

FOUR OUTSTANDING FEATURES OF SHINTO

By

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CHAPTER I

DEVELOPMENT OF SHINTO FROM NATURAL TO CULTURAL RELIGION

I

The Term Shinto

To begin with: Shinto or Kaminomichi or the Way of the Kami or the Gods is the designation, the name, of the religion, indigenous to the soil of Japan, observed by the people of Japan from time immemorial. What then is meant by the Japanese word *Kami*, the English equivalent of which is god or deity or sometimes soul or spirit? It would be rather a difficult task for me at the very beginning of such a brief course of lectures to make clear the concept of the Japanese Kami, with its various complicated shades of meaning; but, nevertheless, I hope that patient students of my lectures may be able to form an adequate idea of the meaning of the term for themselves before the end of my discourse.

I think that, instead of trying to devote myself to the idle task of defining Kami at the outset, I might here better tell you first of all something of the main

divisions of Shinto, which are of much interest and importance to students of the religion.

Shinto may be divided into two classes: the Sectarian or Denominational Shinto which is sub-divided into 13 sects and the Shinto of the national faith of the Japanese people generally, the latter of which to distinguish it from the former, is often inadequately called the State Shinto Religion. I say "inadequately" because the terms "state" and "religion" as used in the usual sense of the term in the West are in a considerable degree misleading in the case of the Shinto in question. The national Shinto faith of the people makes its concrete manifestation in the form of the so-called Jinsha (Jinja) or Shrine Shinto, while it is taught in schools to the younger generation under the name of national ethics. In other words, Shinto, as the national faith, has now developed into a unique form of national morality glowing with the holy fire of religion, and just herein lies the peculiar Japanese patriotism or loyalty to the Mikado or Sovereign, suffused with a devotional quality of religious intensity, of which I will speak later on. Such being the case, for the sake of clearness of expression, permit me to repeat that both the Sectarian Shinto and the national faith of the Japanese people are no doubt religions, although some Japanese go so far as to say that the Japanese national faith of the so-called State Shinto is no religion at all, being regrettably misled by the ethical camouflage of the latter.

II

Shinto as a Nature Religion

According to the category of development, religion is broadly divided into two types: one being nature religion, the other culture religion—I might call the latter ethico-intellectualistic religion—and the former is subdivided into lower and higher. The very beginning of Shinto is lower nature religion; Shinto in this first stage expresses itself in (1) Nature Worship or Naturism, (2) Fetishism, (3) Spiritism, (4) Ancestor Worship, (5) Totemism and (6) the so-called Primitive Monotheism or belief in the deity of a primitive monotheistic nature. I am sorry, however, that I cannot here with the limited time available, make even a brief survey of each of these phases, but I may be permitted to invite reference on the subjects to my book, "A Study of Shinto, the Religion of the Japanese Nation" (1926 in English; the French version, the Musée Guimet, Paris, 1931). Shinto in the higher nature stage is polytheism, in the strict sense of the term, as distinguished from the polydemonism of Shinto in the stage of lower nature religion, that is to say, polytheistic Shinto belongs to the stage of higher nature religion. In this stage Shinto is full of mythology, characterized by the divine drama presented in the *Kojiki* (Records of Ancient Matters) and the *Nihongi* (Chronicles of Japan) played by different anthropomorphic gods in the arena of the Takamagahara or Plain of High Heaven, the Japanese Olympos, where the Japanese celestial beings dwell, and act and often take council, like the Greek

gods of Homer. As with the Homeric Pantheon, that of ancient Shinto represents unmixed downright polytheism consisting of a divine hierarchy. Amaterasu-Omikami, the Ancestral Sun-Goddess; her impetuous divine brother Susano-o-no-Mikoto, the deified rainstorm, mythologically considered; and Tsukiyomi-no-Mikoto, the Moon-God, are a divine triad, each being born of the divine parents Izanagi and Izanami, respectively presiding over the Plain of High Heaven, the vast expanse of Ocean, and the realm of Night. In the Kojiki and the Nihongi the conflict between the sun and the rainstorm is mythically and graphically described, with final victory to the sun, resulting in the banishment of the God of rainstorm following a verdict of the divine council held by the eight-hundred myriads of Gods in the dry bed of the Heavenly-Eight-Sand-Bank-River, i. e., the Milky Way. We see, similarly, in Greek mythology, divine councils were often held on Mt. Olympos, presided over by Zeus, father and king of gods and men, with his divine consort Hera, accompanied by his son Apollon, his daughter Athene and many other divine potentates under him. Five male and three female divine children were miraculously born of the Sun-Goddess and the Rainstorm-God through the supernatural wondrous power inherent in the Sacred Sword and Jewels they held, and the oath which they took on the banks of the Heavenly River. The dramatic scene of the Plain of High Heaven passes on to the theatre of the earth, when Ninigi-no-mikoto, Grandson of the Sun-Goddess Amaterasu-Omikami, descended from the Plain of High Heaven upon the Wondrous Peak of Takachiho in Hyuga Province, and after-

wards the local guardian God, Okuninushi-no-Kami of Izumo Province, a descendant of Susano-o-no-Mikoto, handed over the country to the Heavenly Grandson by a peaceful agreement, thus founding the Japanese Empire. The Ancestral Sun-Goddess Amaterasu-Omikami had expressed to the Heavenly Grandson on his descent to earth her best wishes for his prosperity and for the sacred mission of the Japanese nation in the following words:—

“The Luxuriant Land of Reed Plains is a country which our descendants are to inherit. Go, therefore, our Imperial Grandson, and rule over it! And may our Imperial lineage continue unbroken and prosperous, co-eternal with Heaven and Earth!”

This well-known inaugural address of the Ancestral Sun-Goddess must at once remind Westerners of Yahweh's words of promise to his chosen People of Israel in sending them to the land of Cannan. Thus we read in Genesis (xii):—

“Now the Lord had said unto Abraham, Get thee out of thy country, and from thy kindred, and from thy father's house, unto a land that I will show thee: and I will make of thee a great nation, and I will bless thee; and make thy name great: and thou shalt be a blessing: And I will bless them that bless thee, and curse him that curseth thee: and in thee shall all families of the earth be blessed”.

Here we see a parallelism or similarity between the religious history of the Israelites and that of the Japanese people, although we do not fail to discern discordances between the two religions.

III

Shinto as a Culture Religion

As the history of religions shows us, when progress is made in the civilization of a nation, her religion advances in the intellectual and ethical sense of the term, and thus from nature religion comes forth culture religion or ethico-intellectualistic religion. The case is the same with Shinto. From the Shinto of nature religion its cultural form develops, i.e., natural Shinto passes on to cultural or ethico-intellectualistic Shinto.

(1) Intellectual Progress.

This tendency is seen even in the remote age dealt with by the Nihongi. As early as in the reign of the Emperor Nintoku Japanese history indicates the fact that there were men who had already become mentally advanced enough to judge a god as true or false. Thus when a man named Koromonoko was about to be sacrificed to a certain river-god, his newly awakened intellect enabled him to discern and declare that this pretended river-god was false since no really true god could require such a bloody offering as a human sacrifice, and in consequence Koromonoko was saved. A similar case is related in another tradition. It is said that a local mountain god, or rather demon, living in a towering cryptomeria tree and working mischief continually on passers-by, was expelled from the locality by the miraculous efficacy of a sutra recited by a Buddhist monk, Nichi-An by name. A letter of apology which, the tradition says, was sent by the demon from his tree-top retreat to the monk, is now to be seen at the Butsugenji Temple (the present Myoshoji) at Ito in Izu Province, although no one has been able to decipher the incomprehensible characters in which it is written (*to be continued*).