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W.G. Aston

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# SHINTO: THE ANCIENT RELIGION OF JAPAN

## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTORY

**Origins.**—The Japanese are in the main a continental race. Their language and physical characteristics show conclusively that they come from Northern Asia, and geographical considerations indicate that Korea must have been their point of embarkation. Indeed a desultory emigration from Korea to Japan continued into historical times. When we say Northern Asia we exclude China. The racial affinity of the Japanese to the Chinese, of which we hear so often, really amounts to very little. It is not closer than that which unites the most distantly related members of the Indo-European family of nations. The Japanese themselves have no traditions of their origin, and it is now impossible to say what form of religion was professed by the

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earliest immigrants. No inference can be drawn from the circumstance that Sun-worship is common to them with many North-Asiatic races. The Sun is, or has been, worshipped almost everywhere. There is distinct evidence of a Korean element in Shinto, but, with the little that we know of the old native religion of that country, anything like a complete comparison is impossible. Some have recognised a resemblance between Shinto and the old state religion of China, and it is true that both consist largely of Nature-worship. But the two cults differ widely. The Japanese do not recognise Tien (Heaven), the chief Nature-deity of the Chinese, nor have they anything to correspond to their Shangti—a more personal ruler of the universe. The Sun is masculine in China, feminine in Japan. The Sun-goddess takes precedence of the Earth-god in Japan, while in China Heaven and Earth rank above the Sun and Moon. Some Chinese traits are to be found in the old Shinto documents, but they are of later origin, and are readily distinguishable from the native element. A few similarities exist between Shinto and the religion of the Ainus of Yezo, a savage race which once occupied the main island of Japan. But it is reasonable to suppose that in this case

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the less civilised nation has borrowed from its more civilised neighbour and conqueror rather than *vice versa*. It is significant that the Ainu words for God, prayer, and offering, are taken from the Japanese. If the Malay or Polynesian element, which some have recognised in the Japanese race, has any existence, it has left no trace in religion. Such coincidences as may be noted between Shinto and oceanic religions, myths and practices are attributable to the like action of common causes rather than to inter-communication. The old Shinto owes little to any outside source. It is, on the whole, an independent development of Japanese thought.

**Sources of Information.**—The Japanese had no writing until the introduction of Chinese learning from Korea early in the fifth century of our era, and the first books which have come down to us date from the beginning of the eighth. One of these, called the *Kojiki* (712) is said to have been taken down from the lips of a man whose memory was well stored with the old myths and traditions of his country. He was perhaps one of the guild of ‘reciters,’ whose business it was to recite ‘ancient words’ at the ceremony which corresponds to our coronation. The *Kojiki* is a repertory of the old myths and

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legends, and, in the latter part, of the ancient history of Japan. The *Nihongi*, a work of similar scope, though based more on an existing written literature, was produced a few years later (720). It quotes numerous variants of the religious myths current at this time. There are voluminous and most learned commentaries on these two works written by Motoöri and Hirata in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. For the ritual of Shinto our chief source of information is the *Yengishiki*, a compilation made early in the tenth century. It contains, along with minute directions regarding offerings, ceremonies, etc., a series of the *norito* (litanies) used in Shinto worship which are of the highest interest, and of great, though unequal, antiquity.

The above-mentioned authorities give a tolerably complete account of the old state religion of Japan, sometimes called 'Pure Shinto,' in order to distinguish it from the Buddhicised cult of later times. Its palmy days may be taken to extend from the seventh to the twelfth century. Shinto, literally 'The Way of the Gods,' is a Chinese word, for which the Japanese equivalent is *Kami no michi*.

## CHAPTER II

### GENERAL CHARACTER OF SHINTO

**Kami** is the ordinary Japanese word for God. It means primarily above, superior, and is applied to many other things besides deities, such as nobles, the authorities, the 'missus,' the hair of the head, the upper waters of a river, the part of Japan near Kiōto, etc. Height is in every country associated with excellence and divinity, no doubt because the first deities were the Sun and other Heavenly objects. We ourselves speak of the 'Most High' and use phrases like 'Good Heavens' which testify to a personification of the sky by our forefathers. But though Kami corresponds in a general way to 'God,' it has some important limitations. The Kami are high, swift, good, rich, living, but not infinite, omnipotent, or omniscient. Most of them had a father and mother, and of some the death is recorded. Motoōri, the great Shinto theologian, writing in

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the latter part of the eighteenth century, says:—

‘The term *Kami* is applied in the first place to the various deities of Heaven and Earth who are mentioned in the ancient records as well as to their spirits (*mi-tama*) which reside in the shrines where they are worshipped. Moreover, not only human beings, but birds, beasts, plants and trees, seas and mountains, and all other things whatsoever which deserve to be dreaded and revered for the extraordinary and pre-eminent powers which they possess, are called *Kami*. They need not be eminent for surpassing nobleness, goodness, or serviceableness alone. Malignant and uncanny beings are also called *Kami* if only they are the objects of general dread. Among *Kami* who are human beings I need hardly mention first of all the successive Mikados — with reverence be it spoken. . . . Then there have been numerous examples of divine human beings both in ancient and modern times, who, although not accepted by the nation generally, are treated as gods, each of his several dignity, in a single province, village, or family. . . . Amongst *Kami* who are not human beings, I need hardly mention Thunder [in Japanese *Naru Kami* or the Sounding God]. There are also the Dragon, the Echo [called in Japanese *Ko-dama* or the Tree Spirit] and the Fox, who are *Kami* by reason of their uncanny and fearful natures. The term *Kami* is applied in the *Nihongi* and *Manyōshū* to the tiger and the wolf. Izanagi gave to the fruit of the peach, and to the jewels round his neck names which implied that they were *Kami*. . . . There are many cases of seas and mountains being called *Kami*.

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It is not their spirits which are meant. The word was applied directly to the seas or mountains themselves as being very awful things.'

**The Kami Beneficent.**—The saying of the old Roman poet that 'Fear first made the Gods' does not hold good of Shinto. It is rather, as Schiller called the worship of the gods of Greece, a *Wonnediensst*, a religion inspired by love and gratitude more than by fear. The three greatest gods, viz. the Sun-goddess, the Food-goddess, and Ohonamochi (a god of Earth, the universal provider), are all beneficent beings, though they may send a curse when offended by the neglect of their worship or an insult to their shrines. Their worshippers come before them with gladness, addressing them as fathers, parents, or dear divine ancestors, and their festivals are occasions of rejoicing. But there are some malevolent or mischievous deities who have to be propitiated by offerings. The Fire-god, as is natural in a country where the houses are built of wood and great conflagrations are frequent, is one of these, and, in a lesser degree, the Thunder-god and the deity of the Rain-storm. The latter has, however, good points. He provides trees for the use of humanity, and rescues a maiden from being devoured by a great serpent.

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Lafcadio Hearn's view that Shinto was at one time a religion of 'perpetual fear' is unsupported by evidence.

**Classes of Kami.**—Although the Kami are deficient in several of the attributes of the Christian God, they possess two essential qualities without which it would be impossible to recognise them as deities at all, viz., sentiency and superhuman power. The union of these ideas may be accomplished in two ways, first by attributing sense and will to the great elemental objects and phenomena, and secondly by applying to human and other living beings ideas of transcendent power derived from the contemplation of the mighty forces on whose operation we are daily and hourly dependent for our existence. We have therefore two classes of deities, Nature-gods and Man-gods, the first being the result of personification, the second of deification. It has been the generally received opinion that the Shinto gods belong to the latter rather than to the former of these two categories. Nine out of ten educated Japanese will declare with perfect sincerity that Shinto is ancestor-worship. Thus Mr. Daigoro Goh, a former secretary of the Japan Society, says:—'Shinto or ancestor-worship being the creed of the ancient inhabitants.' The same



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view is held by some European scholars, notably the late Lafcadio Hearn, whose interesting and valuable work, *Japan, an Interpretation*, is greatly marred by this misconception. It is quite true that there is a large element of ancestor worship in modern Japanese religious practices, but a very little examination shows that all the great deities of the older Shinto are not Man, but Nature gods. Prominent among them we find the deities of the Sun, the Moon, the Earth, the Sea, the Rain-storm, Fire, Thunder, etc. And when the so-called ancestors of the Japanese race are not actually Nature-gods, they are usually the satellites or children of Nature-gods. In imitation of the Mikados who selected the Sun-goddess as their ancestral deity, the hereditary corporations or clans by whom in ancient times the Government of Japan, central and local, was carried on, chose for themselves, or perhaps invented, nature-deities, or their children or ministers, as their patron-gods, to whom special worship was paid. From this to a belief in their descent from him as an ancestor, the transition was easy. The same process has been observed in other countries. It was assisted by the habit of addressing the deity as father or parent, which, at first a metaphorical expression, came ultimately to be

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understood in a more literal sense. These pseudo-ancestral deities were called Ujigami, that is to say 'surname-deities.' In later times the Ujigami ceased to be the patron-gods of particular families and became simply the local deities of the district where one was born. Children are presented to the Ujigami shortly after birth, and other important events, such as a change of residence, are announced to him. A deity of any class may become an Ujigami, and there have been cases of a Buddha attaining to this position. The cult of one's real forefathers, beginning with deceased parents, as in China, was hardly known in ancient Japan. Indeed there is but little trace of any religious worship of individual men in the Shinto of the *Kojiki* and *Nihongi*. Living Mikados were styled Kami, and spoken of as the 'Heavenly Grandchild' of the Sun-goddess. But their godship was more titular than real. It was much on a par with that of the Pope and Emperor who in the Middle Ages were called 'Deus in terris.' No miraculous powers were claimed for them beyond a vague general authority over the minor gods of Japan. Deceased Mikados were occasionally worshipped by their descendants, but whether there was anything in this so-called worship to distinguish it from the ordinary funeral