

***PERCIVAL
LOWELL***



***OCCULT
JAPAN
(THE
WAY
OF THE GODS)***

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Occult Japan (The Way of the Gods)

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PREFACE TO THE FOURTH EDITION

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The manifestations of which this book treats were witnessed by the writer in 1891 and 1893. Since then the miracles, he learns, have become one of the sights that visitors are taken to see, and on the fifteenth of April and of September the grounds of his friend the high priest at Kanda show many a tourist from the other side of the world amid the devout crowd about the sacred bed of coals.

The illustrations are from photographs by the writer, taken at the time.

P. L.

ONTAKÉ.

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In the heart of Japan, withdrawn alike by distance and by height from the commonplaces of the every-day world, rises a mountain known as Ontaké or the Honorable Peak. It is a fine volcanic mass, sundered by deep valley-clefts from the great Hida-Shinshiu range, amidst which it stands dignifiedly aloof. Active once, it has been inactive now beyond the memory of man. Yet its form lets one divine what it must have been in its day. For upon its summit are the crumbling walls of eight successive craters, piled in parapet up into the sky.

It is not dead; it slumbers. For on its western face a single solfatara sends heavenward long, slender filaments of vapor, faint breath of what now sleeps beneath; a volcano sunk in trance.

Almost unknown to foreigners, it is well known to the Japanese. For it is perhaps the most sacred of Japan's many sacred peaks. Upon it, every summer, faith tells a rosary of ten thousand pilgrims.

Some years ago I chanced to gaze from afar upon this holy mount; and, as the sweep of its sides drew my eye up to where the peak itself stood hidden in a nimbus of cloud, had meant some day to climb it. Partly for this vision, more because of the probable picturesqueness of the route, I found myself doing so with a friend in August, 1891. Beyond the general fact of its sanctity, nothing special was supposed to attach to the peak. That the mountain held a mystery was undreamed of.

We had reached, after various vicissitudes, as prosaically as is possible in unprosaic Japan, a height of about nine thousand feet, when we suddenly came upon a manifestation as surprising as it was unsuspected.

Regardless of us, the veil was thrown aside, and we gazed into the beyond. We stood face to face with the gods.

The fathoming of this unexpected revelation resulted in the discovery of a world of esoteric practices as significant as they were widespread. By way of introduction to them, I cannot do more simply than to give my own. Set as the scene of it was upon the summit of that slumbering volcano sunk in trance itself, a presentation to the gods could hardly have been more dramatic.

We had plodded four fifths way up the pilgrim path. We had already passed the first snow, and had reached the grotto-like hut at the eighth station—the paths up all high sacred mountains in Japan being pleasingly pointed by rest-houses; we were tarrying there a moment, counting our heartbeats, and wondering how much more of the mountain there might be to come, for thick cloud had cloaked all view on the ascent, when three young men, clad in full pilgrim white, entered the hut from below, and, deaf to the hut-keeper's importunities to stop, passed stolidly out at the upper end: the hut having been astutely contrived to inclose the path, that not even the most ascetic might escape temptation. The devout look of the trio struck our fancy. So, leaving some coppers for our tea and cakes, amid profuse acknowledgment from the hut-keeper, we passed out after them. We had not climbed above a score of rods when we overtook our young puritans lost in prayer before a shrine cut into the face of the cliff, in front of which stood two or three benches conspicuously out of place in such a spot. The three young men had already laid aside their hats, mats, and staffs, and disclosed the white fillets that bound their shocks of jet-black hair. We halted on general principles of curiosity, for we had no inkling of what was about to happen. They were simply the most pious young men we had yet met, and they interested us.

The prayer, which seemed an ordinary one, soon came to an end; upon which we expected to see the trio pack up and

be off again. But instead of this one of them, drawing from his sleeve a *gohei*-wand, and certain other implements of religion, seated himself upon one of the benches facing the shrine. At the same time another sat down on a second bench facing the first, clasped his hands before his breast, and closed his eyes. The third reverently took post near by.

No sooner was the first seated than he launched into the most extraordinary performance I have ever beheld. With a spasmodic jerk, pointed by a violent guttural grunt, he suddenly tied his ten fingers into a knot, throwing his whole body and soul into the act. At the same time he began a monotonous chant. Gazing raptly at his digital knot, he prayed over it thus a moment; then, with a second grunt, he resolved it into a second one, and this into a third and a fourth and a fifth, stringing his contortions upon his chant with all the vehemence of a string of oaths. Startlingly uncouth as the action was, the compelling intentness and suppressed power with which the paroxysmal pantomime was done, was more so.

His strange action was matched only by the strange inaction of his vis-à-vis. The man did not move a muscle; if anything, he grew momentarily more statuesque. And still the other's monotonous chant rolled on, startlingly emphasized by the contortion knots.

At last the exorcist paused in his performance, and taking the *gohei*-wand from beside him on the bench, placed it between the other's hands, clenched one above the other. Then he resumed his incantation, the motionless one as motionless as ever. So it continued for some time, when all at once the hands holding the wand began to twitch convulsively; the twitching rapidly increased to a spasmodic throe which momentarily grew more violent till suddenly it broke forth into the full fury of a seemingly superhuman paroxysm. It was as if the wand shook the man, not the man it. It lashed the air maniacally here and there above his head, and then slowly settled to a semi-rigid half-arm

holding before his brow; stiff, yet quivering, and sending its quivers through his whole frame. The look of the man was unmistakable. He had gone completely out of himself. Unwittingly we had come to stand witnesses to a trance.

At the first sign of possession, the exorcist had ceased incanting and sat bowed awaiting the coming presence. When the paroxysmal throes had settled into a steady quiver—much as a top does when it goes off to sleep—he leaned forward, put a hand on either side the possessed's knees, and still bowed, asked in words archaically reverent the name of the god who had thus deigned to descend.

At first there was no reply. Then in a voice strangely unnatural, without being exactly artificial, the entranced spake: "I am Hakkai."

The petitioner bent yet lower; then raising his look a little, preferred respectfully what requests he had to make; whether the peak would be clear and the pilgrimage prove propitious, and whether the loved ones left at home would all be guarded by the god? And the god made answer: "Till the morrow's afternoon will the peak be clear, and the pilgrimage shall be blessed."

The man stayed bowed while the god spake, and when the god had finished speaking, offered up an adoration prayer. Then leaning forward, he first touched the possessed on the breast, and then struck him on the back several times with increasing insistency. Under this ungodly treatment the possessed opened his eyes like one awaking from profound sleep. The others then set to and kneaded his arms, body, and legs, cramped in catalepsy, back to a normal state.

No sooner was the ex-god himself again than the trio changed places; the petitioner moved into the seat of the entranced, the looker-on took the place of the petitioner, and the entranced retired to the post of looker-on. Then with this change of persons the ceremony was gone through with

again to a similar possession, a similar interview, and a similar awakening.

At the close of the second trance the three once more revolved cyclically and went through the performance for the third time. This rotation in possession so religiously observed was not the least strange detail of this strange drama.

When the cycle had been completed, the three friends offered up a concluding prayer, and then, donning their outside accoutrements, started upward.

Revolving in our minds what we had thus so strangely been suffered to see, we too proceeded, and, being faster walkers, had soon distanced our god-acquaintances. We had not been long upon the summit, however, when they appeared again, and no sooner had they arrived, than they sat down upon some other benches similarly standing in the little open space before the tip-top shrine, and went through their cyclical possessions as before. We had not thought to see the thing a second time, and were almost as much astounded as at first.

Our fear of parting with our young god-friends proved quite groundless. For on returning to the summit-hut after a climb round the crater rim, the first thing to catch our eyes amid its dim religious gloom was the sight of the pious trio once more in the full throes of possession. There were plenty of other pilgrims seated round the caldron fire, as well as some native meteorologists in an annex, who had been exiled there for a month by a paternal government to study the atmospheric conditions of this island in the clouds. Up to the time we met them the weather had been dishearteningly same, consisting, they informed us somewhat pathetically, of uninterrupted fog. The exorcists, however, took no notice of them, nor of any of the other pilgrims, nor did the rest of the company pay the slightest heed to the exorcists; all of which spoke volumes for the commonplaceness of the occurrence.

We again thought we had seen our last of the gods, and again were we pleurably disappointed. At five the next morning we had hardly finished a shivery preprandial peep at the sunrise,—all below us a surging sea of cloud,—and turned once more into the hut, when there were the three indefatigables up and communing again by way of breakfast, for they took none other, and an hour later we came upon them before the tip-top shrine, hard at it for the fifth time. And all this between four o'clock one afternoon and six the next morning. The cycle was not always completed, one of the three being much better at possession than the other two, and one much worse, but there were safely ten trances in the few hours that fringed their sleep's oblivion.

And nobody, apparently, took any cognizance of what was going on, except us and the meteorologists, who came out to fraternize with us, and volunteered comments in a superior manner on the senselessness of the proceeding,—an imported attitude of mind not destitute of caricature.

Truly the gods were gracious thus to descend so many times; and truly devout their devotees to crave so much communion. Doubtless an inordinate desire for their society is gratifying to the gods, but the frequency of the talks fairly took our breath away, though it had no perceptible effect on the young men's nor on the god's, even at that altitude. The god possessed his devotees with comparative ease; which was edifying but exhausting; for to let another inhabit one's house always proves hard on the furniture. And all this took place on top of a climb of ten thousand feet toward heaven. In spite of it, however, these estimable young men were equal to a tramp all over the place during the rest of the morning. They ascended religiously to all the crater-peaks, and descended as piously to all the crater-pools—and then started on their climb down and their journey home of three hundred and fifty miles, much of it to be done afoot. That night saw them not only off the mountain, but well on their

way beyond. How far their holy momentum carried them without stopping I know not, for the last we saw of them was a wave of farewell as they passed the inn where we had put up for the night. But the most surprising part of the endurance lay in the fact that from the moment they began the ascent of the mountain on the early morning of the one day, till they were off it on the late afternoon of the next, they ate nothing and drank only water.

Such was my introduction to the society of the gods; and this first glimpse of it only piqued curiosity to more. No sooner back in town, therefore, than I made inquiry into the acquaintanceship I had so strangely formed upon the mountain, to receive the most convincing assurance of its divinity. The fact of possession was confirmed readily enough, but my desire for a private repetition of the act itself was received at first with some mystery and more hesitation. However, with one man after another, offishness thawed, until, getting upon terms of cordiality with deity, it was not long before I was holding divine receptions in my own drawing-room. Exalted and exclusive as this best of all society unquestionably was, it proved intellectually, like more mundane society we agree to call the best, undeniably dull. I mention this not because I did not find it well worth knowing, but simply to show that it was every whit the company it purported to be.

II.

The revelation thus strangely vouchsafed me turned out to be as far-reaching as it was sincere. There proved to exist a regular system of divine possession, an esoteric cult imbedded in the very heart and core of the Japanese character and instinct, with all the strangeness of that to us enigmatical race.

That other foreigners should not previously have been admitted to this company of heaven may at first seem the strangest fact of all. Certainly my introduction cannot be due to any special sanctity of my own, if I may judge by what my friends tell me on the subject. Nor can I credit it to any desire on my part to rise in the world, whether to peaks or preferments—an equally base ambition in either case—for Ontaké, though not of every-day ascent, has been climbed by foreigners several times before. Rein, that indefatigable collector of facts and statistics, managed some years ago to get to the top of it and then to the bottom again without seeing anything. The old guide-book, in the person of an enthusiastic pedestrian, contrived to do the like. Other visitors of good locomotive powers also accomplished this feat without penetrating the secret of the mountain. And yet the trances were certainly going on all the time, and the guides who piloted these several gentlemen must have been well aware of the fact.

The explanation is to be sought elsewhere. The fact is that Japan is still very much of an undiscovered country to us. It is not simply that the language proves so difficult that but few foreigners pass this threshold of acquaintance; but that the farther the foreigner goes, the more he perceives the ideas in the two hemispheres to be fundamentally diverse. What he expects to find does not exist, and what exists he would never dream of looking for.

Japan is scientifically an undiscovered country even to the Japanese, as a study of these possessions will disclose. For their importance is twofold: archaeologic no less than psychic. They are other-world manifestations in two senses, and the one sense helps accentuate the other. For they are as essentially Japanese as they are essentially genuine. That is, they are neither shams nor importations from China or India, but aboriginal originalities of the Japanese people. They are the hitherto unsuspected esoteric side of Shintō, the old native faith. That Japanese Buddhists also practice

them is but appreciative Buddhist indorsement of their importance, as I shall show later. We must begin, therefore, with a short account of Shintō in general.

SHINTŌ.

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I.

Shintō, or the Way of the Gods, is the name of the oldest religious belief of the Japanese people. The belief itself indefinitely antedates its name, for it has come down to us from a time when sole possession of the field precluded denomination. It knew no christening till Buddhism was adopted from China in the sixth century of our era, and was then first called Shintō, or the Way of the Gods, to distinguish it from Butsudō, or the Way of Buddha.

If it thus acquired a name, it largely lost local habitation. For Buddhism proceeded to appropriate its possessions, temporal and spiritual. It had been both church and state. Buddhism became the state, and assumed the greater part of the churches; paying Shintō the compliment of incorporating, without acknowledgment, such as it fancied of the Shintō rites, and of kindly recognizing the more popular Shintō gods for lower avatars of its own. Under this generous adoption on the one hand, and relegation to an inferior place in the national pantheon on the other, very little, ostensibly, was left of Shintō,—just enough to swear by.

Lost in the splendor of Buddhist show, Shintō lay obscured thus for a millenium; lingering chiefly as a twilight of popular superstition. At last, however, a new era dawned. A long peace, following the firm establishing of the Shogunate, turned men's thoughts to criticism, and begot the commentators, a line of literati, who, beginning with Mabuchi, in the early part of the eighteenth century, devoted themselves to a study of the past, and continued to

comment, for a century and a half, upon the old Japanese traditions buried in the archaic language of the Kojiki and the Nihongi, the history-bibles of the race. As science, the commentators' elucidations are chiefly comic, but their practical outcome was immense. Criticism of the past begot criticism of the present, and started a chauvinistic movement, which overthrew the Shogunate and restored the Mikado—with all the irony of fate, since these littérateurs owed their existence to the patronage of those they overthrew. This was the restoration of 1868. Shintō came back as part and parcel of the old. The temples Buddhism had usurped were purified; that is, they were stripped of Buddhist ornament, and handed over again to the Shintō priests. The faith of the nation's springtime entered upon the Indian summer of its life.

This happy state of things was not to last. Buddhism, and especially the great wave of western ideas, proved submerging. From filling one half the government, spiritual affairs were degraded, first to a department, then to a bureau, and then to a sub-bureau. The Japanese upper classes had found a new faith; and Herbert Spencer was its prophet.

But in the nation's heart the Shintō sentiment throbbed on as strong as ever. A Japanese cabinet minister found this out to his cost. In 1887, Mori Arinori, one of the most advanced Japanese new-lights, then minister of state for education, went on a certain occasion to the Shrines of Ise, and studiously treated them with disrespect. It was alleged, and apparently on good authority, that he trod with his boots on the mat outside the portal of the palisade, and then poked the curtain apart with his walking-stick. He was assassinated in consequence; the assassin was cut down by the guards, and then Japan rose in a body to do honor, not to the murdered man, but to his murderer. Even the muzzled press managed to hint on which side it was, by some as curious editorials as were ever penned. As for the

people, there were no two ways about it; you had thought the murderer some great patriot dying for his country. Folk by thousands flocked with flowers to his grave, and pilgrimages were made to it, as to some shrine. It is still kept green; still to-day the singing-girls bring it their branches of plum blossoms, with a prayer to the gods that a little of the spirit of him who lies buried there may become theirs: that spirit which they call so proudly the Yamato Kokoro, the heart of old Japan.

For in truth Shintō is so Japanese it will not down. It is the faith of these people's birthright, not of their adoption. Its folklore is what they learned at the knee of the race-mother, not what they were taught from abroad. Buddhist they are by virtue of belief; Shintō by virtue of being.

Shintō is the Japanese conception of the cosmos. It is a combination of the worship of nature and of their own ancestors. But the character of the combination is ethnologically instructive. For a lack of psychic development has enabled these seemingly diverse elements to fuse into a homogeneous whole. Both, of course, are aboriginal instincts. Next to the fear of natural phenomena, in point of primitiveness, comes the fear of one's father, as children and savages show. But races, like individuals, tend to differentiate the two as they develop. Now, the suggestive thing about the Japanese is, that they did not do so. Filial respect lasted, and by virtue of not becoming less, became more, till it filled not only the whole sphere of morals, but expanded into the sphere of cosmogony. To the Japanese eye, the universe itself took on the paternal look. Awe of their parents, which these people could comprehend, lent explanation to dread of nature, which they could not. Quite cogently, to their minds, the thunder and the typhoon, the sunshine and the earthquake, were the work not only of anthropomorphic beings, but of beings ancestrally related to themselves. In short, Shintō, their explanation of things in

general, is simply the patriarchal principle projected without perspective into the past, dilating with distance into deity.

That their dead should thus definitely live on to them is nothing strange. It is paralleled by the way in which the dead live on in the thought of the young generally. Actual personal immortality is the instant inevitable inference of the child-mind. The dead do thus survive in the memories of the living, and it is the natural deduction to clothe this subjective idea with objective existence.

Shintō is thus an adoration of family wraiths, or of imputed family wraiths; imaginaries of the first and the second order in the analysis of the universe. Buddhism with its ultimate Nirvana is in a sense the antithesis of this. For while simple Shintō regards the dead as spiritually living, philosophic Buddhism regards the living as spiritually dead; two aspects of the same shield.

The Japanese thus conceive themselves the great-grandchildren of their own gods. Their Mikado they look upon as the lineal descendant of Niniginomikoto, the first God Emperor of Japan. And the gods live in heaven much as men, their children, do on earth. The concrete quality of the Japanese mind has barred abstractions on the subject. The gods have never so much as laid down a moral code. "Obey the Mikado," and otherwise "follow your own heart" is the sum of their commands; as parental injunctions as could well be framed. So is the attitude of the Japanese toward their gods filially familiar, an attitude which shocks more teleologic faiths, but in which they themselves see nothing irreverent. In the same way their conception of a future life is that of a definite immaterial extension of the present one.

To foreign students in consequence, Shintō has seemed little better than the ghost of a belief, far too insubstantial a body of faith to hold a heart. To ticket its gods and pigeon-hole its folk-lore has appeared to be the end of a study of its cult.

Nor is its outward appearance less uninvitingly skeleton-like. With a barn of a building for temple, a scant set of paraphernalia, and priests who are laymen most of the time, its appearance certainly leaves something to be desired. For in all save good Puritan souls, the religious idea craves sensuous setting. Feeling lies at the root of faith, and a fine mass at the root of feeling. Sense may not be vital to religion, but incense is.

II.

In but one thing is Shintō patently rich—in gods. It has as much to worship as it has little to worship with. It has more gods than its devotees know what to do with. From the Goddess of the Sun to the gods of rice and agriculture, few things in heaven or earth stand unrepresented in its catholic pantheon. Biblical biography puts the number roundly at eighty myriads, but in Japanese speech "eighty" and "myriad" are neither of them mathematical terms, the one being a mystic number and the other a conventional confession of arithmetical incompetency; both expressions being rigorously rendered in English by the phrase "no end." Nobody ever pretended to count the gods. Indeed, to do so would be pious labor lost; for the roll is being constantly increased by promotions from the ranks. Any one at death may become a god, and it is of the entailed responsibilities of greatness that the very exalted must do so.

Of course no merely finite man can possibly worship so infinite a number of deities, though time be to him of oriental limitlessness. So each makes his choice of intimates, and clubs the rest in a general petition, from time to time, to prevent accidents.

His first choice is made for him by his parents. A week after birth the babe is presented at the temple (*miya mairi*) and put under the protection of some special deity. The

god's preference is not consulted in the affair; he becomes tutelary god on notification, as a matter of course.

Next in importance to the tutelary god is the patron god. For every branch of human industry is specially superintended by some god. Men may deem it beneath them to be in business, but the gods do not. Each has his trade, and spends much time looking after his apprentices. But it is work without worry, befitting the easy-going East; the god of honest labor being portrayed as a jolly, fat fisherman, very comfortably seated, chuckling at having just caught a carp.

Pleasures, too, have their special gods with whom perforce their votaries are on peculiarly intimate terms, inasmuch as such gods are very boon-companion patrons of the sport. Furthermore, every one chooses his gods for a general compatibility of temper with himself. He thus lives under congenial guardianship all his life.

Simple as such conceptions are, there is something fine in their sweet simplicity. The very barrenness of the faith's buildings has a beauty of its own, touched as it is by Japanese taste. Through those gracefully plain portals a simple life here passes to a yet simpler one beyond; and the solemn cryptomerea lend it all the natural grandeur that so fittingly canopies the old.

So are the few Shintō rites perfect in effect. Finished fashionings from a far past, they are so beautifully complete, that one forgets the frailty of the conception in the rounded perfection of the form.

One sees at once how aboriginal all this is. Childish conceptions embalmed in an exquisite etiquette; so Shintō might have been ticketed.

III.

But the mythologic mummy showed no evidence of soul. By the soul of a faith, as opposed to its mere body of belief, I mean that informing spirit vouchsafed by direct communion between god and man which all faiths proclaim of themselves, and pooh-pooh of all the others. It was this soul that so unexpectedly revealed itself to me upon Ontaké.

We must now see what the Japanese conceive this soul to be. Now Shintō philosophy is not the faith's strong point. The Japanese are artists, not scientists. And in their revelations their gods show the same simple and attractive character. If, therefore, the Shintō scheme of things seem at times incompatible with itself, the gods themselves are responsible, not I, errors and omissions on my part excepted. For I have it all from one whose authority is nothing short of the god's own words, vouchsafed to him in trance, my friend the high priest of the Shinshiu sect. So that my knowledge of the subject is but second-hand divine, much nearer the source of inspiration than I can ever hope in reason to come again.

To begin with, then, all things in heaven and earth are composed of three elements, (*gotai* or *karada*) body, (*shinki*) mind or spirit, and (*tamashii*) soul. Stocks and stones, plants, animals, and some men have no soul, being made up entirely of body and mind. The behavior of some men seems to lend support to this theory. Gods, on the other hand, are bodiless and consist of spirit and soul, except the supreme god, Ame-no-minaka-nashi-no-mikoto, who is all soul.

Shinki, lit. god-spirit, is related to *tamashii*, soul, much as a substance with its attributes is related to the same substance without them. If you can manage the conception of the first of these philosophic vacuities, you will find no difficulty with the second. Furthermore, spirit and soul may coexist separately in one body. As the spirit clarifies, that is, becomes more and more blank, it approaches soul and finally becomes it.

The one thing common, therefore, to all things, both of this world and the next, is spirit. Everything, from gods to granite, has its god-spirit. Each spirit is as separate and particular as the body it inhabits; yet it is capable of indefinite expansion or contraction, of permeating matter and of going and coming according to laws of its own. It may, perhaps, be looked upon provisionally as a gas.

Spirit never dies, it only circulates. When a man or animal or plant dies its body duly decays, but its spirit either lives on alone or returns to those two great reservoirs of spirit, the gods Takami-musubi-no-kami and Kami-musubi-no-kami. From them a continual circulation of spirit is kept up through the universe. Whether a spirit's personality persists or not is a matter decided by the supreme god, and depends upon the greatness or the goodness of the defunct. For example, Kan Shojo, the god of calligraphy, has persisted thus posthumously for almost a thousand years. It is to be hoped for the sake of Japan's beautiful brushmanship, that he will continue to survive and be worshiped for some time yet.

Spirit is by no means necessarily good. It is manifest that, viewed from the human standpoint, some things are harmful, some harmless, both among plants, animals, and men. The harmful ones are therefore bad; the harmless ones may or may not be good. Why certain inoffensive animals, for example, have got a bad name, or even a good one, is as inscrutable as the cause of the gender of Latin nouns. They are given a bad name, and that is cause enough. It will be observed that in this system of ethics man has no monopoly of original sin.

Similarly the gods themselves are divided into the sheep and the goats, but by a merciful dispensation of something or other the good gods are mightier than the bad. Indeed, a certain evolutionary process is going on throughout the universe, by which the bad spirits grow good and the good