



Review of Tomoko Iwasawa's *Tama in Japanese Myth*

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Abstract: This is an important and innovative study on Shinto thought, away from received approaches emphasizing indigenism and nationalistic tendencies. In a bold move, Tomoko Iwasawa decides to shift her concern away from the concept of deity (*kami*), and writes that emphasis on *kami* is influenced by Western theistic discourses of religion assuming "the existence of a transcendent, moral law-giver, who is the source and foundation of an ethics of prohibition, condemnation, and forgiveness."

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For Tomoko Iwasawa, the "Western concept of God... is inappropriate for analyzing Japanese religious experience."¹ She proposes instead to focus on the concept of *tama*, which seems to be at the origin and at the core of many aspects of Shinto thought and practice (including many *kami*-related matters) and on its primary power, *musubi* (life-force). In fact, *tama* is a polyvalent concept: in Japanese it was (and still is) used to refer to precious objects of spherical shape (pearl 珠, jade 玉), balls and pellets (球), eggs (as in *tamago* 玉子), but also, and importantly, a spiritual entity (in which case it is normally translated as "spirit" as a synonym of its derivative *tamashii* 魂 or 靈). In the latter sense, *tama* refers to both a life (or living) spirit (a kind of life essence, as in *kon* 魂, *haku* 魄, or its compound *konpaku* 魂魄) and to a disembodied spirit of the dead (which can in turn be either benign, as the ancestors' spirits or *rei* 靈, or malignant, as in the case of evil ghosts, *ryō* 靈).

Following the treatments of *tama* in the oldest extant Japanese text, the *Kojiki* (Records of Ancient Matters, completed in 712), and its most influential early modern interpreters, Motoori Norinaga (1730-1801) and Hirata Atsutane (1776-1843), Iwasawa identifies in *tama* the core of the notion of *kami* itself and of Shinto worldview in general.

Before I engage the content of the book more in detail, a few remarks on the state of Shinto studies today is probably in order. Roughly speaking, Shinto studies today is divided into two different fields that are often mutually exclusive. One is carried out by scholars often affiliated with Shinto organizations or institutions and is animated by strong theological and sectarian concerns; it is an ideal continuation of the work of the Nativist scholars (*kokugakusha*) of the Edo period (seventeenth to nineteenth centuries). The second trend of Shinto studies, carried out primarily by scholars of Japanese Buddhism and historians, addresses the complex interrelations among various forms of Japanese Buddhism and several discourses concerning the *kami* (collectively known as *shinbutsu shūgō* or

¹ Tomoko Iwasawa, *Tama in Japanese Myth: A Hermeneutical Study of Ancient Japanese Divinity*, Lanham, MD: University Press of America 2011, p. ix. [Henceforth cited as *TJM*]

“amalgamation of *kami* and buddhas”) that developed in medieval Japan (twelfth to fifteenth centuries). This second trend is closer to intellectual and cultural history. Very little is done on the grey areas between these two fields, namely, *kami* discourses that resisted assimilation with Buddhism during the middle ages, and forms of *shinbutsu shūgō* during the early modern period (when Nativist authors were most active).

In addition to these two trends, there exists, both in Japan and elsewhere, a vast and not clearly defined discourse about the essence of Japanese culture and spirituality, expressed in wide variety of media ranging from books, magazine article, and TV programs, to manga, anime, and computer games. I would like to call this discursive formation, for lack of a better term, “the Shintoesque”—primarily because its connections with the history of the development of the Shinto tradition (a tradition that is inherently plural and often self-contradictory) are obscure or vague at the best. Studies on the Shinto tradition by anthropologists, psychologists, etc. (who are not themselves expert on Shinto or even on Japanese religion) tend to situate themselves between sectarian, Nativist-oriented Shinto studies and the Shintoesque galaxy.

At this point, a few words on Motoori Norinaga and Hirata Atsutane, the foremost members of the National Learning School (*kokugaku*) or Nativism, which emphasized an indigenous, primordialistic interpretation of Japanese thought, spirituality, and culture in general. They came to be enormously influential in modern Japanese culture as they (or, rather, certain interpretations of their writings) are at the basis of the establishment of *Kojiki* as the central text of Shintoism, the formation and content of the Japanese literary canon, and central ideas about the essential features of Japanese culture (especially, in Japanese folklore studies or *minzokugaku*)—in short, essential elements of modern Japanese cultural self-representation.

Iwasawa's book begins with the interpretations of *tama* presented by Motoori Norinaga (chapter 1) and Hirata Atsutane (chapter 2), followed by an overview of the history of the interpretations of Japanese myths in the twentieth century (chapter 3); in this latter chapter, Iwasawa introduces the dialectic of mythologizing, demythologizing, and remythologizing as the main guideline of her interpretive endeavor. A summary and revision of *tama*'s definitions constitutes the introduction to Part Two of the book, which contains the author's original contributions to the subject. Here Iwasawa,

borrowing from structural studies of myth, identifies two triadic mythemes, one addressing defilement and the other sin, at core of *Kojiki*'s mythology. Chapter 4 and 5 are dedicated, respectively, to the themes of defilement (based on the myth of Izanagi and Izanami) and sin (based on the myth of Amaterasu and Susanowo); Iwasawa shows that the concept of *tama* plays important roles in the treatment of both themes as the central concept of the unique Japanese dialectic as it is presented in *Kojiki*. In these two chapters, Iwasawa moves away from standard Nativistic interpretations and mobilizes instead the work of several authors (mostly, modern contemporary folklorists and anthropologists) in order to provide a richer and more nuanced interpretation of *tama*. Iwasawa argues that while Western dialectic, as exemplified by G.F.W. Hegel's work, aims at attaining an ultimate equilibrium and stasis, Japanese dialectic is always left unresolved and has dynamism and the co-presence of opposite elements as both its starting point and final goal—as Iwasawa puts it, “Japanese myth emphasizes 'the recurring cycle of chaos and order,' in which chaos is never annulled but encompassed in an absolutely necessary process for the re-invigoration and re-organization of being” (*TJM* 152).

In the brief conclusion to the book, Iwasawa suggests two points: (i) that *tama* needs to be taken in its constitutive ambivalence (and should not be reduced to one of its components, with the exclusion of the others) as the central feature of the Japanese worldview; and (ii) whereas such new understanding of *tama* has been reached through the use of approaches mediated from hermeneutics and comparative philosophy, these disciplines, when applied to the non-Western concept of *tama*, show their essential rooting into a Western cultural and intellectual substratum; far from being universal methodologies, they reveal themselves to be very much part of Western civilization. In this respect, we may note that application of these methodologies to non-Western phenomena, as heuristic tools, might ultimately result in these methodologies' decoupling from Western philosophical assumptions, the provincialization (de-centralization) of Western thought, and their translocalization.

The most innovative aspect of the book, as I just mentioned, is its attempt to set itself free from existing Nativist Shinto studies and Shintoesque discourses, in order to present an alternative formulation, by shifting the terms of the discussion (with *tama* replacing *kami* as its central concern), the interpretive categories (no longer Nativistic or folkloric ideas, but hermeneutics

and comparative philosophy), and the goals (instead of the attainment of a supreme Shinto truth, emphasis on alternation of chaos and order).

An endeavor of this scale, however, is not free from problems, some of which are intrinsic to its own methodology and textual corpus. Among the intrinsic problems, it seems to me that the book does not succeed completely in freeing itself from the Nativistic framework, primarily because it chooses to follow well established rules of Nativist discourse: the multifarious aspects and stunning diversity of the history of the Shinto tradition are reduced to *Kojiki* (a text that had very little importance in Japanese culture and religion until the nineteenth century, after Norinaga "rediscovered" it); the essence of Shinto is reduced to *tama* (a point already indicated by Atsutane), and the Japanese worldview is identified with Shinto (thus ignoring its historical diversity and multiplicity). In defense of the book's methodology and textual corpus, one could argue that, in order to criticize Nativistic assumption, one should first engage them. The problem with this position, though, is that it ignores the overwhelming influence and pervasiveness of Nativist constructs in modern Japanese culture; engaging with them amounts to revitalizing them.

In terms of methodology, I had the impression that the concepts of mythologizing, demythologizing, and remythologizing (and related processes) can be interpreted in several ways, and not necessarily in the ways proposed by the author; however, I did find them very productive and deserving more extensive applications to the study of Shinto intellectual history.

It is possible to conceive different strategies to address Shinto concepts. First of all, historicization helps: placing Norinaga and Atsutane (and their later epigones) in their historical contexts and within the larger framework of Japanese intellectual history would certainly contribute to reassess their importance. Secondly, it would be interesting to change the text of reference for Japanese mythology from the *Kojiki* to the *Nihon shoki*, and to compare their different perspectives. The *Nihon shoki*, composed in 720, strikes the contemporary reader for its polyphonic nature, as it presents several different variants of the myths.

Thirdly, a study of medieval discussions on *tama* in medieval Shinto texts (such as the *Reikiki*) promises to be very productive. These texts in general attempt to re-interpret ancient Japanese myths in light of Chinese and Indian mythologies, thus creating readings of astounding complexity and intricacy. It is against this syncretic hermeneutics that the Nativists developed their own primitivist approach. More in general, and this will be the fourth strategy, I think there is the absolute need to include considerations of Buddhist thought in any discussion of the history of Shinto, and especially in discussion of matters such as spirits and other supernatural entities, because Buddhism was de facto in charge of the treatment of spirit matters for most of Japanese history. A further elements that needs to be taken into account is the impact of Neo-Confucianism and Song dynasty Daoism; it seems that *kami* came to be envisioned as spiritual/mental entities (*shin*) through the mediation of Chinese thought in the fourteenth century; this in turn opened the way to emphasis on spirit (*tama*) as a central concern for Shinto.

I would also like to note that, while the book certainly does justice to the centrality of the concept of *tama* in Japanese religiosity, there is a further need to emphasize that this concept is inescapably and hopelessly a combination of material and spiritual substances. *Tama* is at the same time both a spherical, material object—and a spirit. This enmeshed, indissoluble combination of materiality and spirituality is one of the main features of Japanese religiosity (and perhaps, of most religiosities in other cultures as well) and deserves to be studied more in depth, beyond modern distinctions between matter and spirit.

In conclusion, Iwasawa carries out in *TJM* a re-signification of *tama* through a recontextualization of this concept by looking at it from the lenses of contemporary hermeneutics and comparative philosophy. In this way, *tama* is re-presented to us in its semantic richness and ambiguity. This is a welcome innovation, away from received Japanese scholarship that tends instead to simplify *tama* and reduce it to straightforward categories. In this way, the study does open the way for a different, more complex understanding of the Japanese religious experience.