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Revolutions with Nothing New

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In 1868, Japanese culture underwent what could only be called a revolution. This period is better known as “The Meiji Restoration.” The period is marked by widespread attempts by key power-bases to re-define, re-write, and re-invent, etc., the “Japaneseness” of Japan. As such, The Meiji Restoration is probably more accurately understood as “The Meiji Revisionism.” The effects of this cultural revolution, and thus the re-definings, re-writings, and re-inventions, etc., are still having an impact today – even in the study and practice of Aikido.

One of the policies put into play during this time was called “Shinbutsu Bunri.” This was the policy by which modern Shinto was re-defined and re-invented according to a notion of “purifying” out its “foreign” elements (i.e. Buddhism). Shinbutsu Bunri refers to the separation of Buddhist temples from Shinto shrines – more accurately understood, as the destruction of Buddhist/Shinto multiplexes.

For centuries, from the beginning, the passive missionary techniques of various Buddhist schools made use and room for the various folk practices (e.g. nature worship, shamanism, ancestor worship, etc.) indigenous to Japan. Through the centuries, these practices evolved and were made more sophisticated via Buddhist notions of salvation, cosmology, science, etc. Family shrines, where ancestors were worshipped according to traditional and newly sophisticated rituals, were connected to Buddhist temples – whose abbot was himself often a family member (e.g. sons not positioned to be heir) of the ancestor being worshipped in the shrine. While everything was kept in the family, through time, via various economic and political practices and the fact that Buddhist temples addressed more than just family matters, the temples of such multiplexes came to politically and economically dominate the shrines. This process reached a philosophical apex in the medieval period with the theory of “honji suijaku.”

According to “honji suijaku” the relationship between the various kami worshipped in the family shrine and the buddhas and bodhisattvas housed in the connected temple was one of manifestation and hypostasis. At the time of its implementation, honji-suijaku was not a policy being imposed from the outside. Connecting one’s familial ancestor to the ultimate reality of a buddha was not a bad thing, for example. In time however, in time with the growing political dis-ease, this policy came under criticism. Such criticism had a lot to do with how socially powerful certain shrine/temple multiplexes had become. One significant outcry is that of Yoshida Shinto. This tradition made use of the theory underlying honji suijaku but did so in order to reverse the relationship. For Yoshida, the kami were the hypostasis and the buddhas/bodhisattvas were the manifestations. Yoshida made use of the Kojiki and the growing sense of “Japaneseness” that was being linked to things like the Emperor, etc. One of the key ways that Yoshida attempted to debunk the previous version of honji-suijaku was to note that Buddhism could not have come first since it has no sense of how the cosmos and the world were created. In a very simple argument, when

Yoshida read the Kojiki, and discovered how creation took place, he saw no buddhas – only kami. Therefore, the kami are the hypostasis and the buddhas are the manifestation of the kami.

While Yoshida did not completely separate the relationship between the kami and the buddhas, he did pave the way, many scholars believe, for the Meiji policy of Shinbutsu Bunri. In carrying out this policy, many temples were burned to the ground. Shrines were cleared of any associations or symbols that they may have shared with their related temple. Other things were simply re-understood (e.g. tori gates – now a Shinto landmark were Buddhist in origin, etc.) Many of the temples that survived the policy (which we can visit today) did so only because the local population protested, begged, and died to prevent the government from razing it to the ground. This was not an easy thing to do since Shinbutsu Bunri was one of the political policies at the heart of the government's fascist/imperialist aspirations. Of the temples that were part of a temple/shrine multiplex and that were not destroyed, for one reason or another, the policy was applied to them by putting obstacles along the traditional paths that led from the temple to the shrine and vice versa. Sometimes this was done with roads and highways, and other kinds of city re-zonings, etc. Sometimes this was done with walls.

The thing with revolutions, we often forget, is that they always come around again. They are never as imaginative as we would like them to be. Based on the circle, there is always a lot of redundancy, a lot of repetition, in revolutions. Gaku Homma's article, "Pathway Closed," reminded me of that fact.