Undermining the Myths: Habian’s Shintō Critique

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“On Shintō” is a short but nonetheless remarkable document, and deserves wider acclaim. It is remarkable not least because it is the first known intellectual assault on the Japanese creation myths since they were committed to writing back in the eighth century. “On Shintō” also offers a trenchant critique of the Yoshida School of Shintō 吉田神道, whose growing authority in the late 16th and early 17th centuries derived, partly at least, from its espousal of the same creation myths.¹ There also surfaces here an intriguing political quality that may set it apart from Myōtei Dialogues’s other sections. This introduction is intended to offer some embellishment for each of these three observations, and so make sense of the sometimes obscure—but always fascinating—exchanges on Shintō between the two women Yūtei and Myōshū.

The Creation Myths

Myōshū is very much drawn to the kami Kunitokotachi. Kunitokotachi, she insists, is not only the first kami to appear in the Nihon shoki 日本書紀, he is also the kami responsible for creating the cosmos.² Yūtei, who knows that Myōshū is here rehearsing a very Yoshida-type take on the myths, dismisses her statement as “preposterous.” Yūtei directs Myōshū back to the Nihon shoki and proves it to be entirely silent on the matter of creator kami. Kunitokotachi is the object, not the instigator, of creation, insists Yūtei. She goes further: Kunitokotachi does nothing more or less than embody the principle of yin-yang. Yūtei insists the other kami, too, are trooped out simply to explain the workings of Chinese yin-yang theory. Izanagi is not really a divine being at all but the force of yin, while Izanami is the force of yang.

¹ The Yoshida School was founded by Yoshida Kanetomo 吉田兼倶 (1434–1511) and by 1486 was more influential than Ise Shintō. It was therefore in a very strong position at the beginning of the seventeenth century and was given a major role in organizing Shintō institutions for the rest of the Tokugawa period. On Yoshida Shintō, see Breen and Teeuwen 2010, pp. 47–52.

² The Nihon shoki or Nihongi (720), written in Chinese, was the first comprehensive history of Japan. Its early sections deal with the mythical period, the creation of the world and the founding of the Japanese state.
Yūtei allows, then, that Chinese yin-yang theory propels the mythical narrative forward, but she proceeds to dismiss this theory as “entirely shallow, unworthy of consideration.” Yūtei’s striking conclusion is that the creation myths are in reality but a coded and crude account of sexual relations between a man and woman: a laughable attempt to explain how men and women couple to create children, who grow to become adults and create more children. In brief, the creation myths reveal nothing of the mysteries of the cosmos and nothing of the creation of Japan.

There follows an intriguing exchange between Yūtei and Myōshū on Amaterasu the Sun Goddess. Yūtei is amused to hear Myōshū assert that the sun is, in fact, a god worthy of veneration: she had always assumed the sun to be an inanimate, insentient object. It is precisely because the sun is inanimate, with no will of its own, that we can predict solar eclipses and plot the summer and winter solstices, she advises. “Pathetic fiction” is how she rebuts the story of the sun and the moon ascending the sacred pillar to Heaven. And as for the sun taking refuge in a cave, and so plunging the world into darkness, well, this is simply “utterly ridiculous.” If the sun were an animate object capable of the actions attributed to it in the myths, then surely its offspring would be suns; multiple suns would inhabit the sky. But we can see that they do not. The sun is unique.

There is much more in this vein, but Yūtei draws this dialogue to a close in the most striking fashion. There is after all no such thing as Amaterasu the Goddess of the Sun; and since Amaterasu does not exist, there can be no god worshipped at the Ise shrines; and since there is no god worshipped in Ise, there can be no point to the Ise shrines.

If we step outside “On Shintō” for a moment, and locate Habian’s myth-interrogation in the broader context of early modern intellectual history, we can see just how striking the position is that he adopts. There is a little-acknowledged tradition of myth-interrogation in the intellectual discourse of the Edo period that seeks to undermine the central narrative of the creation myths. It appears in the work of some of the most influential thinkers of Edo Japan from Arai Hakuseki 新井白石 (1657–1725), to Andō Shōeki 安藤昌益 (1703–1762), and beyond to Yamagata Bantō 山片蟠桃 (1748–1821).

Like Habian, these men all dismissed as preposterous any literal reading of the creation myths. But unlike Habian, each believed that embedded within the narrative nonsense were nuggets of historical truth waiting to be dug out. These men set themselves the task of exposing the nonsense, examining the truth and, indeed, according it value. For Hakuseki, for example, the kami protagonists who structure the myth-narrative were in reality human agents. He claimed no knowledge of them, of course, but he believed their names...