

The Birth of a Myth: Civil War and Sacrifice in Early Meiji Japan

Kenshin Kirihara

1. “Sacrifice” and “Gisei”

In Japanese, the English word “sacrifice” is also expressed with a classical Chinese word “gisei (犠牲).” These words are a perfect match. It is because “犠” which is composed “牀 (cow) + 羊 (sheep as the most common offering) + 兂 (jagged spear to kill the offering)” means “a cow killed with a jagged spear as an offering to the Divine”, and then “牲” which is composed “牀 (cow) + 生 (live)” means “a living cow for offering to the Divine.” It can be said that “gisei” is truly an appropriate word to translate “sacrifice.”



“**犠**” **shape spear**[\(1\)](#)

However, in contemporary Japanese, “gisei” means not only “sacrifice” but also “victim.” This usage, which differs from the original meaning, appeared at the end of the nineteenth century. For example, when a Japanese newspaper reported that the Chinese emperor sent a personal telegraph to the German emperor to grieve over the death of a German minister who had fallen a victim to the daggers of the Boxers (拳匪) the year before, the article used “gisei” for “victim.”[\(2\)](#)

It is clear that this “gisei” was not an offering dedicated to a divinity. In this way, its primary meaning in modern Japanese, which is different from the original meaning as “a sacred offering” to something great, is “the unfortunate death” of the blameless.

2. The birth of the modernized “gisei”



The hall of worship in Yasukuni-jinja Shrine



GOSEDA, Hōryū “March-off of the General Prince Ninnaji”(3)

One of the reasons the meaning of “gisei” changed essentially was due to the inundation of “gisei” in modern Japan. It could be called “the transformation of quantity into quality” (F. Engels)(4). Modern Japan suffered numerous civil wars and foreign invasions, such as the following: the Boshin civil war (1868 - 1869) between the pro-Shogunate army and the imperial New-government army, the Satsuma Rebellion (1877) which was the greatest and last civil war of the *shizoku* (the former samurai class), and several armed conflicts with China in Taiwan and Korea which resulted in the First Sino-Japanese war (1894 - 1895). These wars caused a number of casualties such as Japan had never experienced in the previous two centuries. Subsequently, fallen soldiers were regarded as brave men who had offered their lives on the altar of their country, and their spirits were enshrined together as a “Divine”(5) in Tokyo’s Shōkon-sha (神功神社) shrine (currently Yasukuni-jinja (靖国神社) shrine) by the Meiji State (1868 - 1945). They were literally “gisei” or “sacrifice” for the nation.



FUKUBA Bisei(6)

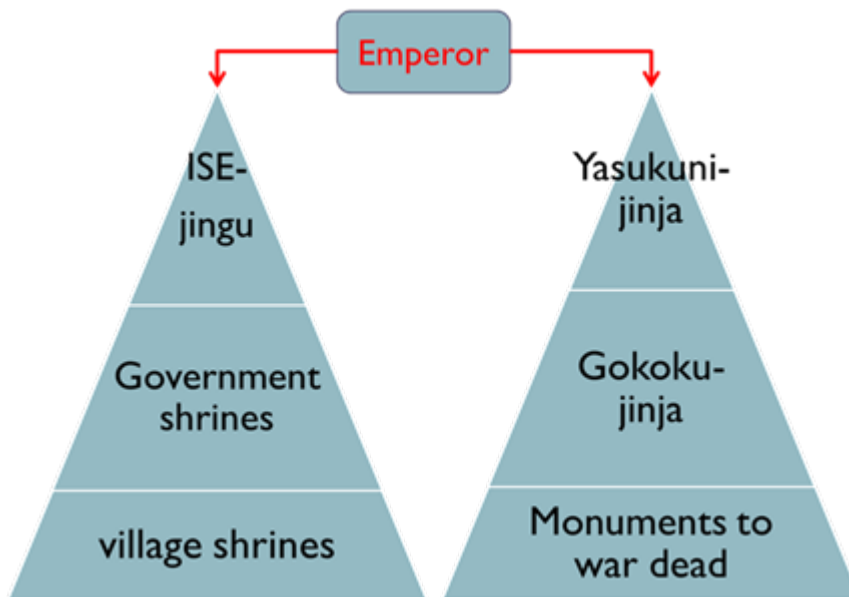
However, in reality, the Meiji State had no firm code of religious principle regarding this tutelary deity of the Empire of Japan. Not only Meiji statesmen but also Shinto priests had no concrete image of what this Divine was or what power it had. Furthermore, many Japanese intellectuals who had meritoriously contributed to establish the Meiji State were skeptical of religion, or firm atheists. The new tendency appeared among Shinto priests. For example, the priest Bisei Fukuba (福部 比叡: 1831 - 1907), who had erected the first shrine (currently Kyoto Ryōzen Gokoku-jinja [豊前国分神社] shrine) for the spirits of loyalists in 1862, was involved in the following episode.



Inner Ise Shrine(7)

In 1868 when Emperor Meiji moved out of Kyoto to Tokyo, imperial families, nobles, and citizens of Kyoto were mostly opposed to this campaign. However, Fukuba strongly asserted a supporting argument, because he thought that the Emperor had to leave this old Capital to establish a new state. One evening, he received a letter from Ise-jingū (伊勢神宮) Shrine (enshrining Amaterasu-ōkami [天照大神] or the Divine ancestor of the Imperial Family) via Jingikan (神部省: Department of Divinities), which read as follows: “the head of a torii (鳥居: an archway of Shinto shrine) in front of Inner Ise Shrine (内宮: Naikū) fell down. I [a priest of Ise-jingū] believe that this may be a sign because it happened just before the departure of His Majesty.” Because Fukuba guessed that it was a protest by adversaries, he disregarded this letter and said “essentially, there is no need to be afraid of the torii’s head falling. It was only an accident!”(8) What he was afraid of was not incurring Amaterasu’s displeasure due to having carried out this campaign but the disturbance of the people due to the suspension.

He was quintessentially political.



Two Hierarchies under the Emperor in State Shintoism

Such priests, who thought and acted politically, founded State Shintoism, which was one of the important pillars of the Meiji State which encompassed religion as a means of dominating the Japanese people. After all, what was honoured in the Shōkon-sha shrine was *the act* of dying for their country, not *the person* as an individual. Therefore, it served neither as comfort of the dead nor for the salvation of souls.

Because the Meiji State founded State Shintoism with a political rather than a religious consciousness, the tendency of religious apathy appeared throughout the whole of modern Japanese society. Thus, “gisei” as a common word lost its original meaning to be given a new one as an unfortunate death which was nobody’s fault.⁽⁹⁾ However, in modern Japan, “gisei” as “sacrifice” did not fade away; there were a lot of invisible “scapegoats” to maintain the community.

3. True “Sacrifices”

It’s the simplest thing; there is no warfare without opponents. Hence, there were fallen soldiers in hostile country, but State Shintoism in modern Japan did not worship these spirits. This was an extraordinarily exceptional phenomenon in Japanese history. Traditionally, Japanese people had worshiped any spirits from either side after wars, because they believed that these worshiped spirits would bring not evil but good from ancient times.

For instance, in 1191, Emperor Gotoba (後鳥羽) built a temple⁽¹⁰⁾ to mourn the spirits of the

Taira clan (平家), who had been defeated in the Genpei War (源平合戦: 1180 - 1185)(11). Such acts could be found not only after civil wars but after foreign wars. In fact, a temple(12) was erected for the fallen soldiers of the Mongolian Army which attacked Japan twice in the late thirteenth century.



A monument sacred to the memory of Toshizō Hijikata (erected in 1958)(13)

However, after the Boshin civil war resulting in the fall of the Tokugawa Shogunate, those who were enshrined were only fallen soldiers of the winning camp; the souls of defeated soldiers were ignored by the Meiji State. Several decades after the war, some memorials for these obscure spirits were erected around old battlegrounds by relatives, but these memorials were completely different from the Shōkon-sha shrine and the spirits were forced to be social outcasts in the end.

The Meiji State encouraged Japanese people to offer their lives to the Emperor by eliminating the spirits of adversaries as a warning to others. It can be said that these spirits which had been branded as “death in vain” contributed to establishing and maintaining the Meiji State in the background or *literally in the underground*. On this very spot, they were exactly “gisei” as scapegoat. It is through such sorting out and rejecting of spirits that the Meiji State spun a new myth as the ideology of the modern Tenō (Imperial) system.

Closing remarks

The following sentence appeared in the speech of U.S. President Barack Obama who visited Hiroshima in May, 2016.



Atomic Bomb Dome in Hiroshima

Nations arise telling a story that binds people together in sacrifice and cooperation, allowing for remarkable feats. But those same stories have so often been used to oppress and dehumanize those who are different. [\(14\)](#)

There still remain countries or groups which treat the war dead as “sacrifices.” However, true “sacrifices” who are really offered to the Divinity called *Nation* are none other than those who are “oppressed and dehumanized” because of being “different.” The nation-state was founded on such a myth inscribed with “sacrifices” whether visible or invisible.

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the Meiji State. [\(back\)](#)

10. This was called Amida-ji Temple (阿弥陀寺: Shimonoseki City, Yamaguchi Prefecture), which is well-known as a stage of “Hoichi the Earless” in Lafcadio Hearn’s *Kwaidan*. However, it was destroyed due to “the Ordinance Distinguishing Shinto and Buddhism” (神佛分離令: 1868), and the Meiji State built a new shrine called Akama-jongu (阿加麻宗宮) at the same place. [\(back\)](#)
11. The warfare between the Taira clan and the Minamoto clan (平治). After that, Minamoto no Yoritomo (源頼朝) established the Kamakura Shogunate. [\(back\)](#)
12. This is Engaku-ji Temple (浄光寺: Kamakura City, Kanagawa Prefecture), which was a center of the movement to modernize Zen Buddhism in Japan. For example, Shaku Sōen (釈宗演: 1859 - 1919) went to U.S. to engage in missionary work, and his disciple Suzuki Daisetsu (鈴木大拙: 1870 - 1966) wrote numerous books in English to introduce Japanese culture, including Zen Buddhism, overseas. [\(back\)](#)
13. Toshizō Hijikata (日吉宗三: 1835-1869) was a great swordsman, the vice-commander of Shinsen-gumi (新選組: Guards of Kyoto in Bakumatsu Japan). He joined the pro-Shogunate army, becoming an officer ranking with the army magistrate (軍奉行), and fell in the battle of Hakodate, which was the last stage in the Boshin civil war. This monument was moved to its present location in 1992. [\(back\)](#)
14. “Visit to Hiroshima: the full text of [U.S.] President Obama’s statement” the morning edition of *Yomiuri-shinbun*. May 28, 2016. p.14. Incidentally, in the Japanese version of this speech translated by this newspaper, “gisei” appeared six times, although the U.S. President had used the word “sacrifice” once. This serves to show how ambiguous “gisei” is. [\(back\)](#)