



Commentary on Iwasawa's *Tama in Japanese Myth*

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Abstract: For Iwasawa, *Tama* (spirit, soul, creative life force), more than *Kami* (deity, god), is at the heart of Japanese religion and spirituality. Yet Shinto shrines emphasize *kami*, barely mentioning *tama*, if at all. Also, conceptions of *kami* have become contaminated by Western notions of a moral God transcending his creation. *Tama*, therefore, is better suited to describe Japanese spirituality, especially as it derives from the ancient *Kojiki* and, as "the vital force that motives whatever comes into being," is more primal than *kami*. This groundbreaking study, which utilizes Western hermeneutics and phenomenology (Ricoeur, Bultmann, and Jaspers), will probably be controversial both for what it says about Japan and about Western religious consciousness.

Keywords: *Tama*; *Kami*; hermeneutics; phenomenology; Ricoeur, Paul; Gadamer, Hans-Georg; Bultmann, Rudolf; Jaspers, Karl.

I read this book in manuscript in order to comment on it for the University Press of America. I liked it and thought highly of it; so I was happy to accept the invitation to review it for *Existenz*, but with the understanding that I am not a specialist in Japanese myth, religion, literature or history. I have studied Buddhism and Shintoism to a degree. My knowledge of Japanese remains rudimentary, despite my continuous efforts. For the past several years, I have been a senior adviser to the Institute of Moralogy at Reitaku University, where I met the author, Professor Iwasawa, for the first time about a year ago.

My consideration of *Tama in Japanese Myth*¹ is in part informed by my own experiences in Japan. For example, I have visited many Shinto shrines and in particular the Ise Grand Shrine several times. That shrine, a centerpiece of Shinto, is central to the myths

of Japan's foundation and of the stories of Izanagi and Izanami, Susanowo and Amaterasu Ōmikami, who is considered the ancestress of the royal house. She is the principal deity (*kami*) celebrated and worshipped at the inner shrine (Naiku). According to Professor Iwasawa, it is *tama* (spirit, soul, creative life force) that gives rise to *kami*. This is something like the relationship between the unmanifest and the manifest in the *Bhagavad Gita* and in similar relationships or concepts from other religious traditions. For Professor Iwasawa, *tama*, rather than *kami*, is at the heart of Japanese religion. Yet I do not remember *tama* (whether pronounced as "tama" or as "rei" or "rei kon") being discussed by my various guides and Shinto specialists at the Ise-Jingu, or emphasized by the priests in the private ceremonies enacted on my behalf. If I remember correctly, most of the priests' language centered on *kami* and on Amaterasu-Ōmikami, with the rituals being devoted primarily to offerings, to her story and to her main

¹ Tomoko Iwasawa, *Tama in Japanese Myth: A Hermeneutical Study of Ancient Japanese Divinity*, Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 2011. [Henceforth cited as *TJM*]

symbols: jewels, the sword, and the sacred mirror. That reticence about *tama* is perhaps the *raison d'être* of Professor Iwasawa's book, and the act of bringing *tama* to center-stage in a discussion of Japanese spirituality is certainly an innovative strategy and, as far as I can judge, an important contribution to Shinto studies. But it is also more than that.

Her focus on *tama* has several aspects to it, which she presents succinctly. First, she states that her analysis of early Japanese spirituality is based on *tama*, not *kami*, because conceptions of *kami* have become contaminated by Western notions of the deity as a transcendent moral God separate from his creation. Second, the analysis is exclusively centered on the *Kojiki*, which is the oldest extant Japanese text on the origins of Japan and its spirits, souls, or gods, that is, the divine in the broadest sense. Third, she hopes to "liberate the *Kojiki* from the historical burden of Japan's nationalism and imperialism" by focusing on the text's mythic-symbolic language. Fourth, she seeks "new insights into the meaning of human existence and being in the world." Fifth, she intends to explore these various aspects through concepts and terminology from Western hermeneutics and phenomenology, in particular the thought of Paul Ricoeur, Hans-Georg Gadamer, Rudolf Bultmann and Karl Jaspers, with reference to Mircea Eliade, Gaston Bachelard, G.W.F. Hegel, and Martin Heidegger. These are impressive aims, and only someone of great intelligence and independence of mind would attempt them.

I respect and admire this book, just as I respect and admire Professor Iwasawa's intelligence, lucidity, and learning. Yet I have some reservations about her decisions to emphasize this or that aspect of her subject, or to use this or that critical theory and terminology. My comments fall into several categories: the presence and use of *tama* as a Chinese ideograph in the *Kojiki*; the relationship of the *Kojiki* to the *Nihon Shoki*; the relationship of the *Kojiki* to its cultural context; the use of terminology from Western thought; the applicability of some essentially Western theological notions. Admittedly, these large and perhaps inexhaustible issues are difficult to discuss as briefly as I do.

In his commentary on *Tama in Japanese Myth*, Professor Fabio Rambelli has summarized Shinto studies more expertly than I could, and he has outlined the book's main arguments. I do not consider it necessary, therefore, for me to repeat that summary and outline here.

In the sense most relevant to her book, the word or

concept *tama* is rendered in the following ideographs: 霊, sometimes pronounced as *tam* (たま), sometimes as *rei* (れい); and 魂, sometimes pronounced as たま, sometimes as *こん*. The two together, 霊魂, are pronounced as *れいこん*. These two ideographs are more important for her analysis than the characters for jewel and spherical shape (TJM 14), though both can also be associated to myths concerning Amaterasu. As たま, the dictionary meanings are given as "soul; spirit"; as れい, the dictionary meanings are given as "soul; spirit; departed soul; ghost." There is a cluster of terms associated with 霊 and with 魂. I reproduce a few of them here, taken from the *Denshi Jisho—Online Japanese Dictionary*,² with their hiragana pronunciations:

霊魂	れいこん	soul; spirit
霊視	れいし	to see inside someone's soul
霊屋	たまや	mausoleum; (temporary) resting place of a corpse
霊地	れいち	sacred ground
霊智	れいち	mystic wisdom
霊園	れいえん	cemetery
霊界	れいかい	the spiritual world
霊山	れいざん	sacred mountain
霊性	れいせい	divine nature; spirituality
威霊		(1) powerful spirit; (2) power of the emperor
御霊	みたま	spirit of a deceased person; "Mi" (み) is an honorific
大和魂	やまとだまし	the Japanese Spirit
魂	こん	Yang energy; spirit
魂	たま	soul; spirit
魂	たましい	soul; spirit
魂魄	こんぱく	soul; spirit; ghost
霊送り	たまおくり	sending off the spirits of the dead
魂不死説	たましいふしせつ	(theory of) the immortality of the soul

These word clusters in modern Japanese lead me to ask if they or they in combination with other ideographs occur in the *Kojiki*. That is, I wonder what more we might learn from a more detailed consideration of contextualization, not only in the *Kojiki* but also in the *Nihon Shoki*. Which ideographs, or combination of ideographs, actually are to be found in the texts? Which are later accretions, and how might that change the interpretation of *tama*? Decades ago, these questions would have been almost too time-consuming to explore, but today, with the presence of searchable electronic editions, such tasks have become more feasible.

² <http://jisho.org>

In the introduction to his translation of the *Kojiki*, Donald Philippi writes: "The *Kojiki* and the *Nihon Shoki* should be studied together. Not only were they planned and finished at almost the same time [The *Kojiki* in 712, the *Nihon Shoki* or *Nihongi* in 720, at the beginning of the Nara period], but also, in dealing with the same subject matter, they often echo, complement and elucidate each other. No serious study of early Japan is possible without making full use of both."³ The two sets of stories of Izanagi, Izanami, Amaterasu and Susanowo do indeed seem to echo each other, to complement each other. I wonder what the two works can tell us, respectively, about the relationship between *tama* and *kami*.⁴ I would imagine that a comparative etymological and philological analysis of the original and most important Chinese ideographs in both texts, and the cluster of terms around them, would yield an understanding that is as comprehensive as possible with a subject like this one. Professor Iwasawa has briefly explained why she excluded the *Nihon Shoki* from her analysis (*TJM* 7-9, 63), but I am not persuaded by her reasons. My hope is that she is postponing a detailed comparison of these two seminal texts to a future project.

In 712, when the *Kojiki* was written down, Shinto was not the only worldview in Japan. During the earlier Asuka period (538-710), Buddhism had already entered Japan (the official date is given as either 538 or 552) through China via Korea, and through the medium of the Chinese language, and Buddhism had been proclaimed the state religion about a century before work on the text that was to become the *Kojiki* began. Also, China had already been influential in Japan for centuries, not only through its language but also through Confucianism and Daoism. Moreover, beginning in the early seventh century, official Japanese missions were sent to China in order to bring back Chinese culture. In Japan, the most famous and influential document was the "Seventeen-Article Constitution," composed in 604 by Prince Shotoku, who synthesized in it Han Confucianism, Buddhism, and Japanese traditions.

³ *Kojiki*, trans. with intr. and notes by Donald L. Philippi, Tokyo: University of Tokyo Press 1968, p. 15. [Henceforth cited as *K*]

⁴ The *Nihon Shoki* presents several versions of the most important stories, each of them preceded by the phrase, "In one writing it is said." In essence, the versions are repetitions with variations. While such a presentation may detract from the literary merit of the work as a whole, it also adds to its usefulness for philological research.

Therefore, I would want to know—but I don't know if it is even possible to know with any precision—how Shinto, Buddhism, Daoism, and Confucianism are blended in the *Kojiki*. I believe that in the Nara period (710-794) these worldviews were in the mix in some way. How might each worldview have contributed, say, to the idea of nature as sacred, to the idea of a creative life-force (*musu*), to the principle of harmony (*wa*), to the idea of death and the afterlife, to the notion of evil, to ancestor-worship, to ideas or views concerning divinity, spirit, soul, or ghosts, in sum, to *tama*, *kami*, and so on?

The *Nihon Shoki* has overshadowed the *Kojiki* in terms of popularity and importance for the construction of Japan's cultural and political identity, for, written in Chinese and presented as official history, it was continuously available from the Heian period (794-1185) and beyond. The *Kojiki*, however, remained essentially unavailable from the eighth to the fourteenth century, when a priest from the temple of Shimpuku-ji transcribed the first manuscript (*K* 30), and it did not become important in Japanese culture until the nineteenth century. What is the significance of the general knowledge—or the lack thereof—of the texts for an understanding of the relationship of *tama* to *kami*? From her reading of Motoori's monumental 45-volume study on the *Kojiki*, which he completed in 1798, Professor Iwasawa suggests that *tama* was "discovered" to be in the *Kojiki* (but therefore not in the *Nihon Shoki*?) and that *tama*, "the vital force that motivates whatever comes into being" (*TJM* 15), is thus more primal than *kami* and is in fact its origin. Surely, both 靈 and 魂 may be found in the *Nihon Shoki* as well as in the *Kojiki*. Surely, a comparative analysis would strengthen rather than weaken her interpretations, both in terms of Japanese Shinto scholarship and of cross-cultural considerations vis-à-vis Western thought.

It is in part Professor Iwasawa's training in the philosophy of religion, and more specifically her work on hermeneutics and phenomenology, that has made possible the kinds of analysis and superb insight that inform this book. However, at some points, it seems to me that she seems to be over-dependent on her terminology, and that may end up confusing issues rather than clarifying them. This appears to be the case with "mythologizing, demythologizing, and re-mythologizing," for she discusses the terms as she comments on Ricoeur, Bultmann, and Jaspers, each of whom has his own ideas about them. At other times, her use of western terminology aids her argument greatly and makes it persuasive. This is the case with

her take on Ricoeur's theology of evil (defilement, sin, and guilt), as well as with her consideration of the term "dialectic."

Let us take the first triad. "Mythologizing," she defines as occurring in the Meiji era (1868-1912) up to and including World War II: at this time, to mythologize the *Kojiki* was to "confine" it to "one specific logos or explanation" supporting the nation-state (*TJM* 55). However, I prefer to think of this process as ideology-formation in the service of the myth of the state, a process that resembled what occurred in Germany in the 1930s, which built on certain kinds of scholarship undertaken in the nineteenth century. For me, mythologization is what the original *Kojiki* was all about in the eighth century. It was not just narratives; it was a cosmogony that presented the creation of the world (Japan), its first deities or beings, and its first experiences of the complexities of existence: being born and dying; living; violence and harmony; chaos and order; emotions like fear, anger, jealousy, benevolence, and compassion. For me, mythologization is a quest for coherence through narrative that is taken to be symbolic; it is an explanation of how the world arises, how it is peopled, and how things have come to be what they are. I have somewhat similar difficulties with the terms "demythologizing" and "re-mythologizing." For demythologizing, for instance, I would prefer to substitute "secularizing." This process involves the "reduction" of larger meanings to more particular and lesser ones. For "re-mythologizing" I would prefer, on the one hand, "symbolization," the making of coherent symbolic structures largely free of history, politics, or ideology; or, on the other hand, "ideology-formation" if the making of symbolic structures and meanings occurs in the service of the state or the culture at large. In either case, the symbolization and ideology-formation depend on prior "myths." But all this may be mostly a matter of my questioning the meaning and use of terminology in one field as applied to another field. Perhaps these are really questions for Bultmann and Jaspers than for Professor Iwasawa. Her comments on Shinto intellectual history concerning the pattern of the interpretation and use of the *Kojiki* in terms of myth strike me as sensible and correct, but I am not sure that Bultmann and Jaspers contribute all that much to the discussion.

As a student of Western thought primarily, I am most attracted to the entire second section of the book, which turns out to be a critique and exploration of Ricoeur's conception of the essence of religion, of the

origins of evil and its purpose in human existence. Ricoeur states that there are three notions — defilement, sin, and guilt — that define the relationship between the human and the divine in the Judeo-Christian tradition and that these notions — which belong to the problem of evil in monotheistic religions — "embrace mankind as a whole in one ideal history" (quoted in *TJM* 71). Professor Iwasawa asks how applicable all this is to Japan, to the *Kojiki*, and to *tama*. Her response is that, for her, Western monotheism limits the conception of the relationship between the human and the divine in the *Kojiki* concerning the "movements of consciousness" that are manifested in it. Japan's *Kojiki* and *tama*, she maintains, are more encompassing in this regard than Western religions are. She expands on her views in chapters about *tama* as a mediator between realms, "between the human and the divine, the natural and the supernatural, this world and the other world" (*TJM* 73). *Tama*, therefore, is associated both with the life-force (*musu* — 産す, 生す) and with the world of the dead. More importantly, as a mediator, *tama* is at the heart of a circular and unresolved dialectic.

The chapter on defilement treats the myth of Izanagi and Izanami, the first "parents" through whom the world (that is, Japan) comes into existence, and with them also the *kamis* like Amaterasu and Susanowo, the subjects of the next chapter. That next chapter deals with sin. Sin, in her view, is differently conceived in the *Kojiki* than it is in the Western Judeo-Christian tradition. Sin is not a descent from original oneness and innocence (The Garden of Eden) into the chaos of life (expulsion from the Garden), leading eventually, through an essentially linear progression, to redemption and salvation (and a new order). Sin, in the *Kojiki* and in the stories of Amaterasu and her brother Susanowo, heralds the recurring and never-ending cycle of order and disorder. Susanowo's sin is that, through his violent misbehavior and through disrespecting his sister, he brings chaos with him through his every action. But he is also a chthonic *kami*, for example, in that he destroys rice fields yet also simultaneously fertilizes them (with his feces). Amaterasu, by withdrawing to her cave and concealing herself within it, in effect permits disorder to reign in the now darkened world outside her cave. Her action is a dying, a kind of descent to the world of the dead. And yet, by the time she exits the cave, it has become symbolically transformed from a space of death into a space offering life, a womb. Most of my colleagues of the Institute of Morality at Reitaku University, perhaps inspired by the Confucian aspects of morality

itself, interpret Amaterasu's withdrawal to her cave as motivated by her desire to examine her conscience and her relationship with her brother. She comes to realize, they say, that her brother's outrageous behavior was due to her own insufficient virtue. Then, having undertaken this moral self-examination, she exits the cave determined to act always from the ground of benevolence. She is able to balance Susanowo's violence and disorder and with her order and benevolence. The equilibrium that is attained, however, is not permanent, for it recognizes the continual transformation of order into disorder, and vice-versa.

The conflicts or dualisms in the *Kojiki* do not resolve themselves into a third term, a synthesis in the Hegelian sense; a kind of equilibrium that then, through a progressive dialectic, becomes the source of further dualisms that eventually will end in unity at some future time. In the *Kojiki*, the dualisms remain unresolved and, as such, present us with a chthonic dialectic that is not Western, that is, with a conception of existence that is not linear but circular and never-ending, consisting of transformations from one state to another, from life into death and back. In the West, according to Ricoeur, it is by suppressing and exterminating the chthonic that—through this dialectic—the Unitary One can be achieved (*TJM*153). In Japanese mythical consciousness, however, the chthonic is never exterminated; rather, as Professor Iwasawa maintains, it is incorporated into a dialectical process that reinvigorates being itself. Order and harmony are not permanent; they are moments of equilibrium in a process of continual change. Is this kind of consciousness unique to Japan?⁵ Consider the importance of harmony (*wa*) in Japanese culture, present as early as the first words in the first article of the "Seventeen-Article Constitution" of 604: "Harmony is to be valued, and contentiousness avoided." Consider also the moments of equilibrium in, for example, tea ceremony, zen meditation, archery, and the *kare-sansui* garden in the Ryōan-ji in Kyoto. I believe that, rather than being unique, such moments of equilibrium, though perhaps rare in our awareness of them, are universal.

They are poignant reminders of our condition of being alive.

Is it the case that the proper analysis of *tama* today is a bringing back of something that was once central and then forgotten or repressed, as the nationalist or *kokugaku* scholars of the Edo period (1603-1868) seem to have suggested? Is it the restoration of an archaic meaning of particular relevance and importance to Japan today?⁶ Is the analysis of *tama* the analysis of Japan's special and unique identity, both culturally and spiritually? Or is it rather an uncovering of something at some level forever concealed, more unconscious than conscious, and made visible only indirectly through processes of symbolization? At various times in her text, Professor Iwasawa tends to align herself with the former analysis, especially when she discusses in detail the views of the *kokugaku* scholars, even when disagreeing with some of their interpretations. I suspect, however, that she is really after the second kind of analysis. *Tama* is that which remains accessible only through myth, ritual, allegory or symbol, which therefore is central to the most profound views of existence itself, and which is not reducible to ordinary language. The final words of most of her chapters signal, I believe, her true inclinations, despite the detailed and erudite discussion of previous scholarship. The introduction ends with the words, "universal significance and validity." Chapter I ends with a reference to Heidegger and language as "the house of being," finding an analogy with *tama*; chapter II, with a quotation from Jaspers on "ciphers" (mysteries at the root of things) and *Existenz*; chapter III, with the intention to recover a dimension of consciousness not only of the Japanese but of humanity; chapter IV, with comments on Heraclitus and the unending dialectic of revealing and concealing, of being and becoming; chapter V, with a statement of *tama* as an unresolved dialectic of order and chaos, life and death, each constantly transforming into the other. The first kind of analysis, to me, is scholarship. The second is a search for wisdom. And that, to me, is special and laudable.

⁵ The question of Japan's uniqueness is explored at length in Peter N. Dale, *The Myth of Japanese Uniqueness*, New York: St. Martin's Press, 1986.

⁶ This is the central thesis of Masao Yaku, *The Kojiki in the Life of Japan*, trans. G.W. Robinson, Tokyo: Tenriji-hosha Printing Co., Ltd., 1969.