

## **Digging Up the Dead: Death and the Afterlife in the Shinto Tradition**

Nathaniel Hunter Wimpey  
Religious Studies  
The University of North Carolina at Asheville  
One University Heights  
Asheville North Carolina 28804

Faculty Advisor: Dr. Katherine Zubko

### **Abstract**

This paper examines the historical development of death concepts within the Shinto tradition, from the early centuries of the Japanese empire up through the work of prominent *Kokugaku* scholars Motoori Norinaga (1730-1801) and Hirata Atsutane (1776-1843) as they evolve under the influence of foreign traditions such as Confucianism and Buddhism. An examination of the work of these two scholars reveals their anxieties over the influence of foreign epistemologies, the drive to return to native Japanese texts for understanding about the cosmos and death, and the argument against the Buddhist and Confucian traditions. After tracing the gradual deconstruction of the idea of death as a ritual pollutant, this analysis dissects the new constructions of death developed by Norinaga and Atsutane through their use of sources, such as the *Kojiki* (8<sup>th</sup> century), a mythical account of the creation of Japan, as well as a record of the legendary emperors of early Japan. Investigating the various passages each of these scholars used, this paper demonstrates both new meanings these scholars brought to these sources in order to fit into their changing cosmologies and various excerpts that were purposefully ignored, revealing a more complicated picture of death than typically presented as part of Shinto traditions.

### **1. Introduction**

Death is universal. Every culture, philosophical school, and religious tradition has attempted to unravel, answer, and prepare for that inevitability. Ideas of life in a paradise or a prison, spirit reincarnation, and eternal sleep are but some of the ways in which humans have attempted to answer that last great question. Standing as a stark exception is Shinto which seems to view the concept of death as less important than other elements of ritual observance. In fact a discourse on death is remarkably absent from the tradition for many centuries. It is not until the analysis of the *Kojiki* (one of Shinto's principle texts compiled in the eighth century), by the famous *Kokugaku* scholar Motoori Norinaga (1730-1801) that Shinto begins to have a grounded response to the phenomena.<sup>1</sup> Building off of Norinaga's work, his successor Hirata Atsutane (1776-1843) would take this discourse further to challenge Buddhism as a foreign corruption, and show that Japan had within its own native traditions answers to these philosophical concepts. These developments, however, did not occur within a vacuum. Instead, these death concepts were constructed gradually as the needs and environment of the tradition evolved. Norinaga and Atsutane were both shaped by their stance against Buddhism and desire to establish a unique Japanese identity, which they saw as already present within the tradition without the need of foreign influences. The development of consistent death concepts within Shinto arose as a response to the influence of these external traditions and conflicts regarding reconstructing Japanese identity, rather than claims to any original fully formed conception on death and the afterlife. With a brief overview of the early ideas of death within the tradition, an analysis of the work of Norinaga and Atsutane, as well as an examination of the text of the *Kojiki* itself, the context and motivations surrounding the development of these concepts reveals a hidden anxiety about Japan's place in the world and the relation it has with the foreign epistemologies of Buddhism and Confucianism.

## 2. Death Concepts in Medieval Japan

Shinto is a tradition with strong concepts of purity, which views things such as sickness, blood, bile, and death as impure. This is even mentioned within the text of the *Kojiki*, an eighth century compilation of the mythical origins of the Japanese islands, along with records of the legendary early Emperors of Japan. When Izanagi, one of the two gods responsible for the creation of Japan along with his sister and spouse Izanami, returns from *Yomi*, the land of the dead, he exclaims, “I have come to a hideous and polluted land I have,”<sup>2</sup> and again on a separate occasion when a deity, after being mistaken for another deity<sup>3</sup> who had just died, remarks, “It was only because he was my dear friend that I came to condole. Why should I be likened to an unclean dead person?”<sup>4</sup> The polluted nature of death goes beyond the deceased however, seen during the medieval period when a person who experienced the death of a friend or family member was barred from entering a Shinto shrine until the period of impurity had ended.<sup>5</sup> It is important to note here that impurity in Shinto is not seen as a permanent condition done away with by prayer or ritual as it is in some monotheistic traditions, but rather as a state that gradually wears off with time. Bernhard Scheid, has shown early attempts to conflate this pollution with Buddhism, using texts such as Book III of the *Engishiki* (*Regulations from the Engi Era*), a book about laws and rituals from the early tenth century, which reads, “At all times during the days of partial abstinence before and after the festivals of *Toshigo*, *Kamo*, *Tsukinami*, *Kanname*, and *Niname*, monks, nuns, and persons in mourning, as wells as bands of robbers, may not enter the Imperial Palace.”<sup>6</sup> Here death is depicted as an impurity within the tradition, something to be removed from places seen as pure such as shrines and palaces. However, Scheid has also shown this as an early attempt to establish a connection between Buddhism, and death pollution. In another passage of the *Engishiki*, words that must not be used at the Ise shrine are given substitutes to allow them to be utilized. Death becomes “getting well,” illness becomes “slumber,” but Buddhist terms also get transformed so that the Buddha becomes “Central One,” the sutras, which are Buddhist texts containing his teachings, become “dyed paper,” and a temple is a “tiled roof.”<sup>7</sup> While these taboos on death would remain intact for some time, only loosening gradually over the centuries, this notion of ritual purity barred early discussion on death. To discuss it was to become impure, so proper discourse on the phenomena would not arise until much later, after some of the regulations on death began to corrode. For example, in the medieval period there was no ritual service for the dead nor any kind of Shinto funeral, showing the continued avoidance of death. However, this lack of ritualized funeral service would soon be undone by one prominent Shinto priest family in response to Buddhist, Daoist and Confucian practices and ideas.

During the medieval period, commoners and Shinto priests alike would usually pray for their salvation in a Buddhist afterlife. This can be seen in the case of Yoshida Kanehiro (1347-1402) who was the patriarch of a Shinto priest family, and in typical fashion at the time, also an ordained Buddhist lay-monk who recited the *nenbutsu* (a salvific Buddhist mantra) just before his death. This was done in order to be reborn in Amida’s Pure Land, a type of Buddhist paradise. His son, Kaneatsu (1368-1408), would put a stop to this tradition by not following in his father’s footsteps in his refusal to recite the *nenbutsu* during his own passing. Eventually, the role of Buddhist ritual in the family’s funeral rites would give way to a proto-Shinto funeral that most likely served as the template for all later Shinto death ceremonies.<sup>8</sup> This gradual shift away from a strict avoidance of death as a ritual impurity paved the way for later scholars to examine the concept more closely within the tradition itself. This is not to say that death was simply ignored altogether, however, as some foreign ideas seeped in from the mainland.

One example of this influx of foreign philosophies is the dualistic concepts of the soul, the Yin-soul and the Yang-soul (*haku* and *kon* in Japanese), that make their way into the Shinto cosmology from China. Not only are the characters of Yin and Yang found in the *Nihongi*, another eighth century text detailing the mythical history of Japan compiled less than a decade after the *Kojiki*, but concepts such as *aramitama* (rough spirit) and *nigimitama* (gentle spirit) indicate an early interpretation of this idea. While these two terms are scarcely mentioned in later texts, *haku* and *kon* continue to be mentioned. Before his death in 840, Junna Tenno stated his belief that upon death his Yang-soul would be lifted up to Heaven while his bodily remains would be inhabited by a death-spirit.<sup>9</sup> Due to his belief that the Yin-soul of an emperor will eventually cause trouble he ordered his body to be cremated.<sup>10</sup> While this intense concern over the fate of the Yin and Yang-soul might have just belonged to Junna, it does represent a decidedly non-Buddhist idea of death and the afterlife. It would not be long before these notions were adapted to better fit within a Shinto paradigm.

Jihen, a fourteenth century Buddhist monk, using the *in’yō gogyō setsu* theory<sup>11</sup> adapted this to fit with mythological accounts in works like the *Kojiki* and *Nihongi*.<sup>12</sup> For Jihen, Yin and Yang constantly turn into one another, which mirrors that of life and death. Life is the accumulation of Yin until one eventually dies (turning into a Yin state) and then begins to accumulate Yang until they are reborn. Life becomes the process of dying, while in the afterlife the process is reversed. Examining the story of Izanagi’s journey to *Yomi*, where upon breaking a rule not to look at Izanami, his deceased wife whom he went to find, he is chased out of the land of the dead, Izanagi seals the passage

between the two worlds with a large rock. Jihen uses this to prove that the boundary between life and death is not as concrete as it appears, and that this story makes contact between the two worlds possible.<sup>13</sup> While these Daoist concepts of life and death transformation would eventually fade from the discourse of death within Shinto itself, they do show a development of the analysis of death using Japanese source material such as the *Nihongi*. The final break away from the taboo of death discussion, however, would come a few centuries later.

In the early Edo period, Yoshikawa Koretari (1616-1694) wrote the *Shōji denpi* (*Secret Transmission on Life and Death*), becoming one of the first scholars to openly write about death in connection with Shinto. Using a Neo-Confucian concept of *shinri* (heart-principle) that refers to a basic layer of consciousness that is immortal, Koretari contends that after death this heart-principle reunites with the original substance of Heaven and Earth. For Koretari after death the spirits of the deceased reside in the subsidiary Sun-Palace (*hi no wakamiya*) or in the High Plain of Heaven (*Takamagahara*), both terms taken from the *Nihongi* that represent a place in the realm of the *kami*.<sup>14</sup> This destiny is of course only reserved for those who have followed the “mandate of Heaven,” showing more of Koretari’s Confucian understandings, while those who have not are forced to wander between Heaven and Earth, or are sent down into *Ne no kuni*, another spirit world that appears within the text of the *Kojiki*.<sup>15</sup> Perhaps *Ne no kuni* is also an appropriation of *Yomi*, which would go along with his usage of the term “falling down,” into that realm. Regardless, Koretari is notable for not only utilizing one of the heavenly realms revealed in the *Kojiki* and *Nihongi* that seems to be forgotten throughout the rest of the text, but also for overcoming the taboo of discussions on death, showing that simply talking about it did not entail death pollution on oneself. These early developments within the tradition would allow for the eventual exegetical work of Motoori Norinaga and his successor.

### 3. The *Kojiki* vs. the *Nihongi*

Motoori Norinaga (1730-1801) stands as one of the most prominent thinkers of the Edo period, and is often studied in light of his work within the *Kokugaku* School, which aimed to refocus scholarship in Japan away from foreign traditions such as Buddhism and Confucianism in favor of the Japanese classics. Adopting this project, Norinaga began to examine the oldest Japanese texts in order to gain an understanding of the Ancient thought of the Japanese, and to prove that within these works was contained a native way, or *kodō* (Ancient Way). In light of this, Norinaga turned his attention to two works in particular, the *Kojiki* (*Record of Ancient Matters*), compiled in 712, and the *Nihongi* or *Nihon Shoki* (*Chronicles of Japan*), compiled in 720. When dealing with these two texts, Norinaga gave precedence to the *Kojiki*, and used this text to frame most of his philosophical understanding of the Ancient Way, the nature of the *kami*, and his thoughts on the afterlife. In order to fully grasp the extent of Norinaga’s work, an understanding of his preference and use of the *Kojiki* becomes necessary.

Norinaga asserted that the *Kojiki* was the older of the two due to the language style each utilized.<sup>16</sup> The *Nihongi* was composed in Classical Chinese, whereas the *Kojiki* is a hybrid of classical Chinese and spoken Japanese composed entirely in Chinese script (*kanji*) without the aid of Japanese syllabary. Thus, for Norinaga, the *Nihongi* was too closely linked to the Chinese thinking he was competing against, whereas the *Kojiki*, despite being composed in flawed Japanese, was less culturally compromised and captured the emotional essence of the ancient spoken language that he intended to display.<sup>17</sup>

This emotional essence is shown in Norinaga’s theory of *mono no aware*, translated as a profound depth of emotion. Norinaga himself stated, “*aware* is to be moved by things,” on a human level, with the stoic demeanor associated with Confucian virtues being seen as unnatural.<sup>18</sup> Given a *mono no aware* sensitivity, people would feel natural sympathy for one another. Norinaga showed that this depth of emotion naturally existed in the native Japanese works by exalting the story of Yamato Takeru in the *Kojiki* where, upon learning his father wished him dead, he cries. Norinaga writes, “He entirely fulfilled his father’s expectations of victory. Nevertheless, Yamato Takeru resented what was to be resented and, crying, lamented what was to be lamented.”<sup>19</sup> In other words, he openly experienced the emotions that naturally came to him. It is important to note here that in the *Nihongi* the story of Yamato Takeru takes on a different connotation where the hero basks in his father’s trust and love, a stark contrast to the version in the *Kojiki* where he is exiled by his father. This preference shows in part how the *Kojiki* was better suited to Norinaga’s theory of *mono no aware*, viewing it as a text with more of the natural emotions embedded into it. However, Norinaga was not above editing it when the need arose.

Using this old text, Norinaga not only wished to prove an inherent way that existed in Ancient Japan, but also to legitimize the imperial house as the ruler of Japan using their connection to the creator deities. To that end, Norinaga turned to Izanagi and Amaterasu. Izanagi and Izanami gave birth to the land, while from Izanagi’s eye Amaterasu, the sun goddess, was born and ruled the heavens. She then instructs her grandson, Ninigi, to govern the land and so he

descends from the heavens while Amaterasu proclaims an oath that pronounces the reign of the imperial throne co-eternal with heaven and the earth. This legitimized the rulers of Japan as descendants of divine sovereigns. However, this oath is not from the *Kojiki*, nor even from the main text of the *Nihongi*. Instead it stems from an alternate variant in the *Nihongi*, displaying Norinaga's willingness to adapt the *Kojiki* to fit his philosophy, despite his claims to its authenticity.<sup>20</sup>

Another example of this inherent Way lies in his treatment of the creation deities. To emphasize the natural aspect of *mono no aware*, Norinaga placed a single creative deity, Musuhi no Kami, at the beginning of his interpretation. Yet, this does not conform to what appears in the *Kojiki* either. In the *Kojiki* there are three deities that appear when Heaven and Earth began, Ame-no-mi-nakanushi no Kami, Takami Musuhi no Kami, and Kami Musuhi no Kami.<sup>21</sup> Norinaga, however, reread them as a single original deity, and goes even further by implementing the main text of the *Nihongi*. In the *Kojiki*, heaven and earth are already separated, but using the *Nihongi*, Norinaga places Musuhi no kami as an existence that predates the separation. Also in the *Kojiki*, the deities are described as "having hidden their bodies," implying that they are supreme deities that play very small roles in the ballad of creation.<sup>22</sup> Norinaga reframes this, making his original deity the source of all beings.<sup>23</sup> While Norinaga sang the praises of the *Kojiki* over the *Nihongi* as displaying the original sentimentality of the Ancient Japanese, the *Kojiki* of Norinaga differs over that of the original. Despite his assertion of the superior authenticity of the *Kojiki*, the text itself proved insufficient to properly display the philosophical concepts that Norinaga wished to project onto the ancient Japanese people. In order to work around this, Norinaga used the body of the *Kojiki*, with supplements from the *Nihongi*, to create a clearer image of his idea of *mono no aware* and display its presence within the Japanese classics. Only with these concepts firmly established in tradition could Norinaga hope to effectively combat the spread of foreign philosophies such as Buddhism. To further substantiate his claims of an original Japanese sensibility, Norinaga needed also to discredit the Buddhist notions of the afterlife, in order to prevent people from following what he saw as the empty promises of the tradition.

#### 4. Norinaga on *Yomi*, the Land of the Dead

For all of the complex renderings and abstractions of the text of the *Kojiki*, and the establishment of his theory of *mono no aware*, Norinaga's view of the afterlife is surprisingly straightforward. The spirits of the dead go to the dark and dirty underground realm of *Yomi*, a dreary land with some similarities to this world in the sense that people talk, and eat, but should not be misunderstood as a complete reflection of this world. That this was the final destination for the souls of the deceased was one of Norinaga's firmest beliefs, however this also played into his conception of *mono no aware*.<sup>24</sup>

For Norinaga, *Yomi* was not a punishment. Both good and bad people end up there after death, which is why there was nothing sadder for him than death.<sup>25</sup> He even criticized other conceptions of the afterlife, stating, "In Ancient times when the hearts of people were naïve and not yet adulterated with doctrines from other lands there was no useless, devious thought of indiscriminately creating theories about where people go after death. When they died, people simply went to the Land of *Yomi* and there was nothing to do but prepare themselves for it and grieve."<sup>26</sup> Not only does this show his commitment to the inevitability of ending up in *Yomi* after death, it also reveals how the natural emotions of *mono no aware* work. Bitō Masahide has shown this view of the afterlife is what allowed Norinaga to cement his understanding of the Way of the Kami. There is no need for an individual to search for any kind of spiritual salvation (such as the Pure Land paradise in Buddhism) since all people, good or bad, go to *Yomi*. Thus, the real emphasis becomes fulfilling "as much of one's function as one should perform," or living one's life doing one's duty in society.<sup>27</sup> Masahide shows that this performance of duty to Norinaga contained a religious significance since it was this innate knowledge that constituted the Way of the Kami, and that people's actions in society are all due to the kami's design. To grieve at the passing of someone is natural, all the more so when you know their ultimate fate.

Using the *Kojiki* as a reference point, Norinaga points to the parting of Izanagi and Izanami, upon the death of the latter, as the first example of this *mono no aware*-like emotion. Izanagi, grieving at his loss, cannot bear to be apart from Izanami and so decided to venture down into the realm of *Yomi* to rescue her. This passage becomes significant not only for being the first and only mention of *Yomi* specifically within the text, but also as the basis for Norinaga's belief in it as the inevitable afterlife; proof of an Ancient understanding of *mono no aware*. Despite his assertions that this *mono no aware* understanding was in the hearts of the people during ancient times before the corruption from outside influences, the passages that he cites from the myths are only the parting of Izanagi and Izanami, and a few others like Yamato Takeru.<sup>28</sup>

Norinaga used his conception of *Yomi* as a tool against Buddhism, pulling people away from a tradition that focused on the afterlife in order to ground their attention on the here and now. He saw the idea of a Buddhist paradise as a

falsehood, misdirecting people away from the will of the Kami. Norinaga believed that if people could understand the nature of *Yomi*, they would turn their attention towards doing as much as they could in this life. They would understand true emotion, and operate in harmony with the Kami, which Norinaga saw Buddhism as inhibiting.

Finally, Norinaga's own death reveals how he viewed death in relation to the living. Norinaga's will, instead of containing the expected details about inheritance, is devoted to the instructions regarding the disposal of his remains, the funeral, gravesite, and annual memorial service. Although Norinaga's family belonged to the *Jōdo* (Pure Land) sect of Buddhism, Norinaga left instructions that his body should be taken in secret to a separate temple on Mt. Yamamuro and interred there. Thus, he was given two funerals, one with an empty coffin and in the Buddhist tradition, while on Mt. Yamamuro a cherry tree was planted upon an earth-mound tomb. Although he allowed for both funerals, along with the priest's prayers, he specifically requested that his survivors should not pray to Amida Buddha, once again solidifying his view of his own fate.<sup>29</sup> The cherry tree and earth-mound then become simply mementos for those still living. For Norinaga, death was a this-worldly experience, and contained no more meaning beyond that framework, the final experience a human will have before they descend into *Yomi*. This fatalistic view of the afterlife seemed self-evident to Norinaga, revealed in the old texts of the tradition. Some, however, would find this fate unacceptable and attempt to rework it.

## 5. Atsutane and the Other World

Hirata Atsutane (1776-1843) was in many ways the spiritual successor to Norinaga. Although never having met, Atsutane did have a chance to join the school Norinaga founded, the Suzunoya. Unfortunately, Norinaga had died four years prior to Atsutane's arrival. Despite this, Atsutane considered Norinaga to be his teacher, having studied his work extensively, which would later color Atsutane's own scholarship. Becoming interested in spirits and the afterlife early on in his career, Atsutane would expand the discourse on death and the afterlife, moving away from the strict adherence to the *Kojiki* and *Yomi* that his mentor held. While Norinaga relied solely on the *Kojiki* (with some uncredited additions discussed above) to produce his theories on the Ancient Way and his views on *mono no aware*, Atsutane would pull from several different sources to construct what he saw as the native tradition, as well as to argue against the spread of Buddhism. As Atsutane grew as a scholar, his intellectual pursuits would develop with him, resulting in three stages of his thought, the first of which becomes apparent through his work, the *Kishin shinron*.

In this text, Atsutane deals with the role of spirits in the thought of Confucius. Attempting to prove that not only did Confucius believe in spirits, but that reverence of them was a key value of his, Atsutane argued that an attentive reading of the *Rongo* (*The Analects*) could reveal small elements of belief and wisdom that Confucius left for later generations. Specifically, he pointed towards Confucius's emphasis on filial piety. A major component of this was ancestor worship, reverence and offerings left for the deceased. Atsutane saw this as proof that Confucius had to believe in spirits in order for this action to make sense.<sup>30</sup> Although Atsutane had respect for Confucius, stemming from his belief in Confucius's adherence to spirits, he also lamented that Confucius's knowledge was incomplete. Not living in Japan, there was no way he could fully understand and grasp the *kami* himself. The *Kishin shinron* is certainly not an endorsement of Confucian thinking, attempting to show that elements of the supernatural are embedded within it, rather it was showing that the supernatural was unavoidable, even for the Confucians who tried to dismiss such things. Beyond that, it was also an early attempt to bring some of these foreign traditions into a Shinto paradigm. If Atsutane could successfully discredit the skeptical elements of Confucianism, in this case disbelief in spirits and the afterlife, he could begin to construct a continuity between these Chinese epistemologies and those of the ancient Japanese to show that Confucianism was just a corruption of Japanese knowledge.

Moving away from a discourse on Confucius, Atsutane turned his attention to nativist understandings of the afterlife. This second stage of his thought would manifest in his work the *Tama no mihashira* (*Pillar of the Soul*), which he finished in 1811. Investigating the final destination of the soul, Atsutane would utilize the *Kojiki* as well as build off of the work the *Sandaiko*, written by fellow Suzunoya scholar Hattori Nakatsune (1756-1824).

Nakatsune was interested in the creation myths given in the *Kojiki* and attempted to reconcile these with those presented in the *Nihongi*. In this pursuit he began examining the formation of Heaven, Earth, and *Yomi* from the primordial mass, believing that the lighter elements rose to create heaven, the heavier elements sank to form *Yomi*, and the in-between elements made Earth. Turning to the section where Izanagi bestows lordship of these three domains to his children, Amaterasu with Heaven, Susano-o with the Sea, and Tsukiyomi-no-mikoto (a moon god) with Yoru-no-osu-kuni, Nakatsune had to connect this with his idea of the Heaven-Earth-*Yomi* triad. To this end he concluded that Yoru-no-osu kuni was in fact a reference to *Yomi*, turning the moon god into the lord of *Yomi*. Since the moon god was ruling over *Yomi*, then *Yomi* must be another name for the moon. To prove this, he pointed out that the word

“yomi” actually appears in Tsukiyomi’s name, and that the realm he was charged to rule has the word “*yoru*” (night) in it. Taking this even further, he pointed out that the tides of the sea were regulated by the moon, meaning that Susano-o, the sea god, must be a reference to Tsukiyomi. This marked the parallel between Amaterasu, as the sun goddess, ruling over Heaven, and Susano-o, the sea god, ruling over the moon, shifting the creation chapters of the *Kojiki* to revolve around the formation of the sun and moon.<sup>31</sup>

The *Kojiki* contains some passages that substantiate these claims, albeit with multiple contradictions. While the *Kojiki* does not actually explain the formation of Heaven and Earth, starting just after they “began,” it does hint at Earth being in the middle of two things when it is described as “young and like unto floating oil,” which would suggest it is floating on top of something heavier, but what this heavy substance could be is not explained.<sup>32</sup> As for the lordship bestowed on the three deities, the text does seem to suggest there actually being three, instead of two. Amaterasu is given the domain of Heaven, Susano-o dominion over the Sea, and Tsukiyomi dominion over the night.<sup>33</sup> Tsukiyomi’s name does imply a moon god, and his realm was the night which could indicate the moon, however, there seems to be little evidence that the moon was in fact the *Yomi* which Izanagi had journeyed to. Moreover, in the section that follows it is said that while Amaterasu and Tsukiyomi each assumed their role, Susano-o did not. Instead he wept and expressed his wish to depart to his deceased mother’s land.<sup>34</sup> A passage where Nakatsune might find some validation is later when Ōkuni-nushi goes to visit Susano-o in *Ne no Kuni*, which appears to be another type of underworld which Susano-o has dominion over, and was discussed in the work of Yoshikawa Koretari.<sup>35</sup> This event, however, seems largely ignored possibly due to it not fitting in with the cosmology that Nakatsune and Norinaga are attempting to construct. The idea of two afterlives, *Ne no Kuni* and *Yomi*, conflicted with Norinaga’s assertion of the certainty of *Yomi*. This particular passage also relates to the story of Ōkuni-nushi, whereas Norinaga and Nakatsune were more preoccupied with Amaterasu and her involvement.

Norinaga published the *Sandaiko*, since it agreed with his conclusion of *Yomi* as the indigenous notion for the underworld. Norinaga, along with Nakatsune, believed that *Yomi* formed from the heavier elements during creation, giving its physical location to be underneath Heaven and Earth. From this belief, a contradiction arises: How could the moon be *Yomi*, when it sits atop the night sky just as the sun sits during the day?<sup>36</sup> Although not addressed directly, Atsutane’s own interpretations of *Yomi* may bridge the gap.

Atsutane agreed with Nakatsune’s view that *Yomi* was indeed the moon, as well as Susano-o and Tsukiyomi were the same being. The disagreement came with Norinaga’s assertion that *Yomi* was a notion of the afterlife. He concluded that Norinaga’s interpretation was corrupted by the Chinese view of the afterlife in the form of the Yellow Springs, a similarly bleak shadowy world. Moving away from Nakatsune’s view of Ōkuni-nushi dwelling in *Yomi* (Ōkuni-nushi being given lordship over a spirit-world after abdicating the land of the living to Amaterasu’s grandson Ninigi), Atsutane placed him still on the earthly world, settling somewhere in the shrine at Izumo. Izumo then became a kind of portal through which Ōkuni-nushi enters the hidden realm Atsutane called the *Yumeikai*. Atsutane argued that the physical location of *yumeikai* could not be determined, for it existed alongside the visible world. Ōkuni-nushi is then given by Atsutane a role in the hidden realm similar to that of the Emperor in the visible realm, governing it and taking care of its inhabitants.<sup>37</sup> The spirits would not just reside in this world, they would transform and become kami themselves:

People exist in visible bodies for as long as they are in that visible world. When they die and return to the dark mystery, the soul at least becomes kami. Then, the actual amount of spiritual matter of which they are composed separates out into noble and vile, good and evil, and hard and soft. The most surpassing among that spiritual matter becomes like kami from the Age of the Kami, of such grand quality in no way inferior to the kami of the Age of the Kami.... Ōkuni-nushi who exists there in his unseen form lovingly attends them.<sup>38</sup>

This transforms the previous concept of the afterlife as *Yomi*, a dark underworld that rests as everyone’s eventual destiny, into a blissful eternal existence as a Kami, showing an element of human deification after death, under the care and guidance of the loving deity Ōkuni-nushi. This *yumeikai* theory also worked for him in his crusade against Buddhism. By establishing a kind of “Shinto Pure Land,” Atsutane could appropriate that Buddhist concept to work within the Shinto tradition. Rather than take Norinaga’s approach of discrediting foreign traditions, Atsutane attempted to bring them under the umbrella of Shinto, and show that they were corruptions of ancient Japanese knowledge. Atsutane, however, also had some personal involvement with the project, which could also have influenced the death concepts that he attempted to solidify.

According to Mark McNally, the passing of Atsutane’s wife, whom he credited as having helped him with his research, and Norinaga, whom Atsutane saw as his teacher, weighed heavily on him and that Atsutane believed that they deserved a fate better than had been envisioned by Norinaga.<sup>39</sup> McNally shows how Atsutane could not rest with

the idea of them residing in that cold, dark place, and so took it upon himself to rewrite it. He would not stop there, however, as his research eventually took him away from examination of the classical sources, such as the *Kojiki*, towards attempting to find proof of the supernatural in visible world phenomena.

Shifting to the examination of the supernatural as revealed in the visible world, Atsutane took to interviewing people who allegedly had some contact with the other world. In 1823 Atsutane wrote the *Katsugoro saisei kibun*, which examined the phenomenon of rebirth. In this text, he invited the boy Koyata Katsugoro to his home to question him on his previous life. Katsugoro, drawing on his experiences, denied the existence of the Buddhist realms of heaven and hell. This led Atsutane to argue that it was the Japanese kami that were responsible for rebirth, not the Buddhas. According to Atsutane, Musubi-no-kami (discussed above), and the *Ubusuna-no-kami* (local kami) were specifically responsible for rebirth, and only of the faithful. Ōkuni-nushi's role in rebirth, as ruler of the afterlife, remains unclear.<sup>40</sup> Also left untouched is what decides who is reborn, and who remains in the afterlife under Ōkuni-nushi. This displays another Buddhist notion that Atsutane appropriated in his mission to establish a native Japanese tradition. By taking reincarnation away from Buddhism, one of its key philosophical concepts, and reframing it within Shinto, Atsutane could easily dismiss the foreign tradition. With both reincarnation, and paradise being subsumed under Shinto, there would be nothing more that Buddhism could offer to stay relevant. Atsutane would soon shift his scholarship once again to examine interactions between the two worlds, and believed that through study of these interactions the superiority of native Japanese beliefs would be definitively established.

Interviewing a young man, Takayama Torakichi, over the course of five years from 1820-1825 Atsutane produced a text entitled the *Senkyo ibun*.<sup>41</sup> Never published commercially, it contains the interviews between Atsutane and this young man who was allegedly taken into the mountains, mountains that seem to sit in between the two worlds as it was inhabited by spirits and the like, by a *tengu* to receive spiritual training. At this time, *tengu* were normally associated with Buddhism, being either evil Buddhist monks or protective spirits. Using Torakichi's account of his time with his *tengu* master, Wilburn Hansen has shown how Atsutane attempted to discredit Buddhism and use Torakichi's experiences to reframe some Buddhism concepts within a Shinto understanding. The first step was to insist that Sugiyama Sanjin, the *tengu* master, was in fact not a *tengu* at all but rather a Sanjin, a supernatural medium whose purpose was to protect the people of Japan.<sup>42</sup> Sanjin act as a middleman between the kami and people, operating on different levels with some Sanjin being almost as powerful as some kami.<sup>43</sup> With this framework established, all of Torakichi's training falls under the realm of Shinto oriented practices.

Torakichi asserts many times that this land is the land of the kami, not the land of the Buddha. He claims that people are the descendants of the kami, and that everyone will eventually become kami, "The souls firmly composed of good intentions receive the blessings of the shining kami and become kami who protect this world until the end of time."<sup>44</sup> According to Torakichi this is knowledge that he gained from his Sanjin master and harkens back to Atsutane's argument about the hidden realm that Ōkuni-nushi presides over, as well as the underlying idea of human deification. These ideas are given direct validation by Torakichi when he says that "Many of the kami we worship at shrines were originally human," showing that this transformation from human into kami has already occurred and will continue to do so.<sup>45</sup>

In spite of this strict adherence to the kami, and condemnation of Buddhism, Torakichi did in fact practice some Buddhist rituals. Atsutane left these inconsistencies in the work in order to show his honesty, and because the explanation given by Torakichi seems to further push Buddhism into a Shinto paradigm. According to Torakichi, Buddhist ritual is done in order to help someone who is lost find an answer by asking a kami. The possession practices essentially invite a kami to inhabit their body in order to find guidance, and as for the Buddhist deities invoked, "Fudo, Kannon, Marishiten...these are just names attached to things that don't exist."<sup>46</sup> Torakichi states that since they do not exist they cannot make visitations, but that other demons and spirits can, which is why people think they do exist. As to what benefit the Buddhist trappings have on the ritual seems unclear, and even Atsutane seems confused by their use.

Nevertheless, Atsutane was taken in by the boy's story and believed that this showed the connection between the two worlds for which he had been searching. He was so convinced that when, in 1821 Torakichi said that it would be his master's birthday, Atsutane spared no expense in order to throw a birthday party with a ritual dance performed by Torakichi to celebrate. This party was not thrown to celebrate another year for Sugiyama Sanjin however, nor was it thrown for Torakichi or Atsutane to revere the kami-like being. Rather, it was thrown to verify the existence of the entity as a real spiritual presence. The dance was performed as if the spirit was present and deserving of respect, which is how it was presented to those present.<sup>47</sup>

Atsutane departed radically from the relatively simply notion of *Yomi* devised by his teacher, Norinaga. In an effort to rescue his mentor and wife from that bleak realm, as well as continue the crusade against foreign influences, Atsutane embarked on a quest to rework the conceptions of the afterlife as revealed through the classical texts of the *Kojiki*. Atsutane changed the narrative and then sought validation in the visible world through interviews with those

who had had contact with the other side. Both men, however, approached the text of the *Kojiki* as well as other sources with a specific purpose. With the predominance of Buddhism as well as increasing influence coming from the West, Norinaga and Atsutane saw Japan as becoming more and more corrupted by foreign traditions and ways of thinking. In order to reconstruct a native Japanese understanding, these two scholars sought to reveal through the classics that all of this foreign knowledge originated with the Japanese people. By discrediting, and reframing Buddhist concepts of death and the afterlife, Atsutane and Norinaga could reclaim the superiority of Japan. This was done with clear intention, without regard for what the text of the *Kojiki* actually revealed. As such, certain elements of death and the afterlife present in texts such as the *Kojiki* are undiscussed in their work.

## 6. Death Mysteries in the *Kojiki*

Throughout all of this discourse on death and the afterlife within the *Kojiki* that scholars such as Norinaga and Atsutane were engaged in, several cases go unexamined. Many characters die throughout the narrative told in the *Kojiki* with no elaboration on what occurs after, however, other characters have unique experiences that deserve being mentioned, especially since most do not fit within the cosmology that Norinaga and Atsutane attempted to construct. The first of these experiences occurs immediately after the death of Izanami.

Izanami dies giving birth to the fire kami, Kagu-tsuchi, with this being the first instance of death that occurs in the text. In his grief at losing Izanami, Izanagi kills Kagu-tsuchi, cutting him into eight pieces. Each of these eight pieces of the fire kami became volcanos, whereas the blood of Kagu-tsuchi that dripped off of Izanagi's sword became kami themselves, again eight in all.<sup>48</sup> While this could be seen as the origin story of volcanos in Japan, it is curious that kami would be born from the blood of another, especially when one considers that blood is seen as impure within this tradition. Also worth noting is that Izanagi does not run across Kagu-tsuchi during his visit to *Yomi*, despite Kagu-tsuchi being his child. Could this imply that Kagu-tsuchi's soul was dividing into the kami born from his blood and body, or did Izanagi simply not encounter him during his visit?

Izanagi's trip to *Yomi* brings up the next issue the *Kojiki* presents, particularly aimed at Atsutane's assertion of Ōkuni-nushi as the ruler of the afterlife. After Izanagi is chased out of *Yomi* for breaking the rule not to look upon Izanami, the two exchange a heated farewell where Izanami promises to kill one thousand people a day, and Izanagi promises to help birth one thousand five hundred people a day. After this interaction there is a passage that reads, "So Her Augustness Izanami is called Yomotsu-okami," or the lord of *Yomi*.<sup>49</sup> This would make Izanami not only a goddess of death, but by the sound of it *the* goddess of death. Would this not undermine the role Ōkuni-nushi? Perhaps they rule over different dominions, Ōkuni-nushi over the good spirits, and Izanami over the evil. None of this is elaborated on, and Norinaga is strangely silent on the passage.

Turning to Ōkuni-nushi, there is an interesting and undiscussed element in his story as well. After incurring the jealousy of his brothers, due to the prophecy saying that he would marry the woman they were all competing for, his brothers' plot and murder him. Twice in fact. Both times Ōkuni-nushi is brought back to life, once by two deities sent from Heaven, and once by his mother.<sup>50</sup> This is a rare example of resurrection in the *Kojiki* which gets remarkably little attention, especially given Atsutane's later assertion that Ōkuni-nushi plays no part in the reincarnation of the faithful, that task falling to Musubi-no-kami and the local deities, neither of whom appear in this story. As these are all kami, perhaps the usual rules of death apply differently for them. Human deaths should be more cut and dry, but there stands one notable exception.

The legendary Japanese prince Yamato Takeru, son of Keikō- tennō (Emperor Keikō) who is traditionally regarded as the twelfth emperor of Japan, is a well-known folk hero. Though his narrative contains many of his adventures, the one of note here comes at the end. Upon realizing his death is approaching, Yamato Takeru states, "Whereas my heart always felt like flying through the sky, my legs are now unable to walk."<sup>51</sup> Soon after this he dies, and his wife and children conduct his funeral. During this time Yamato Takeru's body "turning into a white dotterel eight fathoms [long], and soaring up to Heaven, flew off towards the shore."<sup>52</sup> Here we see a resurrection of a different kind, and with someone given to be human (albeit a descendent of a kami). This is the only case of this occurring within the *Kojiki*, and could potentially reveal some foreign influences. With foreign elements leaking into Japan from Korea and China such as Buddhism and Daoism, concepts such as the Yin and Yang soul began to be included in Shinto oriented understanding. While this has already been shown with the concerns of Junna- tennō and the discarding of his remains, perhaps some of these concepts emerged within the *Kojiki* as well. The departure of Yamato Takeru flying off into Heaven seems reminiscent of the legends of the Daoist immortals, who are able to fly like a bird after death. This could explain Yamato Takeru's transformation into an actual bird, and the method of his departure, clearly being a person of supernatural talent even if not a full kami.

## 7. Concluding Thoughts

Death concepts in Shinto have gone through many periods of development, from an intense aversion to a ritual impurity, to a concrete notion of an underworld and beyond. While discussion about an understanding of an afterlife within Shinto is difficult, it is important to note the various reasons for this. With Shinto lacking several components that accompany most religious traditions, such as a founder, a savior, a doctrine, and a holy text, philosophical developments on death and exegetical analysis of any “Shinto” text such as the *Kojiki* arose in a different way.<sup>53</sup> Threatened by the advancement and predominance of foreign traditions within Japan, such as Buddhism and Confucianism, scholars such as Norinaga and Atsutane sought to combat this by reconstructing the tradition of Shinto. By discrediting or appropriating elements of these foreign traditions, Shinto could be seen as representing the true nature of the Japanese people, and as the origin of these philosophical ideas. For this to be successful, the sources that these scholars used, such as the *Kojiki*, had to be reinterpreted to allow for the inclusion of these ideas and development of a concrete notion of the afterlife. Many passages within the *Kojiki* were omitted, since they did not conform to the cosmology that was being constructed. Analysis of the development of death concepts within the Shinto tradition reveals the ways in which Japan responded to the increasing influence of foreign powers, and the method that was employed for the establishment of a unique Japanese tradition.

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## 9. Endnotes

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1. *Kokugaku* was an academic movement in the late Tokugawa period of Japan, which called for a return to the Japanese classics over study of foreign philosophies such as Confucianism and Buddhism.

2. Basil Hall Chamberlain, trans., *The Kojiki: Records of Ancient Matters* (Vermont: Tuttle Publishing, 1981), 46.

3. The visiting kami, or deity, was named Ajishiki-taka-hikone whereas the deceased kami was named Amewaka-hiko

4. *Kojiki*, 118.

5. The medieval period in Japan is normally seen as beginning at the start of the Kamakura period (1185-1333) and ending with the close of the Muromachi period (1333-1568).

6. *Engishiki III*, quoted in Bernhard Scheid, “Overcoming Taboos on Death: The Limited Possibilities of Discourse in the Afterlife in Shinto,” in *Practicing the Afterlife: Perspectives from Japan*, ed. Susanne Formanek and William R. LaFleur. (Vienna: Austrian Academy of Sciences Press, 2004), 209.

7. *Engishiki III*, 208.

8. Scheid, “Overcoming Taboos on Death,” 212.

9. Tenno is the Japanese word for Emperor.

10. Scheid, “Overcoming Taboos on Death,” 213-214.

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11. A theory that deals with Yin and Yang that aligns itself more closely to the original Chinese conception, seeing them as components of the original substance, *ikki*.
  12. It should be noted here that for Jihen, the most authoritative text on the ancient records was the *Sendai kuji hongi* which is now considered to be apocryphal, but during this period was viewed alongside the other two as authoritative texts on Japanese history.
  13. Scheid, "Overcoming Taboos on Death," 218-219.
  14. The High Plain of Heaven is also the first place mentioned in the *Kojiki*, being the realm where the original Kami are born.
  15. Scheid, "Overcoming Taboos on Death," 223-224.
  16. Isomae Jun'ichi, translated by Sarah E. Thal, "Reappropriating the Japanese Myths: Motoori Norinaga and the Creation Myths of the *Kojiki* and *Nihon shoki*," *Japanese Journal of Religious Studies* 27 (2000): 33.
  17. Mark McNally, "The Proof is Out There: Hirata Atsutane, Evidential Learning, and the Afterlife," in *Practicing the Afterlife: Perspectives from Japan*, ed. Susanne Formanek and William R. LaFleur. (Vienna: Austrian Academy of Sciences Press, 2004), 234-235.
  18. Jun'ichi, "Reappropriating the Japanese Myths," 21.
  19. Jun'ichi, "Reappropriating the Japanese Myths," 15-16.
  20. Jun'ichi, "Reappropriating the Japanese Myths," 20. The *Nihongi* not only contains a narrative that can differ from the one presented in the *Kojiki* in several places, but also contains alternative versions of several stories that can differ from both.
  21. *Kojiki*, 17.
  22. *Ibid*.
  23. *Kojiki*, 24.
  24. Bitō Masahide, "Religion and Society in the Edo Period, as Revealed in the Thought of Motoori Norinaga," *Modern Asian Studies* 18 (1984): 584.
  25. *Ibid*.
  26. Jun'ichi, "Reappropriating the Japanese Myths," 21-22.
  27. Masahide, "Religion and Society in the Edo Period," 585.
  28. *Ibid*.
  29. Masahide, "Religion and Society in the Edo Period," 583-584.
  30. Mark McNally, "The Proof is Out There," 239.
  31. Mark McNally, "The Proof is Out There," 240-241.
  32. *Kojiki*, 18.
  33. *Kojiki*, 51-52.
  34. *Kojiki*, 52-53.
  35. *Kojiki*, 86.
  36. Mark McNally, "The Proof is Out There," 241.
  37. Mark McNally, "The Proof is Out There," 242-243.
  38. Wilburn Hansen, *When Tengu Talk: Hirata Atsutane's Ethnography of the Other World* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2008), 92.
  39. Mark McNally, "The Proof is Out There," 242.
  40. Mark McNally, "The Proof is Out There," 244.
  41. Translated by Carmen Blacker as "Strange Tidings from the Realm of Immortals."
  42. Wilburn Hansen, *When Tengu Talk*, 160.
  43. Sanjin is both the name of Torakichi's master, as well as the name of the kind of being he is.
  44. Wilburn Hansen, *When Tengu Talk*, 92.
  45. Wilburn Hansen, *When Tengu Talk*, 142.
  46. Wilburn Hansen, *When Tengu Talk*, 155.
  47. Wilburn Hansen, "Dancing as if Possessed: A Coming Out Party in Edo Spirit Society," *Japanese Journal of Religious Studies* 37 (2010): 284.
  48. *Kojiki*, 37-39.
  49. *Kojiki*, 45.
  50. *Kojiki*, 84-85.
  51. *Kojiki*, 263-264.
  52. *Kojiki*, 268.
  53. The *Kojiki* representing a mythological history of Japan, rather than a text containing moral instruction.