely material forces, endowed with their own inscrutable agencies.

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