

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

NITTA Hitoshi

Part 1

The Illusion of Living God “Arahitogami”

Chapter 1

The Collapse of a Popular View of Living God “Arahitogami”

The “Meiji origin theory” for “Arahitogami”

In the first decade of the new century, intellectuals ceaselessly spread the illusion of “Arahitogami [in order to describe how the emperor should be viewed]. For example, Tachibana Takashi, a renowned journalist, stated in his “Watashi no Tōdai-ron” (*Bungei Shunjū*, June 1999) essay that from the second half of the Meiji era (1868–1912) to the first half of Shōwa (1926–1989), Japan “was an even stranger nation” than North Korea.” He concluded;

Although Kim Jong-il has been almost deified, he is still “shogun sama (honorific title for ashogun)” or “shuryō sama,” and he is not a kami (deity). No one calls him “kami sama” nor worships him. But in the past Japan, an emperor became arahitogami and was worshipped as so. The Japanese people were taught from youth that the emperor was a descendant of the kami, and because they were forced to observe ritual worship, most of the Japanese people believed it. Therefore, during World War II, while crying out “Tennō heika banzai (Long live the Emperor),” many soldiers sacrificed their life for the emperor without hesitation. This is something like the Muslim belief that once *jihad* (Islamic holy war) is declared, dying a martyr in a war for Allah takes them to heaven and thus are willing to die without any worries (p. 352, underlining added).

Yamaori Tetsuo, eminent scholar of religious studies, also states that; “The kind of modernization of Shinto that began during the Meiji era, namely, a policy

of 'forming monotheism' that sets the emperor *arahitogami* at the apex" have existed and asserts that people in the Shrine Shino should break such a policy ("Chinju no mori wa naiteiru," in *Chūdō kōron*, July 2000, p. 55).

Furthermore, the philosopher Umehara Takeshi also remarks that "the spirit of the Imperial Rescript on Education, after all, aimed to make the emperor the absolute God, to establish dying for the sake of the emperor as the fundamental morality, and to make other morals subordinate to this fundamental one" (*Asahi Shimbun*, November 17, 2002).

Komuro Naoki's opinion differs from those of Tachibana, Yamaori, and Umehara in terms of his standpoint, which is favorable to the past, and yet Komuro states that what the Meiji government created in order to foster the spirit of equality as a premise of capitalism was "the idea to make an emperor who was the head of the state the only and absolute God for the Japanese people, and it was like making the emperor an equivalent of the God of Christianity" (*Tsūkai! Kenpōgaku*, Shūeisha Intānashonaru, 2001, p. 214).

It is difficult to judge which research findings these scholars' opinions are built on, but it is easy to imagine that the opinion of Murakami Shigeyoshi, who was an authority of "State Shinto" studies, must have extensively influenced on them. Murakami wrote as follows:

By the establishment of the Constitution of the Empire of Japan, the emperor's attributes changed from traditional Priest-King, who was performing religious rites as a human, to the monotheistic *arahitogami* (*Tennō no saishi*, Iwanami Shinsho, 1977, p. ii).

Tennō as the absolute God; an emperor was regarded as living God and called *arahitogami* or *akitsukami*, who exclusively held political power, military power and religious power in both secular and religious realms. Under the modern *tennō-sei* (emperor system), the fundamental characteristic of the emperor as Priest-King before the Meiji Restoration was replaced with the attributes of *arahitogami*. The emperor's characteristics as *arahitogami* differed markedly from his traditional one, and it was invented after the Meiji Restoration (Ibid. p.151).

The process of making the emperor the absolute being, initiated at the time of the Meiji Restoration, finally reached a point that the emperor became sacred and inviolable as God by establishing the Constitution of the Empire

of Japan. The concept of kami, which was invented as the emperor's new attribute, was quite different from the concept of kami built on a shamanism that encompassed Japanese religious practices. This new concept was the same as that of God in monotheism and almost close to the concept of God in Christianity. The idea, to deify the emperor by making him absolute, held by a group of leaders in the modern Japan with the emperor system, was strongly influenced by Christianity. The emperor, who became *arahitogami*, was created as the embodiment of the absolute truth and ultimate virtue completely separated from human beings (pp.152–153).

The emperor's existence as *arahitogami* regulated the people's consciousness for life in every part and came to powerfully exhibit both political and religious functions, which was incomparable in modern nations of the world. A war in the name of the emperor was regarded as a 'holy war' in order to shine with the glorious virtue of the emperor to the world and to realize 'hakkō-ichiu (eight corners of the world under one roof).' In the Empire of Japan, invading other countries was justified as an action to spread the universal values of the emperor as *arahitogami* over the world, and the limitless loyalty of 'self-annihilation' for the emperor and the nation was demanded of the entire people, regardless of wartime or peacetime (pp.155–156).

The doctrine of *kokutai* (national polity) signifies, first and foremost, a claim of the sacredness of the Empire of Japan, which was ruled by the emperor as God, having its foundation on a political mythology of the *Kojiki* and *Nihonshoki* that the ancient state had created. Both the *Kojiki* and *Nihonshoki* were classified as Shinto scriptures, and the state power viewed both as the orthodox mythology, and made a series of political mythologies, such as the divine descent, an important theme for school education. The government ruthlessly suppressed not only criticism against these orthodox Shinto scriptures but also objective studies and even questions about them (*Kokka Shintō*, Iwanami Shoten, 1970, pp.141–142).

The mythology became a fact that should not be questioned. This built the conviction in the supremacy of the national polity over the world and the sense of a chosen people led by God, which nurtured a rich soil for exclusive ethnocentrism (pp.142–143).

By going back to the roots of the words that these intellectuals used in their

heated arguments during the first decade of the 21st century, we understand that their words are only a repetition of the Meiji origin theory for *arahitogami*, which was discussed a generation before. On the other hand, around the same period, those who developed the argument that, we may call the Shōwa origin theory for *arahitogami*, appeared among scholars specializing in modern history and sociology.

The Emergence of the Shōwa Origin Theory for *Arahitogami*

Suzuki Masayuki, professor of Kobe University, described the so-called *tennō kikanseisu jiken* in 1935 as “a path toward deification of the emperor,”; the military authorities first “absolutized the emperor’s authority in order to absolutize the army led by the emperor, and then they finally tried to govern the state politics” (Tokyo: *Kōshitsuseido; Meiji kara sengo made*, Iwanami Shoten, 1993, p.186).

In addition, Soeda Yoshiya, a professor at Tsukuba University, advanced Suzuki’s view, and stated the following in his *Kyōiku chokugo no shakaishi-nashonarizumu no sōshutsu to zasetu* (Yūshindō Kōbunsha, 1997);

According to the *Kokutai no hongī* [Monbushō, 1937], the emperor is an *arahitogami*, whereas according to the *Kyōiku chokugo*, or *The Imperial Rescript on Education* [Meiji 23], an emperor is not a kami. At least, in terms of the constitutional monarchy indicated by the Constitution of the Empire of Japan, the emperor was first a monarch whose powers were restricted by the government and parliament; thus, he was not a kami. Upon drafting the Imperial Rescript on Education, Inoue Kowashi decided on the principle that the Imperial Rescript on Education would not contradict the faith of followers of specific religions or denominations. Under this principle, an emperor could not have been a kami. As already described, after the promulgation of the Imperial Rescript on Education, the deification of an emperor was enforced in multi-faceted ways. However, it was after the theory of the Emperor as an organ of government was negated that the emperor became a kami from the approved view of the state powers (p. 276; the additional information in square brackets has been supplied by the author of this article).

In short, both Suzuki and Soeda asserted that the process of deifying and absolutizing an emperor by the state started after the Shōwa period. Then, which theory is correct, the “Meiji origin” or “Shōwa origin” ?

I have read various kinds of historical manuscripts of the modern era related to religion and politics of Japan and I have rarely found the term “*arahitogami*” used in the manuscripts written during the Meiji period. Therefore, I originally suspected that the term would appear more often much later than the Meiji period, or the idea of the emperor as absolute God would become dominant. However, I did not yet have a way to support my hypothesis, and I could not clarify the process by which “*arahitogami*” emerged. But, I was asked to compare and examine the descriptions of current textbooks of history for junior high schools, and after I conducted the textbook research, an approach came to my mind. If the government of that period had a view of the emperor which they wanted the Japanese people to hold, such a view should have appeared in the elementary school textbooks at that time, which most of the Japanese people used. Then, if we want to understand changes in the view, we should examine the textbooks for “moral training” and “Japanese history.” Thus, I examined the changes of descriptions of textbooks for moral training and Japanese history while paying close attention to appearances of the terms “*arahitogami*,” as well as “*hakkō-ichiu*,” which had been often mentioned in connection with “*arahitogami*.” I found that descriptions about the emperor in the textbooks went through three stages of changes, and surprisingly, “*akitsumikami*” : interchangeably used with “*arahitogami*” and “*hakkō-ichiu*” appeared in the final and third stage, which was after Shōwa 16 (1941).

Changes in Elementary School Textbooks for Moral Training and Japanese History

Although I wrote that I investigated the elementary school textbooks for moral training and Japanese history, unified textbooks did not begin to be distributed in the entire country until 1904, when the textbooks were standardized by the state, so I could only examine changes in the textbooks after that happened. And the author found that textbooks for moral training had been revised four times, while those for history were revised six times. In other words, historically,

there are five editions of the government-designated textbooks for moral training, and seven for history. When I examined them chronologically by focusing on ways in which the emperor was explained, three stages of changes were observed in the textbooks for both moral training and the Japanese history.

The explanation of the first stage after 1904 consists of two theories. First claims that the emperor is Amaterasu's descendant. I will call this idea the theory of the emperor as "deity's descendant" or "Tennō 'shinson' ron." Second claims that Japan persisted due to the emperor's virtue and his subjects' loyalty historically. I will call this idea the theory of "virtue and loyalty" or "Kunshin 'tokugi' ron." Below are some examples of these theories (underlining added by the author).

The Emperor as a "Deity's Descendant" Theory

Textbook for moral training:

Amaterasu Ōmikami bestowed the three imperial regalia upon her grandson Ninigi no mikoto and said to him, "Govern this country Japan." The first emperor Jinmu is Ninigi no mikoto's descendant,.... (*Elementary school textbook for moral training for the fourth grade*, 1903, p.1).

The successive generations of emperors from Emperor Jinmu are all his descendants. The presence of the unbroken line of emperors from time immemorial is unparalleled in the world (Ibid., 2).

Textbook for Japanese history

Amaterasu Ōmikami is our emperor's ancestor (*Elementary school textbook*, vol. 1, 1903, p.1).

The "Virtue and Loyalty" Theory

Textbook for moral training:

The successive generations of emperors loved their subjects, and their subjects wished for prosperity of the imperial household (*Elementary school textbook for moral training for the fourth grade*, 1903, pp.45–46).

The successive generations of emperors loved their subjects as if they were their children, and our ancestors all respected the imperial household and devoted themselves to the emperor and the country with loyalty and love (*Elementary school textbook for moral training*, vol. 5 for children for the fifth

grade, 1911, pp.1–2).

Textbook for Japanese history:

In this way, our country gradually enhanced its national prestige in the world and finally reached a position where it was able to be compared with other great powers in the world. This was achieved by our emperor's greatest virtue and the people's selfless loyalty and devotion to the country. Moreover, this was solely due to the fact that the successive generations of emperors from time immemorial were virtuous, merciful, and always concerned with the national prosperity and the people's well-being, and that the people also devoted themselves to their emperor and country (*Elementary school textbook for the Japanese history*, vol. 2, 1910, pp.97–98).

Next, upon the second stage, in addition to the “deity's descendant” and “virtue and loyalty” theories, the *kazoku kokka* (nation as family) theory began to be narrated, claiming that the emperor is a parent while his subjects are like his children or that the Imperial family is the head family and the family of subjects is like a branch family. This happened after 1921.

The “Nation as Family” Theory

Textbook for moral training:

It has been a little over 2580 years since Emperor Jinmu's enthronement. During these years, our country has centered on the imperial household and has been flourishing, united as one big family. The preceding emperors have cherished their subjects, like their own children, while we subjects have revered the emperor as our parent and devoted ourselves to the country and emperor with loyalty. Although there are many countries in the world, here is no other country like Japan which has the emperor unbroken for ages eternal and where both the imperial household and its people are united (*Elementary school textbook for moral training*, vol. 5, for children, 1921, pp.1–2).

Textbook for Japanese history:

For the enthronement ceremony at the *shishin-den*, Emperor Taishō stated in his imperial rescript: “the emperor of an unbroken line since time immemorial has inherited the three imperial regalia and nurtured his people. His subjects have served the imperial court with loyalty over the generations. The subjects' loyalty as well as feelings between the emperor and his subjects, like father and

his children, have formed the national polity of our country, which is unparalleled in other countries.” His words are highly respectable (*Elementary school textbook for the Japanese history*, vol. 2, 1921, pp.146–147).

When the third and final stage appeared, in addition to the “deity’s descendant,” “virtue and loyalty,” and “nation as family” theories, both “*arahitogami*” and “*hakkō-ichiu*” theories began to be narrated. Precisely speaking, “*arahitogami*” began to be used after 1941, while the term “*hakkōichiu*” after 1943.

The Emperor as “Arahitogami” Theory

Textbook for moral training

The Emperor whom we venerate as kami is Amaterasu Ōmikami’s descendant and governs the country, keeping Amaterasu’s great heart in mind (*Elementary school textbook for moral training*, vol. 6, 1939, p. 5).

There is no parallel example in the world in terms of the way we have established our country, revering the emperor as kami and respectfully considering the imperial household to be the head family of the Japanese people (Ibid, p.6).

We Japanese people revere the Emperor as *akitsukami* and humbly accept the imperial family as the head of Japan (*Elementary school textbook for moral training*, vol. 3, 1943, p. 92).

Textbook for Japanese history

Being recipients of the Emperor’s great virtue, we have venerated the Emperor as both *akitsukami* and the father of Japan, and have been loyal to him (*Elementary school textbook for Japanese history*, final volume, 1941, pp. 178–179).

Being recipients of the Emperor’s blessings, the people of Japan have revered the Emperor as *akitsukami* and as the father of the country and have been loyal to him (*Elementary school textbook for Japanese history*, final volume, 1943, p. 184).

The “Hakkō-ichiu” Theory

Textbook for moral training

Now Japan attempts to righteously lead the people of the world by following the

kami's great heart at the time Japan was created (*Elementary school textbook for moral training*, vol.1, 1942, p. 9).

Our great Japan is a country that values morality and loyalty. Japan intends to create a bond among the people of the world, to thrive together, and to enjoy together in order to create world peace. This spirit has permeated the country and remained unchanged since the origin of the country.... When Emperor Jinmu founded the capital in Kashihara of Yamato, he said: "I shall cover the eight directions and make them my family" and spread the imperial ancestor Amaterasu Ōmikami's great heart. Keeping her great heart in mind, the subsequent emperors governed the country in order to influence the world by the imperial virtue (*Elementary school textbook for moral training*, vol. 3, 1943, pp. 96–97).

Textbook for Japanese history

Soon Emperor Jinmu founded a capital in Kashihara at the foot of Mt. Unebi and, with his intention to spread Amaterasu Ōmikami's heart, said: "I shall cover the eight directions and make them my family (*Elementary school textbook for Japanese history*, vol. 1, 1943, p. 12)."

Based on these changes in descriptions in the elementary school textbooks, at least two things can be said. First, it is likely that the concepts "*arahitogami*" and "*hakkō-ichiu*" had not been taught since the Meiji period, but, because of a result of certain social changes, began to appear in the textbooks from the 1920s. Second, considering the fact that, although the theory of the emperor as "diety's descendant" had been taught for a while, the "*arahitogami*" theory was newly introduced after 1931, there seems to be a difference between the ideas of the emperor as "diety's descendant" and "*arahitogami*."

In this connection, I would like to introduce an episode: The Deputy Grand Chamberlain Kinoshita Michio found fault in the occupation authority's draft of the Emperor Shōwa's [Emperor Hirohito] declaration that he was an ordinary human being, because it denied the idea of "the emperor as a diety' descendant." He thought it absolutely unacceptable and proposed an amendment to replace the part with a denial of "the emperor as *akitumikami*," with the Emperor Shōwa's permission (Kinoshita Michiko *Sokkin nissshi*, Bungei Shunjū, pp. 89–90). Kinoshita's proposal for this amendment was accepted, and

this resulted in the “humanity declaration” of the Emperor Shōwa, negating “the emperor as *akitumikami*.” This suggests that if there were no difference in meaning between the ideas of the emperor as “diety’s descendant” and “*akitumikami*” interchangeably used with “*arahitogami*”, Kinoshita’s intention in making the amendment would have no meaning.

This leads us to the following questions: what were those social changes that influenced the changes of the textbooks; and what was difference between the “deity’s descendant” and “*arahitogami*” theories. Just viewing the textbooks will not bring us these answers. And so, the questions have to be explored by expanding our view and examining how the government dealt with the matter of the basis for imperial rule in terms of policy for education, and how such governmental efforts were related to the movement of social thought over time. These are examined here in four periods:

- (1) From the beginning of the Meiji period to the promulgation of the Imperial Rescript on Education
- (2) From the promulgation of the Imperial Rescript on Education to World War I
- (3) From World War I to the Manchurian Incident

Before entering deep analysis, two aspects are provided as additional explanations on the textbooks. The first one is about “*hakkō-ichiu*.” The description of Emperor Jinmu ascending the throne in the palace of Kashihara and becoming the first emperor in Japan had continued to appear in the Japanese history textbooks from 1904. However, in 1943, his words that “I shall cover the eight directions and make them my family” from the imperial edict at his enthronement were first introduced and an interpretation of “*hakkō-ichiu*” appeared as the diplomatic policy toward the world.

The second one is about the phrase “the land of the kami,” which former prime minister Mori Yoshiro (b. 1937) uttered in 2000, causing a dispute. In fact, it was in 1940 that this word appeared in both the elementary school textbooks for Japanese history and the elementary school textbooks for moral training.

I will explain a little further. Concerning the textbook for Japanese history, the textbook of 1904 described the wind, which had blown at the time of the Mongolian Invasions, as simply “big wind,” and similarly it described Kitabatake Chikafusa as a loyal retainer who had devoted himself to the Southern court. However, in the textbook of 1934, “big wind” was corrected as “kamikaze (wind blown by God),” and in the textbook of 1940, Chikafusa was described as the

author of the *Jinnō Shōtōki* (the Chronicles of the Authentic Lineages of the Divine Emperors) where he explained that “Japan is the land of the kami.” This is the first example of the term “the land of kami” being introduced in a school textbook. (In connection with this, it is around this time when the proclamation of *tenjōmukyū* (as eternal as heaven and earth) [uttered by the deity Amaterasu to her grandson] began to appear in the opening of the school textbooks.) Furthermore, in the textbook of 1943, the first chapter was entitled “the land of kami;” the headline of the passage on the Mongolian Invasions became kamikaze, and a passage appeared: stating that “the reason why this large difficulty was able to be overcome was absolutely attributed to Japan being the land of the kami.”

Similarly, in the case of the elementary school textbook for moral training, “the land of the kami” was first introduced in *Yoikodomo* (vol. 2, 1941): “Japan is a country of righteousness and pureness, and the only land of kami in the world; Japan is a country of righteousness and strongest, and the shining and great country.” Also, in a textbook for moral training (vol. 2, 1942), the article on Kitabatake Chikafusa was entitled “Japan is the land of the kami,” while in another textbook for moral training (vol. 3, 1943), the following passage came to be written: “Japan as the land of the kami has existed since the time before Japanese history was orally narrated or written down.”