Lost in religion: Kume Kunitake as a victim of State Shinto

As is commonly known, Meiji Japan elevated Shinto into a function comparable to a state religion in Western societies. At the same time, the populace at large and the political elite in particular lacked confidence in the concept of "religion" since it was closely associated with Christianity. This resulted in an uneasy compromise, which declared Shinto a “non-religious” patriotic duty centering on Tenno worship.

Kume Kunitake (1839–1931) was an important witness of Japan’s political reforms after the Meiji Restoration of 1868. He was the official chronicler of the famous Iwakura Mission, a world tour of Japan’s leading politicians from 1871 to 1873, and even visited Vienna in this capacity. As a historian, he introduced new methods of source critique to Japanese historical scholarship and thus encountered opposition from traditionalist scholars. In 1892, he published an article entitled “Shinto is an old custom of heaven worship” which applied these critical methods to ancient myths. This enraged traditionalists who accused him of lèse-majesté. In spite of his excellent relations to the government, Kume was forced to resign from his office as a university professor and his research facility was dissolved. His case is regarded as one of the first instances of repression in the name of State Shinto.

In my talk, I will take the “Kume Incident” of 1892 as an example of the inherent contradictions in the new state ideology of Meiji Japan. I will try to show that Kume's view of Shinto was in fact entirely compatible with the official non-religious Shinto doctrine. His aim was to reconcile Shinto with the modernist paradigm of civilizational progress. In doing so, he rebuffed a traditionalist faction of Shinto adherents who ended on the loser's side of early Meiji modernization. In the 1890s, however, traditionalists stroked back. Kume thus became a kind of pawn sacrifice at a time when conservative intellectuals including the Shinto faction succeeded in shifting the public opinion towards a traditionalist, authoritarian vision of society, which implied a taboo on any intellectual discourse about Shinto.

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