Chapter 6

Rebirth of a Hirata School Nativist: Tsuruya Ariyo and His Kaganabe Journal

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This chapter reconsiders a number of questions surrounding the individual subjectivity (shutaisei 主体性) of scholars in early modern Japan, by examining materials in the context of Hirata kokugaku (or nativism).1 First, by what means can the scholarly and political subjectivity of disciples of Hirata Atsutane (1776–1843) be gauged? Second, how did Hirata followers reconcile possible tensions between their individuality and the academy’s teachings? And third, if Hirata kokugaku facilitated the political subjectivity of some groups and individuals, was this necessarily determined by class, gender, and social background?

Other scholars have examined closely related issues. In 1966 Itō Tasaburō’s ground-breaking research on Hirata kokugaku, or ‘grassroots nativism’ (sōmō no kokugaku), shed light on the spread of Atsutane’s teachings at the rural level.

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1 ‘Nativism’ is an English translation for the Japanese word kokugaku (国学), which literally means ‘study of the country or nation,’ and is also translated as ‘National Learning.’ Specifically, kokugaku refers to the study of classical texts to glean an ancient Japanese Way. During the Tokugawa period, the kokugaku school emerged from its earlier roots of Japanese studies more generally, partly in reaction to officially sponsored Neo-Confucianism as well as the Confucian Ancient Learning school, the latter of which influenced kokugaku scholarship in terms of its methodology. Kokugaku studies began primarily as literary and philological studies in the seventeenth century, but became increasingly religious and ideological in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, as greater attention was devoted to identity formation based on history and myth, which essentialized Japanese identity as sacred and unique. The Ibukinoya Academy of Hirata Atsutane was among the most prominent of the kokugaku academies from the late Tokugawa to early Meiji periods, attracting over 4,200 disciples throughout Japan. Peter Nosco, Remembering Paradise: Nativism and Nostalgia in Eighteenth-Century Japan (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1990), p. 9.
through politically influential leadership. Writing in the late 1980s, Hirata nativism, for Harry D. Harootunian, served as a powerful ideology which valorized village leaders by “sanctioning their presumption of responsibility and local leadership,” and empowered peasants through the valorization of routine farm labor into sacred service to the Emperor and kami. Building on such insights, Miyachi Masato in 1994 identified Shinto priests and village leaders as key figures who proselytized the teachings of Hirata kokugaku and ‘Restoration of Antiquity’ (fukkoshugi) as a means to solidify the ‘subjectivity’ (shutaisei) of the ‘people’ (minzoku) who eventually toppled the Tokugawa regime and carried out the Meiji Restoration. While Miyachi and Harootunian demonstrated the dynamics between Hirata kokugaku and the collective subjectivity of specific occupational groups and the ‘people’ more generally, Anne Walthall in 1998 showed how the female Hirata School disciple Matsuo Taseko (1811–1894) and her friends put kokugaku into practice and turned it into a social movement. Walthall described how Taseko demonstrated individual subjectivity by expressing her views on national affairs through poetry, and grants that, “the Hirata school gave her an institutional framework within which to be heard.” The endorsement of the Hirata Academy by the Yoshida and later Shirakawa Shinto establishments is documented by Endō Jun, who, writing in 2008, showed how the appointment of Atsutane and his disciples as instructors for these Shinto houses facilitated the spread of ‘Ancient Learning’ (inishie no manabi) through an active network of disciples among the Shinto priesthood. Finally, on the topic of the academy’s publishing practices, Yoshida Asako in 2012 criticized the “management” perspective which over-states Atsutane’s role as active and independent author. Yoshida, alternatively, draws attention to the “subjectivity” of disciples whom she describes as proactively engaging with Atsutane in contributing ideas, and not just capital, to his publications.

2 Itō Tasaburō, Sōmō no kokugaku (Meicho Shuppan, 1966).
4 Miyachi explains that “political subjectivity” in Hirata kokugaku was invariably centered around the axis of the Emperor, and this authority was then delegated down to the various levels of leadership from the Shogun and Daimyo, down to the jità (land stewards), jinushi (landowners), and shōya and nanushi (both village headmen). Miyachi Masato, Bakumatsu ishinki no bunka to jōhō (Meicho kankōkai, 1994), pp. 228–231.