



Demythologizing and Remythologizing Tama Reading Tomoko Iwasawa's *Tama in Japanese Myth*

Purushottama Bilimoria

University of California, Berkeley; The University of Melbourne, Australia; Deakin University, Australia
pbilimoria@berkeley.edu

Abstract: The study quite effectively deploys the methodology of exegetical and phenomenological hermeneutics, derived in main here from Karl Jaspers, Paul Ricoeur, and Rudolph Bultmann—in particular, the programmatic of mythologizing, demythologizing, and re-mythologizing as argued by these authors in the context of human-divine relationship; the insights are then applied toward revisioning the relationship between myth and religion, in early-to-late Japanese religious history.

Keywords: Japan; *tama*; *kami*; the *Kojiki*; Jaspers, Karl; Motoori, Norinaga; Hirata, Atsutane; Iwasawa, Tomoko; mythology.

Professor Iwasawa's timely book is an impressive study.¹ In my reading, this can be summarized in the following talking points:

- i. The study quite effectively deploys the methodology of exegetical and phenomenological hermeneutics, derived in main here from Karl Jaspers, Paul Ricoeur, and Rudolph Bultmann—in particular, the programmatic of mythologizing, demythologizing, and re-mythologizing as argued by these authors in the context of the text-human-divine relationship; the insights are then applied toward revisioning the relationship between myth and religion, in early-to-late Japanese religious history.
- ii. One could say the study draws on the Foucauldian praxis of archaeology to unearth certain buried epistemés in texts and cultural symbolism, and then re-interprets these in the light of current scholarship, both Japanese

- and Western (for "symbols give rise to thought" as Ricoeur would put it); in that sense it is a work in comparative philology and cultural anthropology.
- iii. The *epistemés* in question are themselves of significant interest from the perspective of comparative philosophical theology, in as much as these pertain to the notions of divinity, the existential situatedness of human beings (being-in-a-world), the concepts of sin, good and evil, guilt and defilement, and the dialectic of order versus chaos (or its converse), being-in-nothingness, and the chthonic of thrownness-onto-death (to use a Heideggerian trope).
- iv. A brilliant excavation work is carried out on the submerged presence of the non-dualist symbolism of *tama* in the pre-canonized *Kojiki* (c. 721 CE)—vis-à-vis the concept of *kami* that came to the forefront in the self-understanding and re-invention of Japanese religious sensibilities to the detriment of the much-richer primordial stirrings, if one could put it that way, of a more nuanced and authentic (historically and

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

textually), "unthought" of Japanese religio-cultural production. The work of retrieving the lost years of mythic reason, or the Age of the Gods (*TJM* 3).

- v. The study teases out the implications of this alethic journey through the archives of Japanese culture—both religious and secular—for a monotheistically-conceived divinity (mainly in Western theism) as well as for the Platonic tradition of metaphysics, both redolent of certain dualistic ontologies, in contrast perhaps to Heraclitean physis which has deep resonances with the dialecticism of *tama*. Heidegger would be at home, in this language of the relativity of being—notwithstanding the alignment of Heidegger with the Platonic rather than the Heraclitean dialectic (*TJM* 153).

The basic argument seems to be that the teaching of Neo-Confucian schools that migrated into Japanese territory in the seventeenth century, from the farm-houses to the feudal shoguns (notably the Tokagawa), privileged the humanist and secular interpretation of the Japanese experience of *kami*, and overlaid this on a priori, perhaps more primal, or at least ancient, originary stratum that the *Kojiki* textualizes, but which remains awesomely elusive and bounded in mystery (not unlike Rudolf Otto's concept of the "numinous"). Now this argument is itself based on the double debut of deconstruction and re-construction carried out by the eighteenth century Japanese scholar, Motoori Norinaga. Motoori's multi-volume output of his groundbreaking philological and painstakingly exegetical work on pre-Sinolized Japanese mythology still appears to be something of a *tour-de-force*. But for Motoori, it would seem, the marvels of Japanese language would remain at large.

But why language as such? Why not the pre-made texts that can be read-off directly? Why the need for this deciphering and searching for what Ricoeur calls "ciphers" rather than signs and codes, words and grammatical finesses, using as it were the magnifying glass? Is it that what Iwasawa refers to in Chapter One as "the Japanese language," or was it some form of speech or lettered scriptography that the modern harbingers and inheritors of what has come to be known as Japanese language transmuted and transformed—after the Chinese script was adopted (for its semantic and not for the phonetic morphology) and skilfully adapted in the unique *kanji* ideograph?

In response, it is argued that what was there prior to this was a primitive (Iwasawa stops short of using

the epithet "pagan"), perhaps even pre-modern (in the sense in which it might have been seen then in the euphoria of the new imperial borrowings), that subsequent generations forgot and became oblivious to the originary characters. Language thrives and survives on recognition and repetition, not so much on its refinement but use, as the later Wittgenstein would put it; and language that has declined remains confined heretofore to an undecipherable script (think of Indus-Brahmi and various Mesopotamian languages) and of course myths too, which may find ritual or performative expressions (in Mary Douglas' terms). Language dies, as the saying goes, a natural death.

Well, there seems to be a complicated intellectual story behind all this, and Iwasawa commits considerable space in the book describing for us and indeed translating the background, the texts and thinking involved in Motoori's attempt to recover the lost *archē* as it were.

Motoori has a rival and to some extent a detractor on the precise signification of the concept of *tama*, namely in the scholar Atsutane Hirata; the *Kojiki* was off-set by another officially recognized text, the *Nihon Shoki* (c. 720 CE), written in Chinese, the common diplomatic language, achieving the status of official national history. In the latter, the process of mythologization succeeds in expunging the mysterious, the ready-at-hand-to-be-interpreted ciphers (using Jaspers' trope), vital clues to the existential and moral repertoire, aspirations as well as failings of human beings (as seen from the perspectives of the ancestors and the natural gods). Instead, it presents the texts—couched in a supporting language that itself is already highly formalized and sterilized—as facts, as history, as fossils that call out to be acknowledged. But they do not warrant in and of themselves or are shielded from any need for deeper digging or excavation for supposed hidden meanings, or other coded divine treasures.

Jaspers' rejection of the rigid fact/value distinction of logical positivism surprisingly appears to echo in Motoori's sensitivity towards a certain dynamism of religious experience and self-understanding of a people, that at the same time empowers the self toward transformation—and fusion of horizons—when the text is approached with the dialectical consciousness of de- and re-mythologization (*TJM* 12).

The cipher, *tama* (たま) signifies (1) spirit, (2) soul, (3) jewel [which resonates with spirit], or (4) spherical shape, where "spirit" appears to be most fundamental to Motoori's philological reading. The cipher has three parts in the original hieroglyph: "rain," "the sacred

bowls that contain the prayers to the divine," and "a spiritualistic female medium." "In short, this character signifies the situation in which a female medium dances in front of an altar, praying to the divine for rain" (TJM 14). Through a series of further supplements, such as *hi* (日, and *musu* 蒸す), thus *musuhi* (蒸す日) / *musubi* (結びつける), the semantic field expands to embrace "breathing," "streaming," "coming into being"; and even the sun, the giver of fire and light, are implicated (TJM 15). And we are told that *musu-hi* lends itself to the ultimate interpretation as the mysterious, awe-inspiring quality that brings about whatever comes into being, or steamy (ghostly) light/fire. This vital force is the new discovery that Motoori makes in decoding the *Kojikii*: the mysterious property of *tama* that stirs and motivates whatever comes into being; of which *kami* may be read as the concrete manifestation. (I wish later to draw some parallels with the Hindu Samkhya system, and the nondualist Advaita Vedanta.) Modern Japanese scholars, such as Maruyama Masao, have also underscored *musuhi* as historically a bedrock of Japanese religious experience (TJM 89).

The word "primordial" or "primal" was used earlier, and this is explicated as indicating that the concept is pre-rational and even in a sense pre-ethical (for a fully-flashed out theory of ethics is not yet formed, but as with sprouts the seed is already fertile with the goods). And incidentally, not all the gods are benign: some are good, some are bad, others perhaps ugly, or crooked and deceitful. The cosmological picture that emerges here is one that is not of the pristine, pure, and snow as white, before the Fall in the Genesis account, but one, very much as in Vedic homology, that is mixed with or crosses the border zones between the auspicious and spell-caste, good and evil, luck and misfortune. This is how the ancients experienced the world, and the text speaks to that worldview; language speaks the truth of its own house of being, before it is thoroughly mythologized, and the Fall is in the reverse direction to the one given in the Genesis. This is so very interesting and a striking contrast, richly so for comparative theology as well.

Here, I cannot say it better than Iwasawa does herself, so I shall resign myself to citing certain passages directly to bring out the force of the analysis here. Prefacing Motoori's astute argument, Iwasawa tells us with a crispness of nearly a haiku:

In challenging the prevailing notion that *kami* is the key to understanding the *Kojiki* and thus should be regarded as the core concept of Japanese religious

experience. Motoori proposes another view that emphasizes the role of *musubi no mi-tama* as the central principle of existence. It is in *Tamakushige*, meaning "the Comb-Box Decorated by *Tama*," that Motoori passionately describes the true Way that he believes consists in the grace of *musubi no mi-tama*. [TJM 13]

And here is the original from Motoori:

Let us state briefly the content of the single true Way. First, the general principle of the world must be firmly grasped. The basis of Heaven and Earth, the gods, and everything without exception derives from the *Musubi no mi-tama* of the two deities Takami-musubi and Kami-musubi. As creatures that come into being, generation after generation of humans are born, and countless things and events arise, but there is none that is not derived from the *tama*. Accordingly, in the beginning of the Age of the Gods when the two great deities Izanami and Izanagi gave life to our land, to the various deities, and to all things, the basis was the *Musubi no mi-tama* of Takami-muubi and Kami-musumbi. Since the *Musubi no mi-tama* is the mysterious and profound work of the gods, human wisdom cannot reason it out, despite the best efforts to define it according to various principles. [TJM 14]

Understanding it must, through reasoning. And to help with this process, the tradition provides its own Hermes, who mediates between the two realms (TJM 72), the supernatural and the natural, the human and the divine, essences and properties, for in a sense the two are not separate (though distinguishable in space and events); and it is *musubi* that is attributed with the task of mediating and conveying the mysterious, divine quality of bringing into being, and in that process delivering the understanding of the mystery, the divine impulse; through this bringing all that is comes into being.

There is a kind of ontological internalism implied here; the components as the basic building blocks—that is the elements: wind/breath, fire, air, space, and the intentions of the gods—combine in simple forms (what the Indian Nyaya would call atoms, dyads and triads, and karma-souls), and from these simple forms, or energies, more complex conglomerates of substances and things and beings are structured; but in this very process of engineering as it were there is awakened a kind of self-awareness, a knowing about what is actually happening, and it reveals itself to its various parts, or some animated/living parts which through further complexity emerge and stand apart. Intelligence is the infusion that is held up in this mysterious mirror,

and that too is *tama*. I am making this interpolation as a further step in interpretation, and so I stand to be corrected. But it would seem to me that the language used in describing the emergence and then the concealment of *tama* from human's gaze, speaks to that intricate epistemography.

Thus while Motoori and Hirata hold *tama* to be the life force, and its primordial state emerges from a mysterious union of man and a woman, ever procreating and proliferating, Motoori places emphasis on the vital aspect of *tama*, whereas Hirata maintains that the mediation also extends to the realm of the *dead*. Thus, according to Hirata, "after death, all the *tama-shi-hi*(s) depart from the human bodies in which they had resided, and go to the world of the dead, traditionally a mountain close to the village. There the *tama-shi*(s) become the *tama* of ancestral gods, continually observing the living" (TJM 73 f).

But surely that tension is the real dialectic, and it seems to me Iwasawa is inclined toward a more optimistic and utopian valence that Motoori brings forward from the hoary texts. There is further discussion of how one of the interpretations informed Shinto death rituals, affinities with the dead, the belief that the soul of the dead remains in our world ("not gone anywhere" as my deceased wife's soul whispered into my ears, in what seemed like a waking-dream state), and perhaps informed the theory of the transmigration of *tama* into another person's body.

The dispute of course arises when Hirata (and scholars who follow him) maintain strongly that "the most primordial notion of the divine was derived [by the ancients], not from such an abstract notion as life-force, but from the ordinary and abiding Japanese belief in their ancestors' dead souls/spirits" (TJM 74). But another concept, *ara-mitama* (あらみたま), brings out the symbiosis in ancient Japanese understanding of good and evil with life and death. One begins to die as soon as one is born; one encounters death of others in one's life (close ones, even of enemies, which might move one to empathy, retrospectively too); one confronts one's own mortality from time to time, one might even prepare for its eventuality (as reflected in the Retirement plan and the Will, "safely with the attorney's" as they say); the ultimate waning of life-force is death itself, uncontrollably so, like the wild wind, the wandering monk. In Heidegger's touching terms, we are always, forever, in the state of thrownness-unto-death; the abyss of nothingness that recalls dying, is only a step ahead of us, but due to other illusions and

life-preoccupations we do not see it, until a mirror is held up for us, or it's too all too late, the late indeed.

Even more significantly, it is also *tama*'s inherent vigour to deflect the dualism of the polarity not only of life and death, but also of good and evil, the divine and the human, the there and here. Hence, mediating these two realms, the extremes, "*tama* exhibits apparent contradictions." But who is afraid of contradictions and contraries or of unfaithfulness to the dictates of rational epistemology or conventional normativity in the realm of the living (or the dead)? Not the ancients. In the last chapter of the book the ability of Japanese culture of the ancients to hold firmly to this tension and this as the inexorable fate of the becoming that gave us being (and whatever else) is captured vividly with poetical imagery; but here in the discussion on Motoori's exegetical hermeneutics, there is something of an apologetic toward ironing out, overcoming contradictions and transforming "what looks like dualism into a dynamic monism." And, reading between the various lines (while knowing admittedly next to nothing about this particular myth that I am now converted to be its ardent student), it does not seem to me that the tradition other than the reformative, mythologizing, political "nihonism" (if I may put it this way for the imperialist privileging of the more clinical nuance via *kami*) was in any rush to resolve and/or dissolve the contradictions that the myth reveals from within its own womb.

In *Rig Veda, Vac* (Speech), the first-born of Truth, emerges in a bewildering wonder, "What am this 'I'? Wherefrom am I from? What is this Speech-ing?" and then vanishes;² only the gods know Her hiding place; poets whisper her in their souls (think of Sama-Veda, Veda of Songs, Rumi), and human beings look to the horizons of sunrise and sunset, ever seeking her out; but they mangle her also in their own angry human speech-acts.

I wish to move to the last two chapters as the erudite discussion here ties in with the summary (point 5 in particular) I began with. Taking her cue from Ricoeur on the problem of evil, guilt, sin, defilement and indeed the chaos that these make for (or to which these are closely linked), Iwasawa returns us to various narratives in *Kojiki* wherein the relationship between life and death,

² I have explored this theme further with the constant fading of being-ness traced in any manifestation into receding emptiness, even utter Nothingness, in my recent paper "Why is there Nothing rather than Something? An Essay in the Comparative Metaphysics of Nonbeing," for the Max Charlesworth Festschrift in *Sophia*, Vol. 51, Issue 4, December 2012, pp. 509-30.

the uranic and the chthonic, creation and destruction, is revisited. Ricoeur who was only too eager to conclude that "the principle permeating all creation-myths [including Near Eastern and Mediterranean myths] is 'the final victory of order over chaos'" (*TJM* 123). Taking issue with Ricoeur, Iwasawa could see that the Japanese tradition could well hold onto the tensions and contradictions perceived therein, or at least the polarity, between chaos and order, without needing to flee from them, or overcome them, or bury them, or go mute on the dialogic process, or abandon the project of living and morality, and the challenge of re-mythologization that a people or culture may be called upon. Like Escher's spiralling stairway, or Nietzsche's eternal returns, there is a recurring cycle of chaos and order; "order is never permanent, repeatedly confronting contradictions that re-invigorate and re-organize itself [sic]" (*TJM* 123).

Likewise, on earthly sins, that include defilements and calamities visited as a consequence or even otherwise on the community, the sole cause is not blamed on the individual committing certain misdemeanours, for which of course he will be rightly judged, but in part is attributed to the ebb and flow of *ki* (気), the vital force and energy in nature (related to *chi*?), similar to natural disasters which are beyond human control. *Ki* registers for the Japanese the limits of the vigor of *tama*, perhaps like the principle of entropy. And this can be rectified through community rituals (not unlike the massive *yajnas*, sacrificial rites, performed periodically in India and patronised or sponsored by well-endowed *rajās*, kings). Storms, deluge, earthquakes and tsunamis too, let us say, as well as decline in fertility, libidinal prowess, creativity, vitality and cognitive function, are caused when the condition of *ki* is compromised and thereby the homologous equilibrium between heaven and earth is lost or decreased. Untoward human action is part of the fall-out; hence the wrongdoer is not pulled aside as the sole perpetrator or contributor to the particular crime for which he is socially stigmatized. This calls for compassion and understanding and an effort towards rehabilitation of the criminal, following certain expiatory rituals or rites of atonement.

I do have one question: Whereforth love? Is there space and role for love within the broadened nuance of the cipher of *tama*?

While going through these chapters, I kept wondering whether the author was aware that such myths as described above and especially the dialectical response to the Ricoeurian problem of evil and his own theodical solution (corrective on Western theodicy),

abound in the Indian textual corpus as well. And to my surprise a single short passage is cited almost at the very end of the book on the myth of Indra (often known as Indra's net (*jal*), though the source given is Mircea Eliade). Indra is the Vedic storm god, and this is what is said of him:

Whether we see him sending thunderbolts to strike Vrtra, or setting waters free, or sending the storm that goes before rain, or absorbing fabulous amounts of *soma* [read beer/spirits], whether we see him fertilizing the fields or see his fantastic sexual powers, we are always faced with some manifestation of the life force... Indra keeps the cosmic forces constantly in motion to circulate biospermatic energy through the whole universe. He has an inexhaustible reservoir of vitality, and it is upon this reservoir that the hopes of mankind are based. [*TJM* 132]

Indra is also the giver of immortality, and the model for later pantheistic God of Hinduism.

The dread of the *chthonic*, unlike in Western (particularly monotheistic and *mono-onto-lingual*) consciousness is not *suppressed and exterminated* so that the dialectic could culminate in a unitary One. Shankara's nondual ontology holds the tension between Samkhya's ultimate principles of *Purusha* and *Prakriti* (Spirit and Matter, Male and Female), *sat* (being) and *asat* (non-being) in equipoise, in integral balance, so that there is never Two, but not One either (despite what we might be inclined to understand by the oblique term Brahman, for what is equally important is the implicative involvement (internment) of *Ishvara*, the gods, *mithya* (illusionary manifestations), that gets even more pronounced in Ramanuja's theology and in the cosmo-theophany of the *Bhagavadgita*'s. Hence in *tama* metaphysics too, one sees that the "reality of everyday life is relativized, and we learn that life originally consists, not of the ordered cosmos, but of inconsistencies and incongruities; in other words, we realize that all beings are ultimately non-foundational" (*TJM* 153).

It is also the case that, unlike the Platonic dialectic that eventuates in immaterial Ideas (ἰδέεα), the dialectic of *tama* does not culminate "in anything, nor does it pursue sublimation." This non-foundationalism, the bottomless ground of uncertainty and quiddity of contradictory and incongruent dialectic of life and death, good and bad, God and anti-God, the pure and impure, the uranic and the chthonic, is also I believe echoed in the vivid and compelling imagery in the tenth Mandala of the *Rig Veda*, where the fishy-*rishis* are speculating on the origins of the universe; and I would

like to end with this as an offering of a parallel insight of the work of *tejas* (*ojas*), the fire/heat-in-life force which the seers beheld permeating the entire universe and beyond, and beneath too.

Nasadiya Sukta (Hymn of Creation)³

There was neither non-existence nor existence then.
There was neither the realm of space nor the sky which is beyond.
What stirred?
Where?
In whose protection?
Was there water, bottomless deep?

There was neither death nor immortality then.
There was no distinguishing sign of night nor of day.
That One breathed, windless, by its own impulse.
Other than that there was nothing beyond.

Darkness was hidden by darkness in the beginning,
with no distinguishing sign, all this was water.
The life force that was covered with emptiness,
that One arose through the power of heat.

Desire came upon that One in the beginning,
that was the first seed of mind.
Poets seeking in their heart with wisdom
found the bond of existence and non-existence.

Their cord was extended across.
Was there below?
Was there above?
There were seed-placers, there were powers.
There was impulse beneath, there was giving forth above.

Who really knows?
Who will here proclaim it?
Whence was it produced?
Whence is this creation?
The gods came afterwards, with the creation of this universe.
Who then knows whence it has arisen?

Whence this creation has arisen
— perhaps it formed itself, or perhaps it did not —
the One who looks down on it,
in the highest heaven, only He knows
or perhaps He does not know.

³ *The Rig Veda: An Anthology*, trans. Wendy Doniger O'Flaherty, New York, NY: Penguin Classics 1981, p. 25.