

The essence of Shinto

Preface to the French edition

Until now it has been rather hard to find books about Shinto. Shinto is one of the oldest and most respected aspects of Japanese culture, but in the Western world it has not attracted as much attention as Zen or Buddhism did. Books about Zen or Buddhism can be found easily in libraries and bookshops, where they have special shelves. Once I saw in a dream a book about Shinto. It was an empty book with pure white pages. My imagination was inspired by the title of a well-known book by British director Peter Brook: *The Empty Space*. It is a manifest about the meaning of theatre and for Peter Brook it has been the beginning of a theatrical research that eventually brought him to Paris. Together with Yoshi Oida he established the *Centre international de Recherche Théâtrale* in the *Théâtre des Bouffes du Nord*. It became a centre for performers from all over the world, who do not speak each other's language but who share another way of communication. This Institute organized in 1977 a special program for European actors and dancers to study the discipline of Japanese arts and apply it to western art.

I had the privilege to join this program and actually it was my first introduction to Shinto. The program was organized by Yoshi Oida, who had started to work with Peter Brook in 1968. For his production of *Hannya Shingyo* he had assembled a group of Japanese specialists of aikido, kendo, iaido and shiatsu, Noh, Bukkyo and Shinto. Besides their performance the actors gave an introduction to their Japanese disciplines. Every class started with a Shinto ritual, called *misogi*: we had to clean the floor with floor cloths and buckets full of water. This had to be done every single class. Students, who tried to skip these chores, were denied entrance for the rest of the day.

This introduction to Japanese disciplines turned out to be a completely new approach of study. Western students are used to ask questions about the meaning of every exercise, but in this course the answer was always the same: "Just do it and you will gradually understand the meaning." If a student was willing to surrender to this non-verbal approach, he would be awarded by a new sensation. One of the aims of the course was to create a mental turning point, the awareness of a kind of knowledge that goes beyond words. Although we were discouraged to ask questions, we had the guarantee that all accumulated questions would be answered during the last session. It is significant to mention that this last session had proceeded in serene silence.

At the end of the first month of the course there was an evening with lectures. Perhaps this was also an attempt to satisfy students with a craving for logical explanation. Among the lecturers were Jean Herbert, he talked about the relation between Shinto and Japanese arts; Michel Random gave a viewing of his latest movie with a breathtaking fire ceremony in the Shintoshrine of Yamakage Shinto; Grandmaster Yamakage Motohisa talked about a relevant correlation between our course and an aspect of the fire ceremony that is related to ESP (extrasensory perception). Peter Brook explained that it is essential for an actor to develop theatrical skills to evoke a world beyond the visible world.

It had become a memorable evening for me because this was the only time that brought me together with Jean Herbert and Yamakage Motohisa in the same space. Hereafter I explored two ways to intensify this encounter. First I discovered that Jean Herbert had published a book about Shinto: *Aux sources du Japon – Le Shinto* (Albin Michel, Paris, 1964). At the time the book was still available. During the Master class with Yoshi Oida I studied one chapter in particular, *Chapitre 6: Métaphysique, éthique, exercices spirituels et esthétique*. Jean Herbert described spiritual exercises, like *misogi*, *furutama*, *chinkon* and *kotodama* and the reading of these words gave me a

shock of recognition: I was practicing these same exercises at the moment. By being described in an academic book the exercises seemed enhanced with a more real meaning. Although after years of spiritual practice in Japan I finally understood that words can block the road toward spiritual development, at the moment I could not see another reality that exists beyond words. Most people don't like to see it, but I wanted to continue my search. Fortunately I had another opening, a second way, to intensify my encounter with Shinto; during that memorable evening Grandmaster Yamakage had informed us that every student who wished to continue his study of Shinto, would be welcome in the Yamakage Shinto School in Hamamatsu, Japan.

I sent a letter of application. To my great surprise I was accepted, but there was a firm condition; "as soon as you have started, there is no way of return. Giving up halfway is not in the school's vocabulary. Each day will start with misogi at sunrise. We start in midwinter. Misogi means to go into the sea and purify body and mind." It sounded too Spartan not to be a polite way of dissuasion. Nevertheless I accepted and in January 1979 I arrived in Japan.

My study time in Yamakage Shinto School was intense but if it must be described in words, the daily routine seems simple. The core of the study is a series of sessions in front of the Shinto shrine. Each session lasts about three hours and there are up to three sessions a day. Each day starts with misogi in *Hamana Lake* followed by a complete cleaning of the buildings and the garden. Often during breakfast and dinner Master Yamakage gives informal lectures about the meaning of Shinto. So our meals are nourishing in two aspects. Every day I keep record in my notebook. After a while Master Yamakage recommends me to write a book about my experience. This is eventually published in a book *Ware wa kagami nari, I am a Mirror*. The book, in Japanese, describes my spiritual development toward an understanding of the world as a reflection of myself. Master Yamakage completes the book with notes in order to illustrate the wisdom of ancient Shinto. The book is now given to every new student of Yamakage Shinto School, as a guide during his or her spiritual journey. I return to Holland where I instruct thousands of students how to practice the spiritual exercises of Shinto. This is a learning process, not by amassing new ideas from books, but by getting rid of fixed patterns of thoughts. It is an experience of purification. The ideal first encounter with Shinto is non-verbal. The meaning of Shinto reveals itself best by exercises and rituals that generate energy, purity and gratitude.

Here we arrive exactly to the point why Shinto has not yet attracted so much attention of Western people. They are more interested in what can be described logically. The situation is best illustrated by an example from the well-known series about World Mythology by Joseph Campbell. He creates a ludicrous scene where a Shinto master explains to a Western sociologist what Shinto is. "We do not have ideology, we do not have theology. We dance." This explanation might create the false assumption that in Shinto there is nothing beyond dance. The first Western person to state the opposite was Jean Herbert. As I mentioned before, the 6th chapter of his book is completely devoted to the metaphysics and spirituality of Shinto, which even might contain a treasure of mystical mysteries. Already in 1955 Jean Herbert had met Grandmaster Yamakage, who had taught him spiritual exercises and introduced him to sacred spaces in nature, where he was able to feel the natural vibrating energy. While the books of Jean Herbert about Shinto never mention his personal spiritual experiences, Yamakage writes about it in his obituary for Jean Herbert.

"I met Jean Herbert in 1955, when the Association of Shinto Shrines (Jinja Honcho) had assigned me as his guide. We visited many Shinto shrines, not the usual buildings, but natural places from which an amazing energy is radiating. From that moment Jean Herbert understood Shinto as a universal nature philosophy. He shared his deepest inner thoughts with me: please don't propagate Shinto. People in the west will come to it when it is time."

The meeting with Jean Herbert, who had shown genuine interest in Shinto and who was sensitive to the radiating energy of natural places where kami are residing, was also relevant for Master Yamakage. It convinced him about a universal aspect of Shinto. He was the first in Japan to acknowledge that even a not-Japanese person could understand Shinto. Due to his unique vision on Natural Shinto, or Ko-Shinto, Master Yamakage was ready to accept me as a foreign student and finally in 1981 to write the first license in the history of Shinto which entitled a not-Japanese person as kannushi, or Shinto master.

While Jean Herbert mentions the mere existence of metaphysics and spiritual exercises in Shinto, we have here now a French primer that reveals the deepest secrets of Shinto.

The original Japanese book has as title: *The mysteries of Ancient Shinto - Wisdom and Practice*, or in Japanese: *Shintō no shinpi: Ko shintō no shisō To Gyōhō*. The book is written for a Japanese audience to inform them about an unknown aspect of Shinto. Most modern Japanese have no deep knowledge about Shinto. For them the shrine visits or the numerous Shinto festivals in the streets are just a Japanese custom, not an expression of faith. They do not believe in Shinto as a religion.

Shinto in modern Japan seems to have lost all traces of spirituality. It is against this modern trend that Master Yamakage writes his book about Ancient Shinto, (in Japanese Ko-Shinto). It is different from other types of Shinto, like Shrine Shinto, State Shinto or Folk Shinto. Many western readers, who are used to see the Ise Shrine as the most holy space in Japan, will be shocked to learn that spirituality has become taboo in Ise. By stating that prayers in Ise have become a fraud, Yamakage sends a wakeup call to the Shinto establishment, pushing them to create facilities of spiritual training for all Shinto students who want to become kannushi.

In Japan the book has attracted a group of young readers who were surprised to find spiritual wisdom within their native tradition. Disappointed that Buddhist and Shinto institutions were void of spiritual education, they looked for spirituality in western movements as tarot, cabalism, ley lines, or yoga. By returning to Ancient Shinto they could reconnect with the sacred landscape in Japan and find their roots.

In 2005 Grandmaster Yamakage asked me to prepare an English edition of *Shinto no Shinpi*. While reading a rough English translation that was already initiated by a Japanese study group of western esoteric wisdom, I recognized the content as the same of what I had experienced during my study in 1979 and of which I had kept many notebooks. While rewriting the English sentences I experienced again the trials and tribulations of my spiritual journey. The hoped for result should be that the book became better understandable. In the editing process I changed the order of chapters and deleted some references to western traditions that only contained useful information for a Japanese audience. Chapter 6, an introduction to the *theory of one soul and four spirits*, is very difficult. Actually it can be understood if you have practiced the spiritual exercises. It is an essential part of Ancient Shinto and in the future we hope to publish a new book about this theory. In the mean time we present this book as the Essence of Shinto. We hope to make clear that Shinto is not only the spiritual heart of Japan, but might become an example for a spiritual heart in the modern world.

It is interesting to mention that the founder of Aikido, Morihei Ueshiba, has discovered Shinto in the second half of his life. He was instructed by Onisaburo Deguchi, the charismatic leader of Omotokyo, a Shinto sect that was established in the Meiji period. He aimed to integrate *misogi* and *kotodama* in the practice of Aikido. Gradually he transformed Aikido into a Way of Peace. Practitioners of Aikido, who read this book, will better understand the meaning of *misogi* and

kotodama. For this reason Mr Wagner Bull, 6th Dan Aikido and director of the Instituto Takemussu in Sao Paolo, has translated the Essence of Shinto in Portuguese. In 2010 it was published in Brazil.

Now the Essence of Shinto is available in this French edition. As I have mentioned before, some remarkable events have happened in Paris in 1964 en 1977, but I think that the invisible roots of Shinto can be traced back further, to the thousands of years that kami are residing in the beautiful nature of France. Here is the essence of Shinto.

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