

# ***The Illusion of Living God “Arahitogami” and “State Shinto”: What did invoke Absolute God?***

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## **Part 1**

### **The Illusion of Living God “Arahitogami”**

#### **Chapter 2**

#### **From the Beginning of the Meiji Period to the Promulgation of the Imperial Rescript on Education**

#### **A Bitter Experience during the Beginning of the Meiji Period**

Shortly after the Meiji Restoration, it was thought to be an urgent matter for all Japanese people to feel unity with the state, feel unity as a nation, and have loyalty to the state in order to maintain independence while confronting Western powers. Thus, a movement to educate the people developed, on which we can call a movement to form the “consciousness of the nation” (*kokumin ishiki*). It placed primary importance on Shinto, and secondary importance upon Buddhism and Confucianism in the government’s great promulgation campaign (*taikyō senbu undō*). This happened from 1872 to 1875 during the Meiji period (1868–1912). The priests and monks who were engaged in this education movement were called *kyōdōshoku* and they educated the people according to three standards of instruction (*sanjō kyōsoku*), which were general principles for educating the people: “to revere the deities and love the state;” “to clarify heavenly principles and the righteous path of men;” and “to humbly serve the emperor and observe the will of the government.”

However, a dispute occurred at Daikyōin, which was established as both a “research institution of missionary” and “facility for preaching to the people” for both Shinto and Buddhist priests. Daikyōin was located at Zōjōji Temple in Tokyo, and the government established an altar within it, where enshrined three deities of creation (Amenominakanushi no kami, Takamimusubi no kami, and Kamimusubii no kami, who appear at the beginning of the *Records of Ancient Matters* [ *Kojiki* ] ) and Amaterasu Ōmikami were enshrined. Then, the

government compelled the Buddhist monks to worship them as well. As a result, Jōdo Shinshū (True Pure Land Sect), which did not believe in worshipping Shinto deities, opposed such an order, and initiated a movement to leave Daikyōin in order to start preaching on their own. This was called the *Daikyōin bunri undō* (movement to separate from Daikyōin). This dispute continued for more than one and a half years, but, in the end, the government accepted the True Pure Land Sect's position. Not only was their independent teaching allowed but the Daikyōin was also terminated, and the collaborative missionary work of Shinto and Buddhism ended with it (although other Buddhist sects did not necessarily oppose the collaborative missionary work).

This incident became an important lesson to leaders in government who were involved in religion and education. At the time of this dispute, the foundation of the government had become unstable due to a disagreement on whether to launch a punitive expedition against Korea (*Seikanron*). The policy to educate the people, instead of uniting the nation and supporting the government, brought confrontation and split the world of religion, and this made the government deeply concerned. Officials learned the hard way that it would be troublesome for them to clumsily get involved in issues relating to the teaching of religion.

There is an interesting document which was drafted by Shimaji Mokurai in his position as a leader of the Honganji School of the True Pure Land Sect (Jōdoshinsyū-honganji-ha) and submitted by the head priest of Jōdoshinsyū-honganji-ha Ōtani Kōson to Chief Minister Sanjō Sanetomi. This document states that “as we adore the Emperor, it is natural to worship the imperial ancestral deity Amaterasu Ōmikami, but the three gods of creation is a doctrine created by followers of Shinto. A single person cannot believe in two religions, so as the True Pure Land Sect, we can never accept it.” What I thought was interesting is Shimaji's words at the beginning, saying that because Amaterasu Ōmikami is the Emperor's ancestor, he respects her. It is not that he respects the Emperor because he is a descendant of Amaterasu Ōmikami, but that he also [in addition to respecting the emperor] has to respect Amaterasu Ōmikami because she is the Emperor's ancestor. The government recognized the claim of the True Pure Land Sect and allowed them to separate from the Daikyōin, and this would have a significant impact later.

## The Meaning of the Theory Claiming the Emperor as the Deity's Descendant

Before moving to the late 1870s and early 80s, let us examine what view of the Emperor was introduced to the people in the early years of the Meiji period. We can understand it from a book of commentaries on the three standards of instruction at that time (Miyake Moritsune, *Sanjō kyōsoku engisho shiryō shū*, vols. 1–2, Tokyo: Kinseisha, 2008). According to these texts, many phrases referring to the Emperor as Amaterasu Ōmikami's descendant often appeared using terms such as “*shinson*,” “*shinin*,” and “*shinei*.” Among these phrases, some examples stated that as the Emperor was “*shinson*,” he was to be revered as an “*arahitogami*,” But no example stated that an “*arahitogami*” was an absolute God.

On the other hand, though, it is noteworthy that there are many examples explaining that “the Japanese people are also descendants of kami.” For instance, according to a book of commentaries by the Kogi sect of Shingon Buddhism, “the people are deeply aware of their identity as deity's descendants and never disrespect their ancestral deities to this day.” Similarly, a book of commentary of the five sects of True Pure Land states: “Our people are also the people of Imperial Japan and the deity's descendants.” The *Sansokukyō no shōkei*, written by Kanagaki Robun in July of 1873, clearly explains it for a general audience:

I don't know about other countries but our Emperor is the descendant of the Sun Deity or the enshrined deity of the Ise Grand Shrine; thus, there is no higher status than his, and he is the Emperor of the eternal imperial line who is allowed by heaven or *Ten* to govern Japan. Although we are inferior to the Emperor, we were born in the land of deities (*kami*) and our ancestors were also the deities who served Amaterasu Ōmikami. While comparing to paper [also pronounced *kami*] of high quality made from mulberry trees (*Danshi* or *Hōsyō*), we are lower quality paper, but the ordinary paper like tissue (*Chirigami* or *Asakusagami*) is still paper [deities]. Thus, those who do not worship their ancestors should go against heaven and be like devils and heretics.

Considering these examples, in terms of the theory that the Emperor is deity's descendant or “*shinson*,” the difference between the Emperor and ordinary people lies in whether he or she is the descendant of Amaterasu Ōmikami or other deities, and there is no difference in a respect that both the Emperor and

the people in general are descendants of deities. Therefore, in this discussion, “deification” due to being the descendant of deities is insufficient to make the Emperor an absolute being.

If one reads Japanese mythology in a straightforward manner, it depicts the order of heavenly deities centered on Amaterasu Ōmikami, then the descent to earth of Ninigi no mikoto, the grandson of Amaterasu, and the organization of the heavenly and earthly deity’s descendants, so one should not be surprised at the emergence of the idea that the Emperor and the people are no different in terms of their commonality as the deity’s descendants, no matter which deity is considered superior. Before the next section begins, it should be mentioned that after the mid-1890s, the theory of the people as “*shinson*” continued to appear in commentaries on the “Imperial Rescript on Education.”

### **The Lesson of the Pantheon Dispute (*Saijin Ronsō*)**

In 1881, when the democratic movement reached a peak, the government was concerned by internal disputes within the domain of Shinto. After the termination of the Daikyōin, an institution called the Office of Shinto Affairs (*Shinto Jimukyoku*) was established for Shinto proselytizers to conduct missionary work, and a dispute took place on whether Ōkuninushi no kami should be enshrined there. The details will be omitted here, but this dispute became so great that it ended up splitting the domain of Shinto into two: the Izumo faction, which demanded Ōkuninushi no kami should be enshrined, and the Ise one, which opposed it. Because they could not solve the dispute within the domain of Shinto, it was brought in the government to make a judgement, and, in the end, in February of 1881, an imperial decision brought the dispute to a close.

As a result of this dispute, many officials were concerned that if the government continued to allow the Shinto priests to freely conduct missionary work, there would be a risk of similar internal disputes in Shinto, and if that happened, it might weaken the authority of the enshrined deities of the state. This made the government decide in January of 1882 to ban Shinto priests of high-grade shrines from proselytizing or conducting funeral ceremonies. This divided Shinto priests into two groups: Shrine Shinto, which engaged in rituals, and Sect Shinto, which engaged in proselytization and funeral ceremonies. This incident also gave a lesson to the officials of the government that when they were directly involved in theological aspects of Shinto, they risked

unintentionally undermining the authority of deities, which might then undermine the Emperor's authority.

### **The Ideas in the Constitution and the Imperial Rescript on Education**

Inoue Kowashi, who was deeply interested in religious policies from early in the period of Meiji Era, clearly articulated the lesson from experience that occurred in the first half of the Meiji Period. At the time of drafting "the Imperial Rescript on Education," he stated in an opinion submitted to Prime Minister Yamagata Aritomo in June of 1890 that: "Words to worship and respect deities or *Ten* (Confucian concept) should be avoided in the Imperial Rescript on Education because such words will soon become seeds for religious disputes," and "[t]here should be no such words that please one sect and anger another."

These words show that the primary concern of Inoue Kowashi, a central figure in drafting the Meiji Constitution as well as the Imperial Rescript on Education, was exploring a placement of the Emperor that would satisfy most of the people. In his "Dai nihon teikoku kenpō happu no chokugo" drafted by him, as the conclusion, he included the following on the February 11, 1889:

Looking back, my ancestors (waga so waga sō) established this country for eternity with the support of their subjects. This is thanks to my ancestors' great virtue and their subjects' loyalty, braveness and devotion to the country; thus, the magnificent history of the country has been created.

Here, Inoue showed a historical consciousness that saw the wonderful history of the nation as the result of a collaboration between the imperial ancestors' virtue and their subjects' loyalty, which formed the essential framework of the nation. Moreover, he suggested the fundamental policy of the state aimed to make it prosper through maintaining the collaboration between the emperor and his subjects based on the mutual respect of the imperial ancestors and those of their subjects. In short, Inoue's main point was to sustain the narrative of "the history of collaboration between the Emperor and the people" by using reverence toward each other's ancestors as an intermediary.

Inoue, who established the framework as the greatest common factor in the nation's reverence for the Emperor, must have thought that what was built upon this framework as the political system was "the Meiji Constitution," and what as the necessary virtues for the people, who should make the Constitution function, was the "Imperial Rescript on Education." Because of that, he drafted

at the beginning of “Imperial Rescript on Education:”

Our Imperial Ancestors have built Our Empire long ago with great virtue; our subjects are rich in loyalty and filial piety, strong in unity, and have always displayed their excellence. These are the glory of the fundamental character of Our Empire, and herein also lies the source of Our education.

Inoue applied the same framework of “the Meiji Constitution” to the “Imperial Rescript on Education” as the word “fundamental character of Our Empire” and situated it as the origin of education. In other words, the view of the Emperor which underlay “Constitution of the Empire of Japan” and “Imperial Rescript on Education” was The “Virtue and Loyalty” Theory.

### **The Basis of the Relationship between the Emperor and His Subjects**

What should be noted here is the fact that Inoue found the basis and result of the fundamental framework of the state in “the magnificence of the national history.” I think he found his answer to the question of a lesson he had learned from the experience of making policies since the first year of the Meiji period. In other words, Inoue, through establishing the foundation of the reign of the emperor on the physical (historical) things, attempted to avoid causing dispute on metaphysical matters such as religion or philosophy that would involve the emperor or government in such disputes.

Looking at it this way, one could say “that’s not right, because phrases such as “our ancestors” or “waga so waga sō” “waga kōso kōsō” clearly show that Japanese mythology has been made the foundation, and there would be no way that Inoue considered other religious groups.” This argument is based on the interpretation of the term “waga so” “waga kōso” as “Amaterasu Ōmikami.” It is true that the term “Kōso Amaterasu Ōmikami” is commonly used at present, and according to the common sense, “Imperial Rescript on Education” refers to Amaterasu Ōmikami. However, in terms of the terminology used in the Meiji period, it was common to use the “Tenso” instead of “Kōso.”

For those readers who are not convinced by the usage of terminology, there is another example. Soon after the promulgation of the Imperial Rescript on Education, the Ministry of Education decided to create a book of commentaries, and requested a professor at Tokyo University and the philosopher Inoue Tetsujirō to prepare it. Upon receiving this request, Inoue drafted it and explained in the draft that the term “kōso” used at the beginning of the Imperial

Rescript on Education means “Amaterasu Ōmikami,” and “*kōsō*” means “Emperor Jinmu.” In other words, Inoue Tetsujirō tried to explain the meaning of “*kōso kōsō*” based on the Emperor as a “Deity’s Descendant (or *shinson* )” Theory. However, Inoue Kowashi presented a different opinion, pointing out that “in the context of building the country, *kōso* should refer to Emperor Jinmu while *kōsō* should refer to successive emperors in praise of them” and demanded a correction (Inada Masatsugu, *Kyōiku chokugo seiritsu katei no kenkyū*, Tokyo: Kōdansha, p. 345). Whereas Tetsujirō interpreted “*kōso*” as Amaterasu and “*kōsō*” as Emperor Jinmu based on the theory of the Emperor as a “Deity’s Descendant,” Kowashi, who drafted the Imperial Rescript on Education, asserted that in the case of explaining the establishment of Japan, “*kōso* should refer to Emperor Jinmu while *kōsō* should refer to the successive emperors based on the “Virtue and Loyalty” Theory.

Inoue Kowashi also stated the following:

The emperor's ancestors have shown great achievements and virtues for several 1000 years. And our people, during that time, were extremely loyal to the emperors and very dutiful to their parents. These facts are the inherent basis of education in our country. Therefore, education should be pursued according to the history and customs of the country. This is the way of education for the people (underlining added. *Ibid.*, p. 349).

These sentences show that Inoue Kowashi, with a clear awareness, placed the basis of both the Meiji Constitution and Imperial Rescript on Education upon not “mythology” nor “age of kami” but “history” and “virtue and duty” after Emperor Jinmu’s establishment of the country. With this fact in mind, when one reads *Dainihon teikoku kenpō gige: Kōshitsu tenpin gige* by Itō Hirofumit (which is a book of commentary of Meiji Constitution and the Imperial Rescript on Education and both texts are drafted by Inoue Kowashi), one should notice that the three terms “*tenso*,” “*shinso*,” and “*sosō* (an abbreviated form of “*kōso kōsō*”)” were used as words signifying ancestors of the Emperor, and that distinctions were made among them: “*tenso*” meant “Amaterasu Ōmikami,” “*shinso*” meant “Emperor Jinmu,” and “*sosō*” referred to the successive emperors after Jinmu.

However, just because Inoue established the basis of the relationship between the emperor and his subjects in “history,” it is not necessarily the case that his view had nothing to do with “mythology.” Inoue’s specific assertion on the reign of the emperor is famous, because he said that it was not the private

reign of the premodern era, or *ushihaku*, but a public reign of the modern era, or *shirasu*. Itō Hirobumi's *Kenpō gige* (a commentary of Meiji constitution), originally drafted by Inoue, explains it in the following way:

*Shirasu* means nothing but the emperor's reign. Certainly, the successive emperors valued the work assigned by the heaven as a mission, and that the emperor's virtue was to reign over the people, which is not private work to make his family prosperous. This is the foundation of the Meiji Constitution (Tokyo:Iwanami Bunko, p.23).

Inoue was inspired by the words in "the mythology of the transfer of the land by Ōkuninushi no kami to Amaterasu," which he mentioned in his lectures and recorded in his personal writings. Also, in the official commentary of the Meiji Constitution, *Kenpōgige*, the four ancient passages were cited as proof of the emperor's reign as "shirasu:" "the oracle that is as eternal as heaven and earth," "Yamato Takeru's words," "Emperor Monmu's edict at the time of his enthronement," and the "imperial rescripts of the successive emperors." Thus, Inoue regarded both mythology and history as the base of his view when he spoke about the characteristics of the emperor's reign. However, he did not use the mythology as the foundation when he spoke about the emperor's reign itself.

As for "the Imperial Rescript on Education," Inoue asserted that those who were in charge of it should carefully consider not only its content but also the way of being publicized and enforced. As he placed an importance upon an issue of freedom of thought, Inoue suggested that "the Imperial Rescript on Education should be publicized not as an imperial edict that is legally binding, but as the Emperor's literary work for the public. This view was supported by the government, and "the Imperial Rescript on Education" was publicized not as the Emperor's official document with a sign of the minister of education, but as the Emperor's social writing without having any legal obligations. However, the Imperial Rescript on Education eventually gained absolute authority as the Emperor's direct words free from the intervention of ministers.