

Chapter 2

Kami Shrines, Myths, and Rituals in Premodern Times

In the most general sense, shrines are sites where priests and worshipers interact with kami. Excavations of sites where offerings have been left over many generations reveal that the history of “shrines” in this basic meaning of the word goes back to prehistoric times. However, if we understand shrines to refer to permanent institutions, featuring buildings and dedicated priests, their emergence is much less ancient. Even more fundamentally, it is questionable whether ritual sites in different parts of Japan were perceived as specimens of a single category (“shrines”) before the classical period. Shrines came to form such a distinct category only when shrine cults were treated as members of a single species by the imperial court. Therefore, the emergence of centralized court worship of shrines in the seventh and eighth centuries was a landmark in shrine history.

Early Shrine Cults

Perhaps the most common ancient prototype of today’s shrines was an open-air site of seasonal worship, located at the boundary between the human realm where crops were grown and the chaos beyond it. A very suggestive description of such a site can be found in an eighth-century account of the shrine of a minor

lineage of chieftains, the Yahazu, who were based in the northeastern province of Hitachi:

During the reign of Emperor Keitai [early sixth century], Matachi of the Yahazu lineage cleared the reed plain in the valley to the west of the [present] district [office] and opened up new rice fields there. Then, *yato-no-kami*¹ flocked together and appeared in great numbers, stopping people from entering and cultivating the fields. According to local people, *yato-no-kami* have the bodies of snakes, carrying horns on their heads. If one looks back at them while fleeing, one's house and kin will be wiped out and one will have no descendants. Matachi was greatly angered by this. Wearing armor and carrying a spear in his hand, he slew them and chased them away. At the mountain entrance he planted a stick in a ditch as a mark, and he announced to the *yato-no-kami*: "We shall give the land above this stick to you, as the domain of the kami, but the land below it will be turned into rice fields for the people. I shall become a priest [*hafuri*] of the kami, and I shall revere and worship you in all eternity. I pray, do not strike us; do not bear a grudge against us!" He set up a *yashiro* and did worship there for the first time. He cleared ten *tokoro* of rice fields, and Matachi's descendants have performed worship here until this day. (*Hitachi-no-kuni fudoki*, NKBT 2: 54–5)

This tale is recorded in a gazetteer (*fudoki*) compiled on court orders under the supervision of Hitachi's provincial governor (c. 720?), and sheds some light on the local worship of deities called kami as it manifested itself in this particular outlying region. It depicts the kami as the original owners of the land. They are dangerous and violent and allow the people to live on the land only if soothed with offerings and prayers. The community exists due to a pact with these deities, renewed periodically through worship. By a combination of force and negotiation, Matachi conquered agricultural land from the kami. He emerges both as the founder of his community and as the ancestor of a lineage of priest-chieftains. His worship of the kami at a sacred place, called a *yashiro*, makes it possible to grow the rice on which the people depend. This *yashiro* (a word that means "temporary shelter") was not a permanent "shrine" inhabited by kami; rather, it was a

demarcated site where seasonal ceremonies took place. The kami dwelt in the natural world beyond the human realm, and were invited to this site on the border between these two worlds only for the duration of the offering ritual. As descendants of Matachi, the Yahazu chieftains derived their authority from their status as the hereditary priests of the kami of the land. The act of making offerings to the kami on behalf of “the people” was intimately linked with political leadership, and it served to validate “taxation” – control over the agricultural surplus by chieftains who acted as mediators between the community and the greater forces that threatened it from the outside.

The northeast, where this tale is set, was an area that was little affected by the great changes that transformed central Japan into a “state” fashioned after continental models between the fifth and seventh centuries. In the course of these centuries Japan slowly evolved into a centered political unit governed by the so-called Yamato dynasty; the seventh century saw the expansion of that early state into the north of the main island Honshū. No doubt this was first and foremost a military process, but in the court’s account of the subjugation of the Yahazu lands, it is presented in terms of a confrontation between the primitive deities of the land and a much more powerful type of kami:

Later, during the reign of Emperor Kōtoku [r. 645–54], Maro of the Mibu-no-*muraji* took control over this valley and ordered for an irrigation pond and a dam to be built.² Then, the *yato-no-kami* climbed into a *pasania* tree by the pond and gathered there. Time passed, but they would not leave. Maro raised his voice and demanded: “The purpose of this pond is to give life to the people. Are you heavenly deities or earthly deities, you who resist the imperial will?” To the people who had been called in for corvée duty, he said: “Kill those swimming and creeping creatures, every single one that catches your eye! Do not fear them.” Instantly, the ghostly snakes disappeared. (*NKBT* 2: 56–7)

Maro’s conquest of Hitachi revealed that the Yahazu were only as powerful as the deities they worshiped. As “earthly” deities, these “ghostly snakes” stood no chance when confronted with the heavenly might of the imperial court. When the court’s representatives

in Hitachi recorded the Yahazu legend, they made sure that it conveyed a new message: the court does better at “giving life to the people” than the Yahazu because imperial power is heavenly power. As a result of Maro’s action, the right to levy taxes was transferred to the imperial court.

The notion of “heavenly and earthly deities” (Ch. *shenqi*, Jap. *jingi*) reflected an ancient Chinese categorization, attested in Confucius’s *Analects* and other great classics. In Japan this foreign notion became the central concept around which the court organized its priestly power. The court absorbed local authority by incorporating local cults in the emperor’s universal worship of the “deities of heaven and earth.” In practice, this meant that the most important kami were integrated in a new court narrative, a “mytho-history” that established the origins of the Japanese state, and it implied that the court assumed the authority to make “heavenly” offerings to deities across the land. Together, this narrative and ritual practice constituted a new cultic system that we shall call the *jingi* cult.

Almost all information that we have about shrines in ancient Japan derives from records composed by the court in the context of this *jingi* cult. This presents us with a range of difficult problems. Classical sources mention a great number of shrines; in some places, at least, there appear to have been more shrines than settlements. Yet they reveal almost nothing about the ways in which these shrines functioned. The *jingi* cult subjected a number of these shrines to nominal court control, while at the same time priestly lineages from these shrines used the *jingi* cult to enhance their influence at court. Most shrine sites, however, were not included in this court cult, and about these we know next to nothing. The closest the Hitachi gazetteer comes to a description of actual shrine practice is a short passage about a shrine called Tsunomiya:

Every year, on the tenth day of the fourth month, a festival [*matsuri*] is held and sake is served. Men and women of the Urabe lineage gather to drink and to enjoy themselves with song and dance for many days and nights. They sing: “They tell me to drink the fresh sake of the kami – that must be why I am so drunk.” (*NKBT* 2: 68–9)

Similar incidental glimpses at shrine practice in other sources likewise confirm this image of communal festivities, mostly concentrated in the months of planting in spring and harvesting in autumn.

Jingi Myth

Mytho-history was one of the pillars on which the *jingi* cult rested. It is the function of myth to represent the present as rooted in a divine past, and thereby legitimate it and render it unchangeable. The art of writing allowed the court to give its own narrative of origins a new form of permanency and canonized authority, and with the help of Korean scribes, the legends of the royal lineage and its closest allies were codified in a number of works that are among the oldest surviving texts written in Japan. It was on this corpus that Shintoists would later draw in their search for ancient Shinto teachings.

We do not know when exactly the process of codification began, but the earliest surviving texts in this corpus, *Kojiki* (712) and *Nihon shoki* (720), clearly draw on earlier written materials.³ In outline, both works offer a similar story, although the details are at times strikingly different. The plot of *Kojiki* may be summarized as follows:

- 1 We learn the names of the first deities who “became” when heaven and earth first originated: Ame-no-Minakanushi, Takami-musubi, and Kamu-musubi.
- 2 Izanagi and his sister Izanami descend from heaven and have sexual intercourse. Izanami gives birth to the Japanese islands as well as many other deities. She dies while giving birth to the fire deity and disappears to the “Land of Gloom” (Yomi). Izanagi tries to win her back but fails. When Izanagi washes away the dirt of death, he produces the sun-goddess Amaterasu, the moon god Tsukuyomi, and the storm god (?) Susanowo.
- 3 After a violent confrontation with Susanowo, Amaterasu retires into a cave and the world is thrust into darkness. The heavenly deities gather to lure Amaterasu from the cave in