

**Helen Hardacre, *Shinto: A History***

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Helen Hardacre, the former Director of the Edwin O. Reischauer Institute of Japanese Studies at Harvard University, has published several volumes on Shinto-related topics, such as the fate of Shinto shrines in the southern Kanto region of the late Tokugawa and early Meiji periods and a Shinto-derived new religion, Kurozumikyō, for example. Therefore, she could draw on her earlier studies when writing *Shinto: A History*. However, this volume is much more ambitious in that it covers the complete history of the “Shinto” phenomenon. Foreign researchers on Japanese culture and students of Japanese religions will have some knowledge of Shinto, but one may ask why their studies are usually focused on a certain period, a particular shrine, or an aspect of Shinto, and why has there been no comprehensive study of Shinto’s history in a foreign language.

In the course of reading *Shinto: A History* at least one reason for this state of affairs became increasingly clear to me. By studying Buddhism or Christianity, for example, the student can gain advanced insights by delving into basic texts, yet in the study of Shinto, this kind of approach does not let one get very far. I cannot forget a visit to the Grand Shrine of Izumo with a group of Christian missionaries. Our intention was to receive firsthand instruction concerning the religious tenets held by the priests of the shrine and to be given a chance to observe some of their shrine’s rituals. When the priest who was to instruct us appeared, he declared right away: “There is no doctrine I need to explain to you, what is important for us are our rituals.” In her book, Hardacre does offer explanations, but in most cases, these are explanations of ideas guiding rituals or of certain administrative measures taken by the civil authorities. With this procedure she brings together a great number of different threads, weaving them into a whole; namely, into the coherent picture of the history of Shinto. Roughly speaking, the threads she weaves together come from two kinds of sources—a variety of historical documents and her years of personal fieldwork experience.

In the introduction, Hardacre explains her concept of Shinto, saying that “Shinto encompasses doctrines, institutions, ritual, and communal life *based on Kami worship*, including representations of Kami in the arts” (1), but then she adds an important qualification, “[b]ecause Shinto has Kami at its center, *it might be assumed that it is a religion*, but this study resists starting out with that assumption. Instead, *I question the character of the tradition at each stage of its history* and ask how Shinto was regarded at the time” (2, emphasis added). In order to do this, she conceives of “a new vantage point” (5), formulated by two types of dichotomies: indigenous tradition vs. foreign influence (or outward orientation) and public vs. private. Yet, she cautions the reader not to be surprised if these dichotomies may not always be clearly applicable; they would still be helpful to grasp the changing of ideas about Shinto “up to the present”

(6). This is a refreshing view, I believe. It helps make us aware of traps when using the term “religion” too uncritically, as if its meaning in Western discourse also applied naturally to the phenomenon “Shinto.”

Hardacre organizes the book’s sixteen chapters into four groups she calls periods, but they are not meant to follow the customary system of periodization used for Japanese history; rather they are to highlight important developments in the history of Shinto. Furthermore, we are invited to keep in mind that the term “Shinto” does not appear at the outset of the historical development of the phenomenon which later is given that name. The first group (chapters 1 to 4) is called the “ancient period” and covers the Yayoi period (400 BCE) to the twelfth century. The period’s beginning sees the consolidation of the rule of the Yamato clan with the help of the Chinese *ritsuryō* system. This legal system is based on three elements: the concept of *jingi* (deities / kami of heaven and earth / land); the *jingiryō* (Kami Law) to regulate the state’s calendar; and the government office of the *jingikan* (Council of Divinities), which will experience many ups and downs throughout its history but succeed to survive into modern times as the Jinja Honchō, the head of the National Association of Shinto Shrines. It is a system of the ruler, who, guided by his divine ancestors, guarantees the peace of the realm. Although at this early stage in history the term “Shinto” itself is not used, the author considers this to be the institutional origin of Shinto.

In terms of the indigenous-foreign dichotomy, Hardacre finds an expression of it in the two chronicles of the eighth century, *Kojiki* and *Nihon shoki*. The *Kojiki* (Aston 1972; Kurano and Takeda 1981), although written in Chinese, has no reference to something foreign like Buddhism so that it appears to be an expression of nativist or indigenous thinking, while the *Nihon shoki* (Philippi 1968; Sakamoto, et al. 1981) refers to Buddhism and, therefore, shows its openness toward the outside. Yet, Hardacre argues that the emphasis on Chinese thought and institutions served the Yamato clan to bolster its position over all the other clans. The end of this period, however, sees a significant change wherein the private comes to test the public. The most significant public ritual, the *Ōharae* (court ritual), the Great Purification, becomes more and more a private means used by non-imperial clans to protect themselves against kami that have increasingly become imagined as endowed with a moral character. This change made it possible to think that kami may be ill-disposed toward humans so that they need to be appeased by purification.

Chapters 5 to 7 cover the “medieval period” from the thirteenth to the sixteenth centuries, a period Hardacre characterizes as the period of “esoterization” of Shinto. Under the influence of, or in opposition to, esoteric Buddhism, attempts are made to understand Shinto and its relationship to Buddhism. Ryōbu Shinto, an amalgamation of the two, where Dainichi takes the form of Amaterasu, is an example of the first, while Yoshida Shinto, through Yoshida Kanetomo in particular, claims not to rely on Buddhist forms. Kanetomo proposes a unified and comprehensive doctrine that conceives the universe as being pervaded by a principle that animates it and whose moral center is in the *kokoro* (heart-mind) of humans. He also creates a system of shrines based on the secret transmission of doctrine and on licenses granted to selected shrines by Yoshida Kanetomo and his successors. Yoshida Shinto, as a system of shrines, demonstrates its public character while at the same time remaining private because of the secrecy by which its doctrine is transmitted. As a result, it is situated somewhere on the border between public and private.

Chapters 8 to 11 discuss the “early modern period” from the seventeenth to the nineteenth centuries. Efforts are made to rationalize Shinto with the help of Confucianism. The government is intent to regulate religion by public authority, while scholars like Hayashi Razan and Yamazaki Ansai teach that the kami dwells in the heart-mind (Hayashi) and that Shinto is the way to follow the will of the kami (Yamazaki). Kami, therefore, was thought as having an interest in the moral/ethical behavior of humans, which reveals the private aspect of Shinto. Another element that reveals the power of Shinto as private motif for action is the emergence of Shinto-derived new groups based on a divine revelation to their founders on one side, and the phenomenon of ecstatic pilgrimage to the Ise Shrines on the other. But the end of this period experiences a return to the roots of Japan’s tradition, apparent in the rejection of Chinese and other foreign learning by Kokugaku scholars and the efforts of the Hirata faction to restore Shinto thought under the name *fukko shintō* (Restoration Shinto) to its original, pristine level by bringing it back to the common people.

In the last five chapters (chapters 12 to 16), Hardacre discusses “modern Shinto” from the time of the so-called Meiji Restoration up to the early years of the twenty-first century in the Heisei Period. During the Meiji years it was a period of attempts to deliver Shinto from foreign (Buddhist) influence and to restructure it as genuinely Japanese. These attempts were made in order to create a brand of Shinto called “State Shinto” that was intended to be “the core of Japanese ethnicity” (357). Yet its definition, as Hardacre notices, remained unclear, because, on one hand, it had no creed and, on the other, the state did not simply take Shinto under its tutelage and manage it. In fact, using statistics about the support the state had given to Shinto shrines, Hardacre can show that only a relatively small number of shrines were substantially supported by the state, while the state used Shinto shrines and institutions in order to impose its political ideology. Therefore, Hardacre comes to the conclusion that “State Shinto” is not Shinto “managed by the state” but manipulated by the state. And furthermore, that such manipulation did not end with the abolition of “State Shinto” by SCAP (Supreme Commander of the Allied Powers) and the Constitution of 1947 but continues to this day, as for example the ongoing disputes about the legality of official visits by members of the government to the Yasukuni shrine suggest. The last two chapters of this section, as with the whole volume, are an ethnographic report about Hardacre’s fieldwork on an old *matsuri* (festival) celebrated in Fuchū, a suburban township in the west of Tokyo. The study is a pertinent illustration of the fate suffered by an important shrine at the hands of a civil administration oblivious of the festival’s religious significance. But, in this case, the dedication of the shrine’s priest, supported by the shrine’s lay community, eventually succeeded in restoring the festival’s mythic and religious significance.

After having covered a long road through a complicated history, Hardacre lets the reader have a glance at living Shinto in present-day Japan, popular culture included, in the book’s last chapter, “Heisei Shinto.” Just a short while ago the Heisei Period came to an end with the abdication of Emperor Akihito. The rites of his abdication were Shinto rites, but the fact that during his reign as emperor he had visited thirty-seven locations where soldiers and civilians had died “for the Emperor” during the nation’s wars, yet never paid a visit to the Yasukuni Shrine, was not well accepted by both the government and the National Organization of Shinto Shrines. Although he was the symbol of the state, he was perhaps more the symbol of the people and their religious

feelings. At the end of her book, Hardacre briefly writes of the character of Japanese religiosity: “if we are to characterize the way in which people are religious in Japan, it would be closely linked to the *family* and to *tradition*, emphasizing the things that people *do*, rather than attention to doctrines” (517, emphasis added). I happily agree with her, but after having read *Shinto: A History*, I find myself asking: what does this book tell us about Shinto as the common people have lived it throughout their history? The documents we can study and analyze are mostly documents left by people in a position of power, leaving only little, if any, space for the thinking and doing of the common people. I do not intend to blame the author for something she could not do, but I think that we should keep in mind when we read this book, that it probably can represent only one viewpoint, namely the official and public side of Shinto. Nevertheless, Hardacre’s great effort has matured into an important and precious tool for specialists as well as, or perhaps even more, for readers with no or only limited knowledge of the Japanese language for a trustworthy encounter with Shinto. Numerous illustrations, statistical tables, a list of Japanese terms, and an extensive bibliography help to better understand the argument and pursue it further.

Having said so much already, I still would like to draw attention to a problem that occurs on only a few pages. I think that it is more important than it may seem at first, especially when considering that not every reader would have a firsthand impression of Shinto and its shrines. The problem has two aspects that happen to be related. The first aspect is rather minor but still annoying. It is a misrepresentation of the titles of two books. The title of Yamamoto Hiroko’s Iwanami book of 1998 is not *Chūsei Shintō* but *Chūsei shinwa* and that of Suzuki Masataka’s 2001 study of an intriguing aspect of religious folklore is not *Kami to hotoke no minzokugaku* but *Kami to hotoke no minzoku*. The other is a mistranslation of a term that results in a misunderstanding of fact. In her discussion of the section “Medieval changes in shrine and temple architecture” (178–81), Hardacre uses the two authors’ findings, but the second aspect of the problem appears in her usage. She mentions “the introduction of wooden flooring (instead of earthen floors) and ‘rear chambers’ (*ushirodo*) or underground chambers (*geden*)” as a new architectural feature in sanctuaries of the time (178). “Rear chamber” is the correct translation of *ushirodo* 後戸, but to translate *geden* 下殿 as “underground chamber” in this context is very problematic. In fact, pace Hardacre, I believe it is not correct. Kuroda Ryūji writes about the main hall of the Hie shrine: “There is a ritual space under the floor of the main hall called 下殿 (*geden* or *shitadono*), but this space is not underground. It is used by people of the lowest social strata as a shelter” (Kuroda 1999, 56; my translation and adaptation). As can readily be recognized on many medieval pictures of sanctuaries, they are usually built on pillars so that the air can circulate under the floor of a hall. In this space under the floor (*yuka shita* 床下) of a hall, the ritual space called *geden* can be arranged, but it is a dark room that needs to be lit by torches. This somewhat-removed chamber, a special form of *ushirodo*, can also be found in Ise. However, it is not an “underground chamber,” which Hardacre appears to believe, as evident from the following statement: “[t]hese chambers were apparently located beneath the main sanctuaries and the all-important Heart Pillar (*shin no mihashira*). Food-offering rites were held there” (179). It is true that such rites could be held under the floor of a sanctuary, but they could not be held under the Heart Pillar of the Ise Shrines precisely because this Pillar is so “all-important” that nobody can even approach it, not to mention build some underground space beneath it.

Kuroda Ryūji made a diagram of the space under (*yuka shita*) the Inner Shrine as it is probably arranged for a food-offering ritual. Here, the Heart Pillar is surrounded by a fence. In front of that fence the offerings are arranged on three platforms by the *mono no imi* 物忌, a man and a girl who alone are permitted to look after the Heart Pillar. However, there is no underground space under the Heart Pillar (Kuroda 1999, 187, diagram no. 5). Could that space perhaps be somewhere else? Hardacre mentions that the Aramatsuri no Miya, a subshrine to the Inner Shrine “served as the rear chamber, but in addition, it also contained an underground chamber” (179). This shrine is built some distance from the Inner Shrine for the *aramitama* (the “rough spirit”) of Amaterasu. Suzuki Masataka points out that there is no rear chamber for rituals and no space for rituals or taking shelter in under the shrine floor of the Ise Shrines, but the enshrinement of the *aramitama* behind the Inner Shrine may have the same meaning as a rear chamber where rituals to threatening spirits could be held (Suzuki 2001, 216). This means that certain rituals were held in the space beneath the floor of a sanctuary, an area designated by terms such as *yuka shita* or *geden*, but that this was not a space to be found underground. Of course, we are not living in the twelfth century anymore, but even a visit to the Ise Shrines today will make it clear that there is no accessible space under the Heart Pillar, not under the current and not under the former. For this reason, it is unfortunate that such an informative and useful book like *Shinto: A History* may give the wrong impression about an important aspect of the Ise Shrines.

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