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Cosmetic Cosmologies in Japan

Notes Towards a Superficial Investigation

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Tiger and Bond stood in the shade of the avenue of giant cryptomerias and observed the pilgrims, slung with cameras, who were visiting the famous Outer Shrine of Ise, the greatest temple to the creed of Shintoism. Tiger said, 'All right. You have observed these people and their actions. They have been saying prayers to the sun goddess. Go and say a prayer without drawing attention to yourself.'

Bond walked over the raked path and through the great wooden archway and joined the throng in front of the shrine. Two priests, bizarre in their red kimonos and black helmets, were watching. Bond bowed towards the shrine, tossed a coin on to the wire-netting designed to catch the offerings, clapped his hands loudly, bent his head in an attitude of prayer, clapped his hands again, bowed and walked out.

'You did well,' said Tiger. 'One of the priests barely glanced at you. The public paid no attention. You should perhaps have clapped your hands more loudly. It is to draw the attention of the goddess and your ancestors to your presence at the shrine. Then they will pay more attention to your prayer. What prayer did you in fact make?'

'I'm afraid I didn't make any, Tiger. I was concentrating on remembering the right sequence of motions.'

'The goddess will have noticed that, Bondo-san. She will help you to concentrate still more in the future. Now we will go back to the car and proceed to witness another interesting ceremony in which you will take part.'

—Ian Fleming, *You Only Live Twice* (1965) p.90-91

A superficial citation, to be sure, but deployed with a more significant (I do not say *deeper*) end in mind: to pay attention, in this essay, to the significance of superficiality in Japan. By this, I mean the well-documented tendency of Japanese sociality to invest a serious amount of energy in the creation of surfaces.¹ For the moment, though, let us stick with this trivial epigraph, for it is instructive. In *You Only Live Twice*, James Bond – on a mission in Japan – is instructed in becoming Japanese by Tiger Tanaka, head of the Japanese Secret Service. As described by Fleming, James Bond's Japan is a kind of technicolor theatre state, parcelled up in ritual. A country of pure exteriority that Fleming invents by

papering it with clichés (so often italicised): *samurai*, *sake*, Suntory whisky, *ninja* and nightingale floorboards. How then to go undercover in a world of surfaces? Not so difficult, when identity too is just a façade. In a doubly dubious moment of mimesis, Double-O Seven play-acts at being Japanese by the easy expedient of cosmetics: black hair dye and skin-tanning lotion. Later on, Bond gives up his Japanese disguise in favour of something even more implausible. He pretends to be an anthropologist! (Fleming 1965: 121)

Ironies aside, however, consider the scenario quoted above; the prayer exercise at Ise Shrine. Suppose, for a moment, that an anthropologist were present at the scene, loitering perhaps behind a giant cryptomeria; spying on the spy. Observing Bond perform a sequence of actions and overhearing the subsequent bit of dialogue – *You did well... What prayer did you in fact make? – I'm afraid I didn't make any* – our eavesdropping anthropologist might well be led to ask herself the following question: Did James Bond pray or not? After all, he got the actions right, but then he says that actually he didn't pray; yet Tanaka, his mentor, seems to think that he did. Which is it then? Our anthropologist is fazed, both shaken *and* stirred. For while she is able to accept that, on the surface, Bond seems to pray, what she most wants to know is what's *really* happening deep down. Perhaps she remembers reading Geertz and his Rylean doctrine of thick description. The job of ethnography, she recalls, is to codify occurrences according to their particular significations, to sort out 'real winks from mimicked ones' (Geertz 1993: 16). Well then, how to tell the difference between someone making a prayer and someone faking one?

If I indulge in these fictional speculations, it is in order to create a conceptual space for the staging of analysis. Fleming's account is a fabrication – obviously – but it is, I suggest, effective nonetheless in terms of delimiting certain aspects of the ethnographic problem of prayer in Japan. In fact, more than that – to deploy this ersatz example as a means of enacting my general thesis: it is effective to the extent that it is fabricated.

To see how this passage of Fleming might turn out to be ethnographically useful – in spite of its evident exoticism, its double-O orientalism – consider the following description offered by Thomas Kasulis (2004: 27-8). He reports on the sort of typical exchange he would have with the businessmen he would often see praying at a certain shrine in Tokyo.

““Why did you stop at the shrine?”” asks Kasulis.

Says the businessman: “I almost always stop on the way to work.”

Kasulis presses him further. “Yes, but why? Was it to give thanks, to ask a favor [sic], to repent, to pay homage, to avoid something bad from happening? What was your purpose?”

“I don’t really know. It was nothing in particular.”

“Well then, when you stood in front of the shrine with your palms together, what did you say, either aloud or silently to yourself?”

“I didn’t say anything.”

“Did you call on the name of the *kami* [divinity] to whom the shrine is dedicated?”

“I’m not really sure which *kami* it is.”

So there you have it. Everything happens as if the invocation is simulated, seemingly going no further than the curve and contact of surfaces – clapping, bowing, and the pressing of palms together.² Roland Barthes possibly gestures at this image of prayer as pure exteriority at the end of his famous meditation on the ‘system’ he calls Japan. ‘Empire of Signs?’ asks Barthes. ‘Yes, if it is understood that these signs are empty and that the ritual is without a god’ (Barthes 1983: 108; 2005: 149). Certainly, the model ‘Japan’ that Barthes engineers is too heavily invested with the elements of an idealized Zen, with the result that his system puts too much stress on emptiness. At the same time, however, the merit of his analysis is its disavowal of depth; instead, it traces planes and sticks to surfaces. Consider, by contrast, a mode of inquiry that moves very differently; one for which surfaces are encountered as obstructions, when what it really wants is not more walls to run up against, but windows to look through. Just such a model of method is employed by a Cambridge Professor of Anthropology, Alan Macfarlane, with stumbling-block consequences. Writing of the goings-on at the Ise Shrine (where James Bond ‘didn’t’ pray) and other such places, Macfarlane registers confusion:

There is no God or gods and there is no other separate supernatural world. With what can ritual communicate? When thousands visit the Ise shrine or go to Buddhist or Shinto shrines and wash their hands, clap, make little monetary offerings, write up their wishes and hang them on trees, what are they doing?

There is a widespread attempt to communicate with something spiritual...But it is difficult to find out what exactly is happening. (2007: 186)

This moment of incomprehension reminds me of nothing so much as the opening lines of the song, 'For What It's Worth', by Buffalo Springfield: *There's something happening here/What it is ain't exactly clear*. Here, from the point of view of a method fixated with the location of foundations, there is, as Barthes disconcertingly observed, 'nothing to *grab hold of*' ('*rien à saisir*'; 2005: 150). In other words, the problem would seem to be that there are too many surfaces and no evident way of accessing that subterranean zone of motivations that would make them intelligible. This issue of 'access' is one which, for example, scholars of religious conversion – keener than believers in their need to finally, really *see* just what is actually going on – have rather quaintly called the 'problem of observability' (see Cowan and Bromley 2008: 218).³ In short, the problem of what we might call the credibility gap between the envelope of action (clapping, bowing) and the interior intention.

The problem surfaces once more in Nelson's ethnography of the daily life of a Shinto shrine in Kyoto, when he remarks of the various activities that shrine-goers engage in that 'the observer cannot know for certain what degree of belief accompanies such acts' (Nelson 1996: 141; cf. 136). Now this is a perfectly unobjectionable statement, quite in keeping with Nelson's sensible emphasis on the importance of allowing for a wide range of motivations (where these can be ascertained) of those who visit the shrine. But it is precisely this statement's seeming reasonableness that makes me hesitate. That is to say, I am bothered by the elementary epistemology it presupposes; for why, in this particular case, should the observer suppose *any degree* of association between such acts and certain inner states (such as beliefs) that might authorise them? Certainly, nothing in Nelson's own data suggests that 'belief', whether present or absent, has anything to do with the activities that take place at Shinto shrines. If this is so, then perhaps we have been using the wrong language, for, as currently articulated, our analytical expressions concerning these Japanese practices seem to be marked by that 'constitutive unhappiness' that, as Latour (2004: 212) says, forever hangs over the language of epistemology; the sense of regret that, although our descriptions can never get beyond the surface of practice, this is what they *ought* to be doing if they aim to reach that real, interior space of explanation. To be sure, as with other analysts of Japanese religiosity, Nelson makes it clear that 'praxical' (rather than 'creedal') concerns count (1996: 121; cf. Reader 1991: 1-22), but he reaches nevertheless for a readymade language of analysis in which a familiar space is maintained for the possibility of the presence of belief. As a consequence, the same doubts and concerns about surfaces remain, because they are lodged in the language itself; hence

the sense of uncertainty, vis-à-vis belief, is a problem of our own making, for, rather like a frustrated dermatologist, who really wishes he had taken up neurology instead, we are left with a feeling that the skin is all there is; and even if it isn't, we would never know anyway.

But what if the problem of 'what exactly is happening' (as articulated by Macfarlane, for example) was a problem best left at the level of the surface itself? In other words, if the Japanese practices we have been considering here appear to be much less cosmic than cosmetic – if, that is, they strike us as superficial – then, I suggest, that is because the cosmological in Japan is so often constituted at the cosmetic level. This, anyway, is the argument I intend to trace out in the rest of this paper. *Paper* – the very thinness of which we take to be proverbial in our everyday definitions of the superficial. But in Japan – and this is my point – surfaces might be conceptualised very differently. Paper, that is to say, might not always be indicative of the trivial. Indeed, the zigzagging strips of paper (*shide*) often to be found in Shinto shrines index the presence of divinities.

Cosmology and difference deferred – the anthropology of Japan

If my anthropological argument is inclined towards the cosmological, then it does no more than follow a certain recent trend within the discipline (e.g., Taylor 1999; Viveiros de Castro 2001; and especially Handelman 2008). Of course, anthropological interest in cosmology is by no means new – it goes back at least as far as Boas (1996) who, in famously advocating the science he called 'cosmography', was himself taking a cue from Humboldt's *Cosmos*, that massive atmospheric project that sought to relate the farthest star systems to the thinnest skins of lichen 'over the surface of our rocks' (Humboldt 1860: 68). But if there has been a renewed interest in the cosmological (a move not without its critics, as I consider below), then this would not yet seem to have had much impact on the anthropology of Japan, that distant, disciplinary star at the outer arm of the anthropological galaxy. While there are, assuredly, some outstanding exceptions (including Clammer 2001; Ohnuki-Tierney 1987; Yamaguchi 1977; 1991; 1998),⁴ it seems to me that indifference towards cosmology as a possible resource for thought might be related to a more general disciplinary suspicion towards the invocation of difference. To simplify considerably, the emergence of these doubts about difference was in part the result of the powerful attacks launched against orientalism (spearheaded, of course, by Edward Said). But the inclination to tone down difference was also a reaction against certain indigenous discourses (the so-called *nihonjinron* literature – or 'theories of the Japanese') in which Japan is presented as so utterly other that

only the Japanese are capable of understanding it (Dale 1995). Caught between orientalisms – ‘ours’ and ‘theirs’ – the easiest exit strategy has been to downplay difference altogether. But this is merely a methodological dodge that creates its own contradictions, for, as Clammer puts it, the result has been that a discipline dedicated ‘to the study of a particular Other, paradoxically fears the very differences out of which its object is constituted’ (2001: 94).

Maybe, therefore, we require new strategies, new-fashioned languages of analysis; in other words, we need *other words* (though this paper is no manifesto; I am just trying to feel my way around). Hence, what I am in search of is a style of thought that would – as the philosopher François Jullien says of his own thinking on Chinese thinking – succumb neither to a ‘lazy humanism’ that would efface all differences, nor to a ‘lazy relativism’ that would make differences absolute and inscrutable (Jullien 2003: 17). Or, put differently – if you’ll pardon my revision of an old trope – we would need to avoid the Godzilla of orientalism, on the one hand, and the Charybdis of universalism, on the other.⁵

It is therefore with an eye to the careful figuration of difference that I aim to understand Japanese practices of prayer, glossed as cosmological. But since, as Clammer observes, ‘The question of difference will not just go away’ (2001: 3), how can we address it? And what might a cosmological angle add to the endeavour? One possible way of clarifying these difficult issues would be to consider some recent, programmatic remarks made by Jennifer Robertson, which are enlightening for the very reason that they are not concerned with the cosmological at all.

In an introduction to a handbook on the anthropology of Japan, Robertson draws attention to the persistence (in Euro-American accounts of Japan) of a particular figurative device used to evoke Japanese difference: the metaphor of the mirror (Robertson 2005: 6-7; cf. Robertson 2002).⁶ The device that Robertson has in mind is the age-old trope of symbolic inversion; that is, the perception and construction of other societies as being exactly contrary to our own, of which a classic and ancient instance is Herodotus’ description of the Egyptians who (in opposition to the Greeks) do everything back to front – the women urinate standing up; the men urinate sitting down, etc.⁷ It is the enantiomorphic effect of mirrors – their exact reversal of the image in reflection – that makes them so obviously attractive for the figuring of other societies (Fernandez 1986). And Japan came to be figured in the same way. Indeed, inversion as a means of conceptualising Japanese otherness became such a commonplace in Western descriptions that Chamberlain was able to dedicate an entry to ‘Topsy-turvydom’ in his quirky, turn-of-the-century dictionary of Japanese culture (2007: 512-514). To slightly

different effect, Ruth Benedict (1967) took up the mirror and deployed it for partly satirical purposes, angling it at Japan and America in such a way as to make one wonder which culture it was that was topsy-turvy. While sympathetic to Benedict's efforts, Robertson is critical of ethnographies such as hers which resort to this mirror-imaging technique, and she stresses the connection between this Japan-as-mirror literature and the popular conception of anthropology as a 'mirror' of and for 'culture' (as it was for Kluckhohn, for example). As she observes, mirrors are quite capable of other tricks as well; so seemingly deep, they may act as solipsistic traps, specular deceptions (Robertson 2005: 6; 2002: 786; cf. Fernandez 1986).⁸

In addition, according to Robertson, it is also the ubiquity of this particular tropological technique that accounts for the large number of books on Japan that feature the word 'mirror' in the title (2005: 6-7). Robertson only cites one example, but something of the range can most easily be grasped in the most superficial way possible, by simply tallying up the book titles: *Mirror, Sword and Jewel; A Japanese Mirror; The Empty Mirror; The Monkey as Mirror*, and so on and so forth.⁹ To be sure, it is hard to see otherwise why these titular mirrors keep reappearing, unless (the whims of uninspired editors notwithstanding) we were to put it down to some strange phenomenon of specular proliferation. The latest addition to this mirror literature is Alan Macfarlane's *Japan Through the Looking Glass* (2007), a curious kind of magical mystery tour of the country; and, certainly, some of the criticisms that Robertson levels at the Japan-as-mirror literature could be applied even more forcefully here. For instance (and with acknowledgement to Lewis Carroll), Macfarlane's Japan is seemingly a place where the people are able to 'believe six impossible things before breakfast' (2007: 153).¹⁰ It is an exceptional, paradoxical and therefore almost unintelligible culture, which Macfarlane signals many times over by saying that the Japanese 'mirror' is difficult to see into (2007: 204, 212, 213, 215, 229, etc.) As for the Japanese environment, it is:

a magical landscape of the kind which I had only previously encountered in fairy stories and the poetry of Wordsworth, Keats and Yeats. This is the last great fairy-land on earth, but it did not take Disney to create it. (2007: 47-8)

It is perhaps no great surprise why Macfarlane's mirror is difficult to look into, if it keeps getting steamed up by sentimentality of this sort. In the end, however, for all his talk about the

incommensurability of Japan – which, whatever one makes of it, at least has the merit of stressing *difference* – he ends up saying that Japan can only be made intelligible if it is ‘put into a *universal* frame which would bring it back into our comprehension’ (2007: 213; italics mine). But then, whither difference? Like the Cheshire Cat, it vanishes.

Returning to Robertson, her criticisms assuredly hit the mark with regard to books like this. Her own concern is, I take it, with finding a way of figuring difference differently, without recourse to mirror-imaging which, she writes, ‘can deflect recognition of the need to learn more about Japan on terms relevant to the dynamic and intertwined histories of localities and subjective cultural formations and practices within that country’ (2005: 6). I take her point. In addition, I freely admit that my effort here, to try to imagine how a cosmology might inform certain practices at shrines, necessarily abridges and compresses all manner of local formations and histories. And yet, Robertson’s critique is too all-encompassing, linking, as it does, mirrors as tricky instruments for the imaging of Japanese culture to the titular mirrors of so much literature on Japan. Because, as she recognises elsewhere (2002: 791), it is not only anthropologists who do things with mirrors and, equally, their epistemological capacity as imaging devices may be only one of their functions (see Viveiros de Castro 2007: 165). For indeed – the trope of mirror-imaging aside – Robertson overlooks an alternative possibility that would account for the prevalence of the mirror in writings on Japan, which is that it might in fact be conceptually indebted to Japanese thought itself. Thus, one such source of the mirror metaphor is, I suggest, the historical Japanese practice of naming descriptive or historical accounts as ‘mirrors’ (*kagami*) because they purport to ‘reflect’ some place or series of events.¹¹ But the image of the mirror has alternative sources as well, because in Shinto shrines it is very often the case that divinities reside *within mirrors*. This is exactly what I would regard as the crucial cosmological angle that Robertson’s account passes over.

But before exploring what the consequences of this might be for a cosmological understanding of Japanese practices of prayer, I want to weigh up a specific criticism of cosmology as a resource for anthropological thinking. In the first paper published in this series for the OAC, Huon Wardle (2009) takes up the topic of cosmopolitics, by way of an evaluation of a debate between Ulrich Beck and Bruno Latour that was enacted in the journal, *Common Knowledge*. Wardle’s argument is acute and powerfully stated, and – if I understand it correctly – aims, by means of Kant’s notion of common sense, to create a space for an ethical and reflexive subjectivity, as part of a more cosmopolitan conception of anthropology.¹² But the part of his argument that concerns me here is his rebuke of the

use of explicit cosmological contrasts – ‘us’ and ‘them’ stagings – of the kind made by Viveiros de Castro (whose work is often championed by Latour). Says Wardle: ‘the refinement of pristine indigenous cosmologies – elaborately articulated symmetric fictions – that provide the foil to a critique of “Western” society is unsustainable’ (2009: 22). I must confess that finding an adequate response to this doesn’t come easily, except to say, lamely no doubt, that I do not wholly agree. I remain of the view that difference, deployed tactically in something like this fashion, is still a viable device for arriving at anthropological insights (see Robbins 2002). Nevertheless, my intent here is much less ambitious and I have no designs on scaling up a cosmology and ascribing it to something massive called ‘Japan’. My aims are considerably more local and superficial. But it is also partly for these same reasons that I am not sure that Kantian insights would be of much help to my argument either. Though I cannot claim to know much about Kant’s thesis of common sense (beyond Wardle’s excellent exposition), his writings on religion make me hesitate. His universalizing pretensions and strong moral sense of what should constitute reasonable religion lead him to treat all manner of diverse practices as the same in so far as they are equally ineffective. For, as Kant has it, ‘Differences of external form [*den Unterschied in der äußern Form*]...count equally for nothing’ (1998: 168) in so far as belief in the sensuous and transgressively technical nature of ritual or adherence to inflexible dogma erases all differences, as he says, between the Tungus shaman, the Bishop and the Connecticut Puritan (Kant 1998: 171).

But Kant’s anti-ritualism and thorough distrust of surfaces allow me to foreground, by means of cosmological contrast, the Japanese practices of praying at shrines with which my inquiry is concerned. For here, it is, in part, precisely the sensuous and technical aspects – the surfaces – of ritual form that make it efficacious. And this is where cosmology comes into the picture. Of course, in our everyday talk, we might be liable to assume that cosmology must refer to something of gigantic size and infinite depth (*deep space*) or to stories of absolute origin (*Big Bangs*) (Tresch 2005: 352), but the cosmology I aim to model here is arranged along its surfaces and is open to the efficacy of simulation. In characterising it as ‘cosmetic’, I do not mean to refer to make-up *per se* – though how curious that we give the name of *foundation* to that thinnest skin of emulsion, sponged across a face! Rather, what I intend is to exploit this obvious etymological relation between cosmetics and cosmos, in order to imagine how a cosmology might be constituted in facades and fabricating practices.¹³ Practices of prayer in Japan seem difficult to fathom because, *at depth*, there appears to be little there. In fact, such practices, we might feel, almost smack of the theatrical (what Kant would denounce as ‘pious play-

acting and nothing-doing'; 1998: 168). But such feelings, I would hazard, are arguably the kinds of anxieties triggered when a 'depth ontology', as Daniel Miller christens it, comes up against a counterforce of thought that takes surfaces seriously. As Miller goes on to observe, the devaluation of outsides, of the ephemeral, as somehow lacking content 'becomes highly problematic...when we encounter a cosmology which may not share these assumptions, and rests upon a very different sense of ontology' (Miller 1994: 71).

Belief or efficacy?

Japanese practices that centre on shrines are thoroughly pragmatic engagements. I recall once, almost ten years ago, paying a visit to the Hitomaru Shrine in Akashi (western Japan). With me came Maeda-san (the owner of a prominent local business selling soy sauce), in his early seventies though very much *genki* (fit and cheerful), with a puckish sense of humour. Having made some perfunctory prayers – tossing a coin into the offering box, clapping and bowing – I decided to buy an *ema*, a votive plaque. With the felt-tip in my hand, still thinking about what I ought to write, Maeda-san shouted at me across the precinct, 'The god won't understand English!' (*kami-san wa eigo wakarahen de*); both a joke and a dismissal. Notice here that there is no talk of believing, just a half-serious concern with getting the language right. It strikes me now that what Maeda-san was getting at was the question of efficacy – the issue of whether or not the message would *work*. And, in its way, this crucial sense of efficacy, to my mind, recalls the lesson of Niels Bohr's horseshoe. The story goes that someone once asked Bohr whether he believed that the horseshoes hanging over his door would bring him luck. 'No,' he replied, 'but I am told that they bring luck even to those who do not believe in them' (Elster 1983: 5). Not belief then, but efficacy. As Pirotte points out, the famous physicist was, at that moment, articulating animist principles (2010: 203).¹⁴

I guess that, were we to take this story seriously – to take it in and nail it above all our doors, as it were – our accounts of Japanese shrine-going might gain a little more felicity (to advert to a term of J.L. Austin's; Austin 1962). This is so because, although much is made of the sheer performativity and pragmatism of everyday Japanese religious practice, scholars who write on these matters often end up, *anyway*, in the position of assuming some inner space populated by beliefs or some similar 'backstage artiste' (another Austinian expression; 1962: 10). To give an instance: in an excellent and thoroughgoing ethnography of quotidian religion in Japan, Reader and Tanabe confront the well-documented

ethnographic problem ‘that people sincerely purchase amulets but do not really believe in them’ (1998: 129). From this they deduce that such activities do not involve what they call ‘cognitive belief’ and they caution against ‘the common error on the part of investigators’ to suppose that an inner domain of well-formed representations must be motivating the surface of practice (1998:130-31). Nevertheless, rather than draw (what I would regard as) the obvious animist consequences from this observation, they go on to suggest that the system of practice is founded on what they designate as ‘affective beliefs’, by which they mean intimate and emotional attachments to such things as amulets (1998: 129-31). *Yes* – but why persist in calling these ‘beliefs’? Something of the confusion of their position is, I think, evident when they try to explain that there are, of course, multiple means of apprehending a world, hence, ‘cognition and intellectual thought are not the only ways by which the world can be affirmed and *believed in*’ (1998: 129; my emphasis). But to say that there are many ways, beyond the cognitive, in which a world can be believed in is still to suppose that the foundational relation is one of belief. This is exactly the problem with the notion of ‘affective belief’; it merely consecrates the concept of belief and establishes it at an even more fundamental level.

In an argument that lacks even the nuance of Reader and Tanabe’s discussion, Martinez, writing of a fishing community in Western Japan, engages in an inconsequential excursus on Japanese religion in general in which she seems to say, on the one hand, that the Japanese don’t believe, and then, on the other, that after all, they do (2004: 70-72). In a mild rebuke of Reader and Tanabe’s position, Martinez claims that Japanese popular religiosity should not simply be understood as praxical and pragmatic because, ‘the belief in spirits and ancestor worship still holds a powerful place in the lives of many Japanese’, and anyhow, she says straight away, to overly focus on the pragmatic is to overlook ‘issues of power and politics’ (2004: 72). The reader is then dutifully referred to Asad’s (1994) seminal deconstruction of Geertz’s thesis on religion. All well and good, perhaps, but I find it strange that someone who is able to cite Asad’s argument can so casually and uncritically speak of Japanese ‘belief in spirits’. In discussions such as these, everything happens as if forty years of sustained and critical anthropological attention paid towards the concept of belief never took place.

Of course, none of this is to suggest that Japanese practices do not involve the ideational, the conceptual, etc. Rather, to chime in with the findings of Inge Daniels (2003; 2010), relations with divinities in Japan are neither established by means of belief nor are they conceptualised in these terms.

The efficacy of the artificial

And so, at last, on to matters cosmological. In an influential article (Yamaguchi 1991), the implications of which have not, I think, been fully appreciated, the anthropologist Masao Yamaguchi draws attention to a Japanese presentational technique known as *mitate* (lit. ‘seeing-standing’). This is a kind of imaging technique for the conceptualisation of something presented in terms of something else distant or absent. In the process, a kind of conceptual contiguity is established that directs attention to the invisible or virtual dimensions of the thing so presented. To illustrate this, Yamaguchi cites an example from the famous tenth century *Pillow Book* (*Makura no sôshi*):

‘In this episode a princess asks her ladies-in-waiting what name they would give a scene of a snow-covered mound in a garden. One of them immediately replies, “The snow on Mount Koro in China” (Koro is the mountain well known in the classics for the beauty of its scenery after a snowfall). The image of the snow-covered mound was given a mythological dimension by associating it with a well-known image from the Chinese classics’ (1991: 58).

Here, a relation of reference is established between a present object (a snow-covered mound in the garden) and an absent one (a Chinese mountain). The former playfully ‘quotes’ the latter. It is for this reason that Yamaguchi refers to *mitate* as an ‘art of citation’. But as Yamaguchi makes clear (1991: 64), the technique of *mitate* is not limited to rarefied contexts such as this; it is extensively deployed in the presentation of offerings to divinities (*kami*). Thus, in her ethnography of ascetic practices on Akakura Mountain in Aomori Prefecture, Schattschneider (herself drawing on Yamaguchi) describes how worshippers actualize this technique of *mitate* in their presentation of offerings to the mountain divinities (2003: 55-56). The offerings themselves are constructed and arranged as microcosmic ‘citations’ of the mountain itself; thus, glutinous rice cakes (*mochi*) ‘are carefully piled in the shapes of miniature mountains. Mounds of raw rice are shaped into perfect cones. Offered metal bells are sculpted into vertical, mountain-like towers’. In such ways, these offered objects are so many simulations of the mountain itself (2003: 56; cf. Nobuo 1994: 38).

Note that this bringing into relation that *mitate* achieves cannot easily be reduced to a process of metaphor. According to Yukio Hattori, *mitate* is rather ‘a powerful procedure for the realization of novel creations’ (Hattori 1975: 192; my translation). In a similar regard, Yamaguchi himself likens the

notion of *mitate* to Baudrillard's concept of the simulacrum; in the sense, I suppose, that the objects mobilized by *mitate* are not *merely* copies, but things that are capable of establishing their own realities (1991: 66).¹⁵ In any case, what the concept of *mitate* articulates is a notion of the efficacy of artificial, material creation. Artificiality is effective, *because* it is artificial – to say this is merely to repeat the insight of Chikamatsu, that great 17th century innovator of the *bunraku* puppet theatre (see Bolton 2002: 739, 744). Or, to put it another way, we find in this idea the recognition that the deliberate mobilisation and manipulation of forms, on a cosmetic level, can have cosmological consequences.

All of this is especially pertinent to the Japanese practices of prayer with which I began my inquiry, because, as Yamaguchi remarks (borrowing his argument from Masakatsu Gunji's study of the aesthetics of festival practices; Gunji 1987), 'Japanese gods do not appreciate true things; they do not accept things that are not fabricated by means of a device' (1991: 64).¹⁶ To recall the Geertzian injunction that troubled our fictional anthropologist, on the need to sort out real prayers from mimicked ones, it is as if, in this case, the mimicked prayer *is* the real one – so long as it is well fabricated.

Conclusion

In conclusion, we turn to mirrors again. Mirrors are often the supports or containers (*go-shintai*) within which the *kami* (gods) reside – *kami* being almost always aniconically evoked. The *go-shintai* (lit. 'body of divinity') may actually be any number of things – a painting, a mountain, a sword, a waterfall, etc. But mirrors are said to be the most common containers; not that anyone would know however. The *go-shintai* is generally concealed at the back of the shrine, inaccessible to the public. But there are mirrors that are regularly displayed in shrines, as evocations of brightness and purity. These visible mirrors are associated with the most important object among the 'three imperial regalia' (*sanshu no jingi*), this object being itself a mirror that permanently remains, concealed in multiple boxes, at the Grand Shrine of Ise, in Mie Prefecture. Ise enshrines the imperial divinity of the sun, Amaterasu Ômikami – the deity, incidentally, to whom James Bond did his simulated praying. But it is with a myth of this mirror that I want to end; a myth first recorded in the early eighth century, and systemically simulated ever since.¹⁷

According to this myth (called *Iwato-biraki*, or 'opening of the rock door'), the *kami* of the sun, Amaterasu, shuts herself up in a cave and so the whole world goes dark. The other divinities devise a scheme to lure her out again. Assembling before the cave door, they suspend a mirror from the branches

of a tree while one of them, the divinity Ame-no-Uzume begins to dance in a frenzy of possession. All the *kami* laugh and, hearing their laughter, Amaterasu opens the cave door in curiosity. On seeing herself reflected in the mirror, she believes she is looking at another, superior divinity; while frozen in this moment of bewilderment, the other *kami* block the cave mouth. Light is restored to the world.

Now, a lot could be said about this; but I feel I have already said more than enough. The mirror, as a device, is efficacious *because* it simulates. Commenting on the myth, Schattschneider suggests that

‘Life itself is thus founded on an initially illusory act of representation, a potent confounding of presence and absence, merging the imitative image with the represented thing itself’ (2004: 145).

If this myth contained a credo – which it doesn’t; it’s not *deep* enough for that – we could well refer to it as the Doctrine of Original Sim, the myth of the genuinely artificial.

As Arata Isozaki (2006: 154) observes, in a discussion of the Ise Shrine and the efficacy of fabrication: ‘the gods always reveal themselves at the invitation of mimicry’.

Notes

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Hence, once again, thanks are owed to Martin Holbraad, Ioannis Kyriakakis, and Fabio Gygi.

1. For example, Buruma (1995); Hendry (1993); Köpping (2005); McVeigh (1997; 2000); Yamaguchi (1977). In arriving at the ideas presented here, I have also drawn inspiration from both Hay’s and Zito’s studies of the work of surfaces in Chinese cosmologies (see Hay 1994; Zito 1994).
2. I should make it clear that this inference, that the businessman’s prayer is *merely* superficial, in so far as it is in want of something else, is emphatically *not* one made by Kasulis. Indeed, he is intent on challenging any such notion; his argument being that practice of this sort is an attempt to establish existential connections with divinities in Japan (See Kasulis 2004: 28-37). The problematic of prayer is a useful entry point into issues of Japanese religious practice. Reader (1991: 1-2), for instance, begins his own overview on Japanese religion with a similar vignette.
3. For a critique of these sociological assumptions by means of Japanese ethnographic materials, see Swift (forthcoming).
4. It is worth recalling that Sahlins (1999: 407-9) too made a case for taking Japanese cosmology seriously, by way of a critique of an argument (one of the contributions in Vlastos 1998) that much of the form of sumo wrestling can be explained by the fact that it is a modern invention. Indeed, the Japanese anthropologist Yamaguchi Masao (1998) has

explored the cosmological dimensions of sumo and its relations to kabuki theatre and the emperor system. For Yamaguchi, sumo is clearly a dynamic historical formation, in which the cosmological and the commercial are mutually implicated. I therefore fail to understand how the editor of the collection to which Yamaguchi is a contributor can state that Yamaguchi ‘implies that this very Japanese “tradition” might well fall into the category of a modern invented tradition’ (Martinez 1998: 13). Yamaguchi’s exposition is certainly subtle, as the editor points out, and it is precisely because it is that it contains no such simplistic implications.

5. The anthropologist John Clammer has argued this point (with regard to the understanding of Japan) with singularity clarity (Clammer 2001). But see also the collection of papers edited by Gerstle and Milner (1994), a project by various Asian Studies scholars to recover ‘otherness’ in the light of Said’s critique.
 6. These remarks that Robertson includes in her introduction were, as she makes clear, in fact first published in 1998 (Robertson 2005: 4).
 7. Hdt. 2.35 (Herodotus 1988: 145). For the classic study of such mirror operations in Herodotus, see Hartog (1988).
 8. As Yamada (2009) has recently documented of what he calls the ‘magic mirror effect’ of two-way traffic in representations of Zen – when those others we thought we were representing pick up our depictions in order to represent themselves, then the mirrors multiply to such an extent that all that would seem to be left is the dazzling spectacle of representations rebounding endlessly. Similarly, writing of the problems that foreign anthropologists face in attempting to represent Japan, Caillet (2006: 11) comments that it can seem as if ‘our positions disintegrate into a game of mirrors without end’ (*‘un jeu de miroirs sans fin’*).
- Be that as it may, Robertson’s critique of mirror-imaging is valuable, but it is hardly new. Horton and Finnegan (1973) already raised a number of these points almost forty years ago (see also Nagashima’s essay in the same volume).
9. The references are, respectively: Singer (1997); Buruma (1995); Wetering (1987); Ohnuki-Tierney (1987); and Vlastos (1998). And fanciful no doubt, but is Ian Fleming’s title, *You Only Live Twice*, not also suggestive of a certain mirror-like doubling?
 10. Accordingly, Macfarlane deliberately identifies himself with Alice (2007: 4), but he might just as well be Dorothy in *The Wizard of Oz*, for, in its supersaturated strangeness, Japan is the Emerald City and to be in Kansai is to be told, like Toto, that we’re not in Kansas anymore.
 11. Among numerous examples, one could cite the *Great Mirror (Ôkagami)*, a history of the Fujiwara aristocratic lineage, or the *Great Mirror of Love Suicide (Shinjû ôkagami)* that documented a series of scandalous double suicides – a source of much popular fascination during the early 1700s. Or the *Complete Mirror of Yoshiwara (Yoshiwara marukagami)*, a sort of guidebook (from 1720) to the Yoshiwara pleasure quarters in Edo (i.e., Tokyo).
 12. I haven’t the space to do justice to Wardle’s exposition, except to say here that his observation (2009: 3; cf. 19) that Latour’s ‘comparative anthropology’ may well be too ‘insufficiently comparative’ is, I think, especially well made.
 13. I say that this etymological relation is obvious – it is, at least, to classicists. But I have found little work in anthropology that has explored its implications. An exception is Lamp’s (1985) fine study of Temne ritual masking in Sierra Leone. A further exception, recently discovered, is, as I ought to have expected, Lévi-Strauss, who puts it to use in his analysis of Caduveo body painting (Wiseman 2007: chap. 6, esp. 146).

14. I cite Elster's version of the anecdote. Needless to say, I do not agree with his interpretation of it.
15. Joy Hendry (2000: 180) has attempted to utilize Yamaguchi's argument in her ethnography on Japanese theme parks, but her ensuing analysis make abundantly clear that she hasn't understood it. Attacking a vague post-modernist position that she attributes to no one, she attempts to counter it by employing Yamaguchi's discussion of *mitate* as simulation which, she says, is 'close to the original meaning of Baudrillard's "simulacrum", a term too easily translated as "fake"'. Apart from wondering to whom this final caution is supposed to apply (who, after all, is all too easily making such equations?), one can only imagine Baudrillard laughing (somewhere in hyper-reality) about this straight-faced appeal to his *original* meaning! Hendry then goes on (in the same paragraph) to associate *mitate* as simulation with Platonic Forms, seemingly unaware that Plato was the arch-enemy of simulacra.
16. For Gunji's original discussion see Gunji (1987: 88-89).
17. The myth and its subsequent history have very recently been treated by Mark Teeuwen (Teeuwen and Breen 2010: chap. 4).

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