An International Journal in Philosophy, Religion, Politics, and the Arts

Existenz

Volume 7, No 2, Fall 2012 ISSN 1932-1066

Introduction to *Tama in Japanese Myth*

With Reply to My Critics

Tomoko Iwasawa
Reitaku University
tiwasawa@reitaku-u.ac.jp

Abstract: The main thesis of this book is that relationship between the human and the divine manifested in Japanese myth is best understood by way of the symbolism of *tama*, and that this concept of tama discloses the hidden structure of the *Kojiki*, the oldest existing text of Japanese myth. This thesis challenges the prevailing notion that *kami* is the key to understanding the Japanese conception of divinity as well as the Japanese human-divine relationship. Western scholars have frequently criticized the Japanese concept of *kami* as being inconsistent, complicated, or ambiguous. This criticism, however, occurs by failing to appreciate the central role of tama in Japanese religious experience.

Keywords: Myth, Japanese; phenomenological hermeneutics; comparative philosophy of religion; re-mythologizing; the *Kojiki*; the *Nihon Shoki*; *tama*.

Opening Statement

The theme of this book is Japan and the Japanese religious consciousness. Here I would like to ask you how Westerners have historically described the Japanese. John Dower, a historian and the Pulitzer Prize winning author of *Embracing Defeat* that deals with the history of modern Japan, answers this question by saying that since the time of the Jesuits, "the most important and enduring conclusion was that *the Japanese were inscrutable*."[1] Dower maintains that, up to WWII and even afterwards, "comparable rumors flourished concerning the Japanese mind…the Japanese did not think as other peoples did, and were certainly not guided by 'reason' or 'logic' in the Western sense. They were often said to 'feel' rather than think, or to think with their 'whole being' rather than just their brains. Their minds were described as 'pre-Hellenic, pre-rational, and prescientific'—labels which were also commonly employed in discourse concerning the inferiority of the female mind" (*WM* 106). Such description of the Japanese as "being *inscrutable*" has not been an extreme view but popular among the Westerners. We can find its typical example in Ruth Benedict's *The Chrysanthemum and the Sword*, one of the most influential books on Japanese culture written in English, in which Benedict emphasized the "foreignness" and "strangeness" of Japanese culture for Americans.[2]

It may be said that my project was partly motivated by this common view of the Japanese, to explore if indeed Japanese culture is so unique, i.e., unique in a negative sense. Should the Japanese mind so remarkably deviate from the Western mind, must we regard it as primitive, or in other words, as still in a developmental stage and immature compared to the Western mind? Or is there another way of describing Japanese culture in a more

[1] John W. Dower, *War without Mercy: Race and Power in the Pacific War*, New York, NY: Pantheon Books 1986, p. 95. [Henceforth cited as *WM*]

[2] Ruth Benedict, *The Chrysanthemum and the Sword: Patterns of Japanese Culture*, Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co, 1946.

universal context, one that encompasses both Western and Japanese experiences on an equal footing?

Actually, this tendency of understanding the Japanese as being unique/indigenous has been entertained not only by Westerners but also by the Japanese, who liked to consider themselves to be different from other peoples; the undesirable side of this belief resulted in ultra-nationalism and ethnocentrism during WWII. My project of elucidating Japanese religious experience by way of a new interpretation of Japanese myth was prompted by this historical problem of Japanese Studies in general. The aim of the book, therefore, is to deliver Japanese Studies from this tendency, both of the Western and of the Japanese, to emphasize only the uniqueness and indigenousness of Japanese culture; instead it tries to re-contextualize Japanese Studies so that we can discuss what is Japanese in a more universal frame of reference.

This book is about Japanese myth, and the universal frame of reference that I employ is phenomenological hermeneutics. The book consists of two parts: Part I examines the history of interpreting Japanese myth, and Part II explores the manner in which various symbols of Japanese divinity—especially, the symbol of *tama*—manifest themselves in the concrete discourse of Japanese myth. Based on my re-contextualizing strategy, I apply Western methodologies to my analyses both in Part I and in Part II. Part I employs Jaspers' theory of mythologizing–demythologizing–remythologizing in analyzing Japanese intellectual history of interpreting myth, while Part II applies Paul Ricoeur's interpretation theory to interpreting Japanese mythical symbols. Today, I would like my critics to examine whether my project of applying these Western theories to the interpretation of Japanese myth is valid or not.

The main thesis of this book is that relationship between the human and the divine manifested in Japanese myth is best understood by way of the symbolism of *tama,* and that this concept of *tama* discloses the hidden structure of the *Kojiki*, the oldest existing text of Japanese myth. This thesis challenges the prevailing notion that *kami* is the key to understanding the Japanese conception of divinity as well as the Japanese human-divine relationship. Western scholars have frequently criticized the Japanese concept of *kami* as being inconsistent, complicated, or ambiguous. This criticism, however, occurs by failing to appreciate the central role of *tama* in Japanese religious experience.

In order to explore the symbolism of *tama* in Japanese religious experience, the book proceeds by way of a two-dimensional analysis; first, Part I analyzes how the Japanese have understood the concept of *tama* historically. In this analysis, the book focuses on the works of *Kokugaku* scholars in the Edo period, who for the first time in the Japanese intellectual history emphasized the importance of exploring Japanese myth. Here I employ Jaspers' theory of mythologizing–demythologizing–remythologizing in analyzing Japanese intellectual history of interpreting myth as a tool of exploring its meta-history; second, Part II examines the manner in which the concept of *tama* is manifest in the concrete discourse of the *Kojiki.* This interpretation is conducted by way of phenomenological hermeneutics, i.e., by what Paul Ricoeur identifies as the three basic manifestations of the origin and the end of evil: defilement, sin, and guilt—notions characterizing the divine-human relationship in the Judeo-Christian tradition. Ricoeur concludes that the myths of evil "embrace mankind as a whole in one ideal history."[3] Part II asks whether Ricoeur's analysis applies to Japanese myth as well.

My analysis of Japanese myth, however, proposes an antithesis to this view that absolutizes one understanding our being in the world as *ideal*. Contrary to Ricoeur's theory that holds "the final victory of order over chaos" (*SE* 175) as central to the development of the mythical consciousness, Japanese myth emphasizes a 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.

I have analyzed this dynamic cycle in "the dialectics of *tama*." *Tama* is often compared to spirit and soul in Western philosophy and religion, and especially to the German concept of *Geist*. *Tama* is a dynamic concept encompassing the spiritual and the material, the metaphysical and the physical; it develops in ways that do not presuppose a dichotomy between ideational and sensible worlds—the dichotomy that informs Western theism and the Platonic tradition of metaphysics. In contrast to the Platonic dialectic, which pursues its culmination in immaterial Ideas, the dialectic of *tama* does not culminate in anything, nor does it pursue sublimation. Instead, it continues to dwell in the earthly, driven forever by the contradiction of being in this world—the contradiction of life and death, good and evil, the pure and the impure, the uranic and the chthonic. The Japanese mythical consciousness finds

[3] Paul Ricoeur, *The Symbolism of Evil*, Boston, MA: Beacon Press 1967, p. 162. [Henceforth cited as *SE*]

no deep-seated dissatisfaction with this world, no philosophical quest for theodicy. For this consciousness, the world is simply the way it is, organic, cyclical, and well-balanced even with contradictions. The earthly is never evil, but accepted and affirmed.

The dialectic of *tama* represents the principle of life always in flux like the Heraclitean *physis*, motivated by the driving force of contradictions that life necessarily contains within itself. As Hegel asserted, what constitutes Heraclitus' *physis* is the principle of the world and that of the soul, both of which participate in the dynamic process of Becoming. *Physis* at once reveals and conceals itself. At any certain moment, we may think that the absolute principle of *physis* has been revealed. The next moment, however, what appeared to be absolute conceals itself, and we are again lost in darkness. There is nothing absolute in *physis*, nor in our existence, insofar as we belong to *physis*. In this worldview, Heraclitus' thought and the philosophy of *tama* resonate perfectly with each other. What permeates the Japanese notion of *tama* as well as the Heraclitean *physis* is the concept of vital life-process—dialectic being its genuine expression. Unlike Platonic/Hegelian dialectic, however, this dialectic embodies both light and darkness, good and evil, pursuing the dynamism of process itself, not the stabilization of this process into unity.

As Ricoeur observed, the monotheistic Western consciousness created its own dialectic by suppressing and exterminating the chthonic so that this dialectic could culminate in a unitary One. By contrast, the Japanese mythical consciousness has incorporated the chthonic into its dialectical system as a positive occasion that can re-invigorate and re-organize reality. The Japanese mythical figure Susanowo represents this principle of the chthonic. Susanowo's lawless violence shatters the assumptions of ordinary everyday experience. By doing so, he transforms the world into the primal, pre-formal, chaotic state. This counter-world, however, serves to illuminate the realities of the ordinary world from a totally different perspective. 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.

This realization, however, need not necessarily lead to chaos or nihilism. Rather, it provides a clue to better understanding our being—its complexity and multiplicity—as well as an opportunity to re-examine previously accepted values. The philosophy of *tama* begins from a realization of the ultimate non-foundation/ non-ground of our being in the world.

As yet another aspect, the Japanese myths and rituals repeatedly dramatize the moment of death, or to use Mircea Eliade's phraseology, "the return to the womb." Amaterasu most typically expresses this moment, central to the Japanese pantheon, personifying the Dying and Reviving Goddess, and thus symbolizing the moment in which *tama* dies and revives. By making us repeatedly encounter the phenomena of death and rebirth, the Japanese myth emphasizes that death is not an end, but a passing to a new existence. The chthonic is not an enemy outside us, but an absolutely necessary source for the reinvigoration of our being. Here the chthonic is not merely decried as defiled, irrational, or evil. Rather, it is revered as a power revealing the complexity and contradiction of human existence irreducible either to the ideational or to the sensible, to the pure or to the impure, to the good or to the evil. The chthonic in the Japanese myth manifests itself, on the one hand, as monstrous and dreadful, but on the other hand, as the primal giver of affluent creativity and empathy. It is through the powerful manifestation of this complexity and contradiction of humanity that the Japanese concept of the chthonic poses a crucial question: "Why do we live?"—in other words, "What is the meaning of being in this world?" Japanese mythical consciousness responds with the dialectic of *tama.*

Thus, I would like to invite the participants of today's book session to contemplate if such a message of *tama* is unique to the ancient Japanese religious experience, or does it have any universal significance and validity?

Responding to the Critics

First, let me respond to Professors Rambelli's and Palencia-Roth's question: Why have I referred only to the *Kojiki*, and not to the *Nihon Shoki*?

The *Kojiki* vs. the *Nihon Shoki*

Two texts are officially recognized as recording the ancient myths of Japan: the *Kojiki* (古事記 : *Record of Ancient Events*, completed in 712 CE), and the *Nihon Shoki* (日本書紀 : *Chronicle of Japan*, 720 CE). Completed in the eighth century under the auspices of the imperial court, both the *Kojiki* and the *Nihon Shoki* tell stories of cosmogony as well as of the origin and development of Japan as a nation, through a collection of myths, historical and pseudo-historical narratives and legends,

songs, anecdotes, and genealogies. The stories compiled in the *Kojiki* and the *Nihon Shoki* overlap in many instances, although they have many differences, too.

The two texts are similar in the following points. First, both the *Kojiki* and the *Nihon Shoki* tell stories of cosmogony as well as of the origin and development of Japan as a nation, through a collection of myths, historical and pseudo-historical narratives and legends, songs, anecdotes, and genealogies. Second, both texts originated from two pre-existing ancient books (the *Teiki*, meaning Imperial Chronicles, and the *Kuji*, meaning Ancient Dicta) handed down by the court, which consisted of genealogical and anecdotal narratives respectively. Third, Emperor Temmu, who reigned 673-686 CE and had a strong interest in the historiography of Yamato, commanded the compilation of both texts.

In spite of these similarities, they have the following important differences. First, their structures are different. The *Kojiki* has a literary style, providing readers with one consistent story: beginning with the genesis of the world, then the birth of numerous deities, and its genealogical continuation to the history of the imperial family. In contrast, the *Nihon Shoki* is a huge collection of various patterns of Japanese myth; the book has its main body, but simultaneously introduces various different versions of each depiction, by saying: "On this point, another book says…, another book says…, another book says…," to show the plurality and variety of traditions handed down from ancient times by various clans.

The contents of these two texts are also different. Most strikingly, they tell the beginning of the world differently. The *Kojiki* describes it as:

> At the time of the beginning of heaven and earth, there came into existence in Takama-no-hara a deity named Ame-no-mi-naka-nushi-no-kami; next, Taka-mi-musuhi-no-kami; next, Kami-musuhi-no- kami. These three deities all came into existence as single deities, and their forms were not visible.[4]

In contrast, the *Nihon Shoki* describes the beginning of the world as:

> At the time of the beginning, heaven and earth were not yet separate. There was not yet the separation of yin and yang, but only their signs could be found. Then, the pure and brighter part moved up to make the heaven, and the impure and heavier part moved down to become the earth. Thus, the heaven first appeared, and then, the earth. After this, various deities were born in them.[5]

The *musuhi* deities that play an important role in the *Kojiki* do not appear in the main body of the *Shoki*, which, instead, introduces these deities simply as a different version of myth. Also, the *Nihon Shoki* does not mention Takama-no-hara (the Heavenly Realm), nor Yomi-no-kuni (the Land of the Dead), both of which are regarded by the *Kojiki* as the main realms where the divine stories develop; what, instead, appears in the *Nihon Shoki* is only Ne-no-kuni (the Land of Roots). Other differences can be found in the *Nihon Shoki,* such as: (1) there is no story of Izanami killed by her own "fire" child; therefore, (2) Izanagi does not go to Yomi-no-kuni to get Izanami back, and eventually, (3) Izanagi and Izanami together give birth to Amaterasu, Tsukuyomi, and Susanowo (while in the *Kojiki*, these three deities are born from Izanagi alone).

Why the *Kojiki*?

In addition to these differences, I maintain that the most important difference between the *Kojiki* and the *Nihon Shoki* consists in their writing styles. While the *Nihon Shoki* was written in Chinese (漢文 : *kanbun*) following the conventions of the early eighth century, the *Kojiki* was the first historical attempt to write in Japanese.

When the *Kojiki* and the *Nihon Shoki* appeared in the eighth century, the Japanese had finally developed their writing styles by completely imitating Chinese writing. As the Japanese became more and more experienced in writing Chinese, progressively distancing themselves from the indigenous traditions of their oral language, they became concerned that their Japanese oral tradition could not be accurately expressed in the Chinese language. In other words, a few literate Japanese feared that their oral language conveying their traditional ways of thought and expression might disappear when completely absorbed by the Chinese written form. The *Kojiki* was created from this critical reflection on the relationship between oral tradition, written language, and living speech. By contrast, the *Nihon Shoki* was written in a completely Chinese style, and therefore was strongly influenced by Chinese ways of thinking. It can be said that the *Kojiki* represents the internal struggles of the Japanese language in its development from oral

[4] The *Kojiki*, trans. Donald L. Phillipi, Tokyo: University of Tokyo Press 1968, p. 47.

[5] The *Nihon Shoki*, Vol. 1, Tokyo: Iwanami-Shoten 2011, p. 16. [Trans. by the author]

to written form through its encounter with the Chinese script. In other words, to uncover the meanings of the *Kojiki* does entail wrestling with the dynamic internal process of the generation of the Japanese language.

The *Kojiki* is very interesting as a subject of phenomenological hermeneutics. That is why I have chosen the text of *Kojiki* in this study, trying to listen to the voices of the *Kojiki*, and let the *Kojiki* speak to us by revealing moments of origination in the Japanese language and therefore in the Japanese modes of thinking.

The Danger of Re-mythologizing

At the same time, however, I recognize the *danger* of my re-mythologizing project. Professor Rambelli pointed out this issue by questioning if my reference to only one concept (*tama*) from one single text (*Kojiki*) may lead to the very reductionism that results from a Nativist approach.

Once politicized or dogmatized as a tool for fixing reality, any attempt of remythologizing instantaneously degenerates into mythologizing. In early twentieth century Japan, this mythologizing movement culminated in the elucidation of the *kokutai* (国体 : national polity) concept, which became the core slogan of Imperial Japan during World War II. *Kokutai* literally means the "body of the nation" of which the Emperor is the head, viz., the Meiji-era politico-religious concept central to the Japanese imperial system up to 1945. The *Kokutai no Hongi* (国体の本義 : Cardinal Principles of the National Body) was an ethics textbook for schools and universities published in 1937 by the Ministry of Education. Its focus was on the notion of *kokutai* and it emphasized the nationalistic ideology that asserted the superiority of the Emperor and the people of Japan to the people of all other nations. In its first section, this textbook recounted as actual history the mythological origins of the Japanese nation and the sacred ancestry of the Emperor, drawing directly from the *Kojiki* and the *Nihon Shoki*. Under such canonization of the *Kojiki* and the *Nihon Shoki*, Japanese myth was given a sacred dogmatic status no longer open to debate.

Mythologization is characterized by a strong tendency towards exaggerated reduction of complexity to a simple univocal meaning. Through the process of mythologizing, the complexity and richness of Japanese myth was reduced to simple historical facts. The true hermeneutical spirit opposes this temptation of mythologizing, and engages in the restless pursuit of ciphers beyond any fixed reality. Indeed, Jaspers was aware of the difficulty implied in the concept of remythologizing, but believed that the possibility of our *Existenz*—insofar as it cannot live without meaning-construction—must be found in the never-ending pursuit of elucidation through the language of ciphers.

This remythologizing, however, should never return to mythologizing a particular culture's value-system. We must learn from and eschew the history of the nineteenth century *kokugaku* movement that ultimately degenerated into enhancing nationalism, by providing those deprived of community and traditional values with myths of religious and political belonging. Such mythologizing exalts insiders over others; this results, neither in greater humanity nor wisdom, but rather in greater fragmentation and alienation of that particular culture from its neighbors. The true purpose of remythologizing is to confer a sense of community and values that unite or connect alienated modern people with a larger humanity, rather than simply exalting a particular ethnic folk tradition and values by a bygone mythos.

For this purpose, constant relativization (i.e., demythologization) is necessary for our re-mythologizang project. In Ricoeur's expression, demythologization means "the separation of myth and history," while re-mythologization is an attempt to reconnect these two.

The Dialectic of *Tama:* Japanese Cyclical Worldview vs. Western Linear Worldview

Professor Palencia-Roth beautifully contrasted Japanese cyclical worldview with Western linear worldview. Now I, too, would like to emphasize this point.

Ricoeur analyzed that the theme underlying the Western cosmogony was "the final victory of order over chaos." What supports this Western theme is the historical consciousness that posits the linear progress toward the realization of the universal, transcendental order that is never affected by the changes in the phenomenal world. The Japanese mythological consciousness clearly opposes this progressive worldview. In the Japanese context, "order" does not mean what is attained by destroying and overcoming chaos; rather, it means a momentary balance and equilibrium realized in the dynamic circulation of opposite powers—the living and the dead, the pure and the impure, the rational and the irrational, the uranic and the chthonic. In this cyclical worldview, order is never fixed or eternal, but is constantly determined by

the ever changing interdependent whole that forever repeats the dynamic recurrence of life and death.

The Japanese Dialectic and Heraclitus' *Physis*

As Professor Bilimoria pointed out, I compare the Japanese dialectic of *tama* to Heraclitus' *physis*. Now let me clarify this point again.

In contrast to the Hegelian dialectic, whose ultimate purpose is to culminate in Absolute Being, the Japanese dialectic does not culminate in anything; nor does it pursue sublimation. Instead, it continues to dwell in the corporeal, driven forever by the contradictions of being in this world—the contradictions of life and death, good and evil, the pure and the impure, the uranic and the chthonic.

Fire in Heraclitus represents the "self-moving process of the world," in which nothing is permanent but everything changes and is eventually superseded by its contradictions. In this fire metaphor, Hegel found the concept of "dynamic process of Becoming," which he believed is the absolute principle of Being, and of the Spirit.

Physis at once reveals and conceals itself. At a certain moment, we may think that the absolute principle of *physis* has been revealed. The next moment, however, what appeared to be absolute conceals itself, and we are again lost in darkness. There is nothing absolute in *physis,* nor in our existence, insofar as we belong to *physis*. If this is what Heraclitus meant by *physis*, he seems to stand very close to the Japanese mythical consciousness.

Let us recall the very beginning of the *Kojiki* where the triad of deities appeared. They are the deities of *musuhi*, the vital force permeating all living beings. The message that the *Kojiki* conveys to us is that these *musuhi* deities, as soon as they emerged, concealed themselves; the truth of being oscillates between light and darkness. This suggests that we can assert the Japanese concept of *musuhi* to be another expression of the Heraclitean *physis?*

The fact that Heraclitus connected *physis* with *fire* strengthens the resemblance between his thought and the Japanese myth. As Hegel asserts, the fire symbol in Heraclitus unites the principle of the world and that of the soul, both of which consist in the *dynamic process of Becoming*. In the same manner, the Japanese mythical consciousness found the symbol of fire a most appropriate manifestation of the principle of *tama,* engaging in never-ending dialectical movement. Thus, *physis* and *psyche* are united through the symbolism of fire, which analogously unites *musuhi* and *tama.*

The Theme of Love

Professor Bilimoria asked: Where is "love" in the cipher of *tama*? My answer is by way of examining what is the foundation of morality for the Japanese. For the Japanese, morality is not derived from the metaphysical Absolute, but from the depths of the flesh, not from above but from below, as it were.

According to Motoori, it is "the Way of Knowing *Mono-no-aware*" that characterizes the Japanese mode of morality. *Mono-no-aware* means the feeling of being moved. Examined more precisely, *Mono-no aware* consists of two Japanese words: *mono* and *aware*. First, *mono* is usually translated as "a being" or "beings," but what Motoori means by this term may correspond better to the Jaspersian concept of *Existenz*: it signifies a mode of determinate being, in which being itself is manifested. The other term, *aware,* means the exclamatory "Ah." We let out such Ah when we are deeply moved by the modes of other determinate beings; it is an encounter that makes one transcend one's ego, dissolves the distinction between one's consciousness and others', and leads to the realization that one is lived by other beings, i.e., the realization of human solidarity and co-responsibility with the collective. This notion of "being moved" is a natural phenomenon for humans. However, if we are occupied by conventional self-interest and do not transcend the selfish ego, we can never experience such ecstatic moment of being moved. When one is dispossessed of the egoistic and narcissistic ego and fully engaged in the experience of *Mono-no-aware*, the being of others no longer becomes an object standing over against oneself. Instead, the beings of one and others transcend their distinction, and become united in the totality of being. It is this experience of unity that brings about an existential transformation of one's consciousness. I would say that this experience of unity can be properly called love. I think that this principle of *Mono-no-aware*—love for beings—strongly characterizes the Japanese mode of morality throughout history, and also now.