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## A Shinto Religion, Commune, and Conspiracy Theory: 70 Years of the *Hitsuki Shinji*

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### Abstract

The *Hitsuki Shinji* is a large work of automatic writing which has been used in various ways since the first sections of it were composed in 1944. Drawing on the spiritual visions of Swedenborg, it shows some resemblances to Western esotericism while maintaining an independent, Japan-centric message. I examine the major branches of interpretation of the text, showing that it was used to provide authority to a religious group, commune, and conspiracy theory during different periods of time, and I offer some thoughts on how these interpretations reflected the eras in which they flourished.

### Keywords

Oomoto movement, new religious movements, religion and media, global conspiracy, twentieth century

### Introduction

A survey of postwar Shinto movements does not initially appear to show any overlap with Western esotericism. One notable text, however, is the *Hitsuki Shinji* (日月神示, meaning “Sun-Moon Revelation”), a 39-volume work of automatic writing. Linked to the theology of Swedenborg, it is presented in present-day occult literature as a repository of rejected, spiritual knowledge. Herein I examine the tumultuous history of the text in order to show how this “rejected knowledge” was applied, both successfully and unsuccessfully, to postwar Japanese society.

Transcribed for over a decade starting in 1944, the *Hitsuki Shinji* takes the form of a revelation from the god Hitsuku-no-kami 一ニ神 to the esotericist Tenmei Okamoto (岡本天明, 1897–1963). Tenmei founded a religious group around himself and his text, which had a brief rise and fall, being reduced to a handful of people after his death. Thereafter the group

took a new direction, ruptured, and collapsed, and his text went missing. But in a most inexplicable development, in 1990 a completely unrelated freelance journalist named Shin'ichi Nakaya (中矢伸一, b. 1961) heard about the forgotten text almost randomly and turned it into the centerpiece of a new type of spiritual movement.

Why did the text virtually disappear for 40 years before reappearing in 1990? This study proposes that this puzzle can be solved with two scholarly tools: placing the *Hitsuki Shinji* within the history of modern Japanese religions, and recognizing some links to and similarities with Western esotericism. I am not suggesting that the text has inherited some “esoteric tradition” from earlier eras of Japanese history— this assumes that Japanese society would have had a use for classifying some kinds of knowledge in that way. Instead, I am using “esoteric” to show the parallels between the *Hitsuki Shinji's* postwar applications and similar countercultural beliefs and practices in the modern-day West.

Faced with the spirit-matter duality imposed by the Enlightenment, Western religionists offered several different and contradictory suggestions about how spiritual matters might become known.<sup>1</sup> Despite being mutually exclusive, these epistemologies are considered equally esoteric in the modern West, because they endorse a method of accessing a type of perfect knowledge which is generally agreed to be inaccessible. Kocku von Stuckrad has offered the following generic description of how such attempts at renegotiating modernity become esoteric:

What makes a discourse esoteric is the rhetoric of a hidden truth, which can be unveiled in a specific way and established contrary to other interpretations of the universe and history—often that of the institutionalized majority.<sup>2</sup>

As Colin Campbell noted in his definition of the “cultic milieu,”<sup>3</sup> one might expect such discourse and practice to flourish in liminal spaces and times, when the predominant worldview seems to be losing credibility and explanatory power: for example, the Enlightenment in Europe, the late 19th century science wars in America, and possibly in 21st century Japan, as we will see from the history of the text discussed in this report.

It is crucial to keep in mind that this definition of “esoteric” is relevant only to a world where some kinds of knowledge are believed to be available only to a select few. Just as this definition does not apply to the classical source material for much modern esoteric literature in the West, much of the *Hitsuki Shinji's* synecdoche of spiritual knowledge has its origins in material that is not “esoteric” in von Stuckrad’s sense. Indeed, as a society generally unfamiliar with monotheism, Japan has a very different conception of “rejected knowledge.” As I intend to argue in future research, it is unlikely that “esotericism” is a universal concept, and Japan is a particularly good example of a nation that developed modern thought without an accompanying idea of esotericism.

But that does not mean that Western esotericism was entirely ignored by Japanese religionists, nor that ideas considered esoteric in the West were found uninteresting or useless by Japanese society. In particular, the historical reception of the *Hitsuki Shinji* shows

that the Swedenborgian idea of access to spiritual realms is one that has carried weight with small segments of Japanese society. In this report, I focus on how such an “esoteric” message of hidden knowledge found a place (or failed to) in different periods of Japanese modernity.

### Prehistory of the *Hitsuki Shinji*: “Great Origin,” 1892–1944

Throughout Japanese history, susceptible people, often women, have been possessed by spirits, an occurrence known as *kamigakari*. The 20th century religious group Oomoto (大本, meaning “Great Origin”) was founded by a woman named Nao Deguchi 出口なお who became possessed after years of abusive relationships, family troubles, and abject poverty.<sup>4</sup> She was soon joined by an itinerant spiritualist named Deguchi Onisaburō 出口王仁三郎, and together they created a highly popular movement. Nao brought her followers together in pilgrimages to distant islands, where she performed arcane rituals to summon the ancient gods. Onisaburō developed an agrarian commune and a system of vocational education as well as a spiritual poetics.<sup>5</sup> A prolific artist himself, he publicly and frequently advocated for the reunion of Japanese religion with creative and beautiful art.<sup>6</sup> Onisaburō’s Oomoto produced widely watched feature films, promoted Esperanto, adventured in Mongolia, founded an international relief organization with over 1000 branches worldwide, and made alliances with foreign religious groups, including the Chinese Red Swastika Society 紅社会, known for practicing a type of planchette divination called *fuji* 乩示, in which Chinese and Japanese characters were traced out by participants moving a planchette over a sand basin.<sup>7</sup> Onisaburō played with and renegotiated the spirit-matter duality imported to Japan during its rapid Westernization, and his call for remaking Japan as a “spiritual civilization” found many willing listeners.

In 1920, a spiritually minded artist named Tenmei Okamoto stepped into this milieu. Hailed as a prodigy from a young age, Tenmei had quickly progressed to one of the best art departments in the country, but ended up dropping out due to his frequent spiritual experiences, which apparently were seen poorly by fine art society. He spent some time hitchhiking around the country before showing up at the offices of the “Taisho Daily News” (*Taishō nichinichi shinbun* 大正日日新聞), a major newspaper which Oomoto had purchased to promote its perspective on world affairs, and asking to join their staff as an arts reporter. He was admitted, and alongside arts reporting, the newspaper ended up reporting on his regular possessions by various low levels of trickster and malicious spirits.<sup>8</sup>

In 1921, Oomoto was suppressed by the Japanese government for supposedly encouraging seditious beliefs, and in 1935 there was a much harsher crackdown that led to the destruction of most Oomoto property. While this reads like straightforward religious persecution to the modern eye, in fact another reading is possible based on the weakness of the prewar Japanese state. Oomoto had amassed so much power, including high-level government and military support, that it has been argued that it was seen not simply as a religious movement but as a nationwide “heresy” with considerable persuasive power, which

threatened to become the new political “orthodoxy” and supplant the authority of government entirely.<sup>9</sup>

In any case, the 1935 crackdown put Tenmei out of work, and as Japan entered the Pacific War he had returned to being an itinerant spiritualist, with an interest in alternative histories of the nation, a genre of Japanese literature which I have discussed elsewhere.<sup>10</sup> In order to understand some of the unclear points of these alternate histories, in 1944 Tenmei and his friends decided to ask the gods directly through the *fuji* divination technique learned from the Red Swastika Society. But when they asked who was speaking to them, the sand table simply responded with variations on the phrase “Ame-no-Hitsuku 天のヒツク,” which meant nothing to anyone present. Two months later, Tenmei was told by a friend that a brewer-priest of sacred sake would like to offer him some. His address was near a place called Ame-no-Hitsuku Shrine 天日津久神社.<sup>11</sup> When he stopped by this shrine out of curiosity, Tenmei’s hand trembled and he began to experience automatic writing, channeling a god called Hitsuku-no-kami. This was the beginning of an enormous text called the *Hitsuki Shinji*.

### Brief Summary of the Text

The *Hitsuki Shinji* is an immense and obscure work of automatic writing. It contains Swedenborgian, conspiratorial, mythological, prophetic, and seemingly Taoist elements. The world of the *Hitsuki Shinji* is one where war and peace begins in a separate divine world, proceeds into a spirit world, and then finally appears in the material world. The text denounces the division of the world into good and evil, but it also describes a spiritual elect, identified with Japan, that will soon be persecuted by the spiritually ignorant, the “99%”. As in Oomoto, this final catastrophe, a battle when the entire world will rise up and seem to defeat Japan, will precede a golden age when all human selfishness will be extinguished and the entire world will be run by a single son of Heaven, or “Tenshi-sama” てんし様. In order to prepare for this golden age, the hearts of the Japanese must be cleansed of impurities.

A full interpretation of the *Hitsuki Shinji* is well beyond the scope of this study as it has no objective reading in any sense of the word. The original automatic writing, a mixture of letters, numbers, and oblique symbols, evaded decipherment for over a month even when Tenmei tried to read it, and at one point the received<sup>12</sup> text tells us it can be interpreted in eight different ways.<sup>13</sup> One of its chapters, the “Chapter of Earthquakes” (*Jishin no maki*), has no text at all but is only a collection of drawings. Okamoto included interpretations for these drawings, but did not explain the method he used to interpret them.<sup>14</sup> Even the name of the text is not clear, as it has also been called *Hitsuku Shinsho*, *Hitsukuni Seiten*, *Hitsugu Shinji*, *Hifumi*, and even *Fude*.

In this paper, four periods of the *Hitsuki Shinji*’s usage will be discussed. Okamoto Tenmei focused on the practical aspects of the document that he interpreted as ritual instruction, as well as its prophecies of imminent catastrophe and World War III. Yoshio Kawabata (川端善雄, 1914–after 1988) was most interested in the text’s nondualism and

what he saw as a new kind of political system described in its pages. Tenmei's widow, Minori Okamoto (岡本三典, 1917–2009) was enamored with the aesthetics of the text and its use of numerology and wordplay. Finally, Shin'ichi Nakaya is most concerned by the text's attempt to lay out a vast, multidimensional conspiracy against Japan, and how Japan might overcome this to usher in a new age. It is not really the task of the religious studies scholar to judge whether any of these interpretations are "right", but these vast differences in interpretative focus should be taken into account.

### Japan in Liminal Time: "Church of Light," 1945–1963

During the war, Tenmei made no efforts to proselytize,<sup>15</sup> but in August 1945, Japan surrendered to the Allies and became totally controlled by a foreign power. Emerging as if from a long nightmare into a destroyed urban landscape, the Japanese people found themselves in a sort of liminal time, famously dubbed the "rush hour of the gods": old beliefs had become irrelevant, and American administration was directing the nation into an unclear future. Hundreds of new religious groups took off, and even though God had originally instructed Tenmei not to found a church, the Creator now reversed himself and told him to found an organization that came to be called "Church of Light" (ひかり教会, *Hikari Kyōkai*).<sup>16</sup>

Towards the end of this religious boom, a group of scholars noted that many of the Occupation-era religious movements actually "had their basis in the wartime years." As mainstream religions demanded total self-sacrifice and even mass suicide in the early 1940s, prophets like Tenmei Okamoto had forecast a peaceful end to the war and offered an alternative message of salvation. After Japan lost the war, their messages "extended into the postwar years, because they matched the Occupation state of affairs quite well."<sup>17</sup>

Hikari Kyōkai fits this general pattern perfectly. Throughout the Occupation years its membership and funding grew steadily, and by 1949 it was able to produce a crisp, professional newspaper, like the *Taisho Daily News* of Tenmei's youth. The radical openness of this paper towards foreign participation deserves attention. Large parts of the paper were translated into English by an anonymous church member, and translations of the *Hitsuki Shinji* into English, Spanish, Chinese, Russian, and Esperanto were also planned.<sup>18</sup> The preliminary issue introduces the *Shinji* to Westerners in an English-language article, with deference both to Judeo-Christian ideas of revelation and to Tenmei's favorite Western writer, Swedenborg.

Jehova revealed Himself to those elects of old Judea in the times when He felt that it is necessary to do so. Books of Moses were written like that and those books of prophets the same. However, if we limit that such a revelation could be given only to them, St. John's revelation as the last and never afterward, doesn't it sound unreasonable? Why can't Jehova have any elects among those nations which are not Jews? Isn't [i]t also thinkable that God is willing to reveal Himself to the Asiatic nations sometimes?

Swedenb[or]g had to explain exactly the same sort of thing while he was working hard to write down what the Lord has shown him in 18th century. Zeal of these notes is to introduce that we have the same sort of case which has taken place here in Japan since June of 1944.<sup>19</sup>

As this announcement suggests, Tenmei believed that God speaks through select prophets from around the world, like Christ, Buddha, Laozi, Swedenborg and himself, but the vast majority of revelations come from trickster spirits and are not to be trusted. The *Shinji* states that “99.9% of spirits called to this world are evil spirits.”<sup>20</sup> Tenmei was not strict about this epistemology and indeed continued to promote the use of *fujii* divination, even while warning that most spirits were evil and all apparent miracles were hoaxes caused by malicious spirits.<sup>21</sup>

Directly below this announcement, another article offers to English speakers “a painting to a newly born baby with prayer to grow up as a world citizen, blessed by God. Please send us notice whenever you get tidings of a stork's visit.”<sup>22</sup> Despite the *Hitsuki Shinji's* antagonism towards anti-Japanese forces and its message of immanent apocalypse, Tenmei clearly had a strong vision of a large and multilingual community of believers, not standing in opposition to the ugliness of modernity, but embracing it and awakening it to spirituality. This had also been the conviction of Onisaburō during Oomoto's prewar heyday.

Here and elsewhere, the Church of Light adopted strategies for implementing Tenmei's revelations that resembled Shinto and Oomoto ceremonies, as well as Oomoto's focus on news media and art. Like Onisaburō, Tenmei was attempting to renegotiate the systems of authority offered by postwar modernity. He pushed for his artwork to be exhibited in America and Israel as a way of communicating postwar Japan's spirit of peace.<sup>23</sup> Rather than ignoring the American presence, he welcomed them as equal world citizens soon to be united under a World Emperor. He asserted the Japanese to be one of the tribes of Israel, and late in his life he published an article in an American religious newsletter proposing such a link.<sup>24</sup>

Naturally, bold assertions such as these seemed most plausible in a political situation that had already turned all of Japanese history on its head. Church of Light thrived during the Occupation. At one point a young Yukio Mishima, later to become one of the major novelists of 20th century Japan, joined Tenmei in a Shinto ritual, which he then caricatured derisively in a national newspaper.<sup>25</sup> After Japan reverted to local control in 1952 and the political situation became less apocalyptic,<sup>26</sup> Church of Light shrank as quickly as it had grown, and everyday operations were removed from Tokyo to a distant rural settlement, “Tenmei Lodge” (天明居 *Tenmei-kyo*). Although Tenmei continued receiving revelations, including a supplement to the *Hitsuki Shinji* called *Ise Revelations* (伊勢黙示録 *Ise Mokushiroku*), by 1960 he had only a handful of followers left, and he regretted having organized his faith at all due to the spiritually damaged people it had attracted.<sup>27</sup> After his death in 1963, his widow Minori was on the verge of dissolving his church.<sup>28</sup>

## Cultification and Its Discontents: “House of Truth,” 1963–1970

The general attitude of mourning in the now leaderless Hikari Kyōkai was interrupted by the arrival of a stranger named Yoshio Kawabata, who by his own report had spent the Pacific War doing ascetic training in the mountains, then bounced between various religious and political groups for some years. Some months after arriving at Tenmei Lodge, he and another lodger shared a simultaneous, complex visionary dream involving having a man identified as Tenmei deliver a fragile package to him. The package was empty: Kawabata interpreted this as Buddhist emptiness, implying nondualism, implying Mount Fuji (through the wordplay of *fu-ji* 不二 “not-two”), implying he had received a mandate from God.<sup>29</sup> He quickly declared himself Tenmei’s successor and took over publication of the church organ, *The New Sun* (新しき太陽 *Atarashiki taiyō*).

At this point, the Church of Light seemed to be in a stage of transition between two charismatic leaders. In the pages of *The New Sun*, Kawabata continued to quote the *Hitsuki Shinji* at length and offer interpretations, but also printed his own poetry, long conversations with himself, and manifestos about a complex socio-political structure called the “*kyōdō-shinen-tai* 共同思念体, roughly translatable as “Communal Idea Body”, a phrase he had apparently had a strong affinity for. While Kawabata continued to support the Shinto ceremonies and *fuji* divination at Tenmei Lodge, he identified the Communal Idea Body as the true message of the *Hitsuki Shinji*. and apparently saw his pacifist politics as the natural completion of Tenmei’s religious activities.

But Kawabata had a stumbling block, in the person of Minori Okamoto. Minori was also writing for *The New Sun*, but her articles were exclusively about her late husband. In a 1967 article entitled “The *Hitsuki Shinji* and Tenmei Okamoto,” published in the occult magazine *Tama* たま, she focused on the two topics of the title and only briefly mentioned that Tenmei had a successor who was being guided by God to promote the Communal Idea Body.<sup>30</sup> The text itself, and the memory of its big-hearted scribe, evidently took on a much larger role for Minori than Kawabata’s ambitions, and she never granted him formal control over the Church of Light organization.

In 1967, Kawabata founded his own religious group called Makoto no Ie, or literally, “House of Truth,” which did not include Minori but continued to operate from Tenmei Lodge, likely due to their shared poverty. In July 1969, the public face of harmony finally broke down when Minori secretly had the text of the *Hitsuki Shinji* removed from the lodge, after which she fled to an undisclosed location. In response, Kawabata excommunicated Minori from the pages of *The New Sun* and devoted an issue to mercilessly shaming the people involved in this “theft” of “property,”<sup>31</sup> but by the end of the year, Minori’s right to Tenmei’s estate had apparently been legally confirmed, as Kawabata was expelled from Tenmei Lodge in January 1970 and moved to a cabin in a remote “sacred” location with two followers.<sup>32</sup>

Despite his dream of a “world without conflict,” there is no evidence that Kawabata ever attempted to reconcile with Minori. Perhaps the split was a Godsend in disguise for

him, since it allowed him to gather his followers at a new location and consolidate his power and his cult of personality. “House of Truth” persisted as a tiny new religious group through the 1980s, and a visiting journalist observed the following in 1974:

The *Hitsuki Shinji* was their hymnal in 1970, but now every morning and evening, when the Wayfriends come forward to offer ritual prayers, they come together to sing “Coomuuuunalllll Ideaaa Bodyyy”. This “rare case” of making a mantra out of a sociological term might be said to indicate the reification of Yoshio Kawabata’s intentions for a prosperous people and nation.<sup>33</sup>

The tumultuous seven years between Tenmei’s death and Minori’s eviction of Kawabata are a microcosm of Japanese society at the time. The 1960s saw a political turn in Japan that inspired radical theories and grand, utopian ideas, and things came to a head in 1968–9 not only at the Tenmei Lodge but also at Japan’s great universities, where leftist protesters temporarily shut down and barricaded campuses across the country.<sup>34</sup> While Kawabata’s group remained small and obscure, his political means of implementing an occult text matched the beat of the times. Here, as before, interpretation and implementation of the *Hitsuki Shinji* was driven by the needs of its era.

### **The Silence of the New Age: Minori Okamoto, 1970–1990**

By 1970 Minori had ownership of her late husband’s text and had started her own newsletter to promote it. In what would seem to be a lucky coincidence, the 1970s and 80s saw a great wave of interest in occult materials in Japan, beginning with a bestselling book about Nostradamus’ prophecies of apocalypse in 1973. But significantly, even though the *Hitsuki Shinji* was known to the most serious occultists, and even though it was a similarly apocalyptic document, there was virtually no interest in it at all. A great example of this is a 1974 round-table talk in the occult journal *Sasura さすら*, where the *Shinji* is mentioned twice over the course of a 70-page discussion, but only in passing as part of the phenomena surrounding Oomoto.<sup>35</sup> The *Shinji* did make the pages of *Sasura* and similar underground publications like *Tama*, but only occasionally and with apparent editorial disinterest. No book about it found a publisher.

These messages had found a willing audience during the Occupation period, and under Kawabata they had served as good fodder for creating a small cult, but apparently they did not inspire the general public in the 1970s in the same way that Nostradamus did. With the benefit of hindsight, Shin’ichi Nakaya believes that Minori’s personality drove away potential readers at this time. She had become exceedingly stubborn and selective in her trust, and revised the *Shinji*’s text to her liking, refusing access to Tenmei’s earlier translations. Her newsletter betrays her rocky relationship even with publishers: in some months, it was reduced to a single, handwritten postcard. It also contains frequent,

impenetrable references to the cosmology of a numerologist named Sanae Odano 小田野早秧, used to bolster obscure ideas about the power of numbers and language.<sup>36</sup>

But the majority of the newsletter simply consists of excerpts from the *Shinji* or stories about Tenmei's life. Minori constantly reminded her readers of Tenmei's sometime international renown, and appealed to them to learn more about him. It is highly unlikely that the *Hitsuki Shinji* could have achieved its present-day success without her, since if she had not been around in the 1960s, Kawabata would have been able to seize the text without dissent. It is difficult for me to believe that her prickly personality alone dissuaded interested readers; it seems much more likely that outsiders in the 1970s and 80s were simply not very interested in the first place.

Books about Nostradamus and UFOs are simple in their mysteriousness; Nostradamus never said where he got his predictions. The *Hitsuki Shinji* is a far more esoteric document epistemologically. It presents itself as suppressed knowledge from a superhuman realm, and presumably appeals to a more serious sense of dispossession and suspicion of secular authority. It is bound up with claims to have access to spiritual realms, and claims of understanding the higher truths behind Japanese mythology and world history. In short, its primary appeal is to those whose desire more than just idle speculation about a new age, and want to hear very firm-sounding claims of access to higher truth. Such desires should presumably be heightened when mainstream claims to truth are losing power, such as 1940s Japan, and lose power when the mainstream narrative seems obvious, such as in 1970s Japan which was in the middle of one of the largest economic booms in world history.

In any case, lacking an interested audience and having never shown much interest in moneymaking, Minori became very poor. At some point, she was actually forced to sell the original text she had worked so hard to save from Kawabata's cult, as well as her collection of Tenmei's artwork.<sup>37</sup> But her newsletter shows remarkable persistence in wanting to tell the world about the inherent value of the *Hitsuki Shinji* and of her late husband's spiritual and artistic abilities. Eventually, another writer would grant her wish.

### **The End of History: Shin'ichi Nakaya, 1991–Present**

In 1991, an English teacher named Shin'ichi Nakaya happened to hear about the *Hitsuki Shinji* when he was doing some translation work about UFOs at a small publishing house. Nakaya had been drawn into spiritual circles by an interest in mysticism and prophecy, which had included a former connection with the Oomoto-inspired group Sukyo Mahikari 崇教真光 in the 1980s.<sup>38</sup> The *Hitsuki Shinji*, which attributes modernity to a great occult conspiracy, was well suited to his own beliefs and, as it turned out, a devoted readership: his first book on the subject sold 100,000 copies, and as he put out sequels with the same title, his fame grew accordingly. He has now written over 60 books and holds regular lectures for select audiences.<sup>39</sup> The *Hitsuki Shinji* has thus been given an unexpected new life, in a period of time that has recently been associated with the rise of "conspirituality," a synthesis of New Age and conspiratorial beliefs.

The “conspirituality” thesis was proposed by Charlotte Ward and David Voas in 2011, suggesting that this synthesis is a novel late modern phenomenon. Egil Asprem and Asbjørn Dyrendal have attempted to reframe the original concept, noting that the rejection of knowledge that makes a discourse esoteric inherently implies some kind of hidden rejecting force at work, and esotericists have shown an awareness of this for many decades.<sup>40</sup> In support of the concept as reanalyzed, the *Hitsuki Shinji* attests to both the age of conspiratorial ideas in the occult world and to the novelty of late modern conspirituality. It cannot be overemphasized that the year 1991, marking the end of the Japanese housing bubble, the end of the Cold War, the dawn of a “new world order” per George H. W. Bush, and the “end of history” per Francis Fukuyama, was also the year in which a totally forgotten esoteric text was suddenly revived with a new focus. In the first half of that decade, there were several independent writers pushing for such a revival of the *Hitsuki Shinji*, but Nakaya’s choice of writing style and subject matter eventually won out.

For the early interpreters of the *Shinji*, the battle between God’s message and the rejecting force could be better described as an “occult war” in which there was an accessible method of counterattack. Even though Tenmei warned that evil spirits were working to create future disasters and war, a path of meaningful collective practice was obvious to both him and Kawabata. In contrast, while Nakaya’s early writing resembled Tenmei’s Swedenborgian and apocalyptic tone, his ritual practices have always been personal and private, aimed mostly towards readers with a similar “alternative” outlook and not towards the general public. From his very first publication, he compared the *Hitsuki Shinji* to the *Protocols of the Elders of Zion*.<sup>41</sup> His goal was not to encourage racial hatred (indeed, in later books he protested that he had nothing against Jews<sup>42</sup>), but to portray a vast, global conspiracy that rendered collective action meaningless. This naive importation of anti-Semitic tropes into a country with virtually no Jews used to be fairly common in Japanese conspiracy theories.<sup>43</sup>

Early issues of Nakaya’s monthly publication *Genuine Japan* (真正日本 *Shinsei Nihon*) featured regular articles pushing an almost paranoid amount of criticism towards religious groups and New Age teachings which are accused of perverting and corrupting the Japanese spirit. This conspiratorial shift has persisted to the present day, although he has moderated his criticism and expanded into anti-establishment proposals on politics and nuclear energy.

Nakaya doubts that collective practice could have world-changing implications, because of the completeness of systemic control by hidden elites. In sharp contrast with all pre-1991 interpreters, he emphasizes a suspicion towards mainstream culture and foreign powers. In his most widely read book, he writes that “Japan, which was once called the ‘land of the gods,’ is being polluted by the arrival of devils and demons. As a result, 99% of Japanese people have had their spirits dimmed, their bones broken, and like the foreign nations they will eventually become a nation and people ruled by demons.”<sup>44</sup>

The intent of this passage, again, is not to encourage xenophobia but to add a higher dimension to the world-encompassing conspiracy. The *Hitsuki Shinji* defines the term

*Nihon*, or “Japan” not as a racial term, but as based in geographic and spiritual boundaries. Nakaya prefers to focus on the presence of evil in the spiritual world and how it affects our lives in the corporeal world. He envisions a dark presence with human puppets, called “masons” (イシヤ *ishiya*), as well as demonic overlords. As Nakaya explains above, their control over the rest of the world is complete, and at last even “Japan,” the spiritual center, is in the process of falling under their sway. This teaching is found in Oomoto as well, but it was not emphasized by earlier interpreters of the *Shinji*.

In Nakaya’s apocalyptic vision we find both similarities and differences from the past. Like Tenmei and other interpreters, he believes that a final cataclysm will be followed by the arrival of a new golden age called “the age of Miroku.” The skeptic Minoru Harada has pointed out that in a 1992 book, Nakaya interpreted the *Shinji* as predicting 1996 as the year of total upheaval, with the final arrival of the golden age in 2000; he has since offered *Shinji*-based timelines correcting his earlier work. The same themes were on Tenmei’s mind, and Harada suggests that the original date implied by the text was 1948.<sup>45</sup> But while Nakaya shares an imminent eschatology with Tenmei, for him the practices implied by this belief are completely different.

At no point does Nakaya feel an urgent need to conduct group Shinto rites as Tenmei did, and his desire to spread the word abroad is tempered by a realism about the *Shinji*’s complexity. Despite claiming that Japan will suffer another devastating war, he does not tell people to organize politically to alert the country. Rather, he simply advises his 1% to prepare themselves for suffering, which will come to all people without exception. He says that the only way to survive the future chaos is by sinking below the surface and “polishing your soul.” The collapse of fame-seeking, “self-righteous” politics will accompany the discovery of true goodness and God within ourselves.<sup>46</sup>

Nakaya is insistent that the *Shinji* is anti-dogmatic and does not mandate any kind of common practice. The text must be read by each practitioner and lived out within everyday life; internal states come before any external behaviors.<sup>47</sup> That is not to say that Nakaya has had no recommendations whatsoever for external behavior. For several decades he has emphasized a vegetarian, organic diet and quoted passages in the *Shinji* that equate meat-eating with “cannibalism.”<sup>48</sup> His early magazine *Genuine Japan* carried dark suspicions about meat and processed and manufactured foods, and a regular column by a believer named Kazuo Gunji 郡司和夫 placed doubts on virtually all foods sold in supermarkets, up to and including fresh fruits and vegetables. In response, other articles reviewed organic, vegetarian restaurants and investigated various methods of backyard farming. Recently, Nakaya has moderated his vegetarian views, again falling back on individual freedom of interpretation, and proposing that the *Shinji* passages might have been directed solely at Tenmei.<sup>49</sup> Regardless, reader letters in *Genuine Japan* show that a fair number of his readers are vegetarian.

Nakaya’s esotericism may seem especially “reasonable” to us, but this is in fact the point: his message meets the needs of present day seekers, just as Onisaburō and Tenmei’s practices fit their respective eras. Where Tenmei’s group fit in among the new religions of

the postwar period, Nakaya's group is part of the "new spirituality movements and culture" of the 21st century. As Susumu Shimazono has written, participants in these movements "are satisfied with feeling that their inner self changes through participation, and dislike acting with others or assuming a position of responsibility for colleagues or others."<sup>50</sup>

What needs do Nakaya's books and lectures fulfill, if not the basic need for community? Ward and Voas suggest that conspirituality may be "a means by which political cynicism is tempered with spiritual optimism,"<sup>51</sup> and the folklorist Yoshiyuki Iikura 飯倉義之 has pointed to conspiracy theories as a way for cosmopolitans to restore "imagination" to a postmodern world that has lost its "grand narrative,"<sup>52</sup> which echoes Michael Barkun's idea that global conspiracy offers an explanation to those who believe in an apocalyptic battle between good and evil for why the general public is not aware of the fight.<sup>53</sup> Another possible appeal is the simple gnostic excitement of knowing the hidden narrative behind the apparent confusion of world events. But all three of these interpretations have in common a way to offer assurances of beauty and truth in an increasingly uncertain and inexplicable world.

### **Conclusion: Rejected Knowledge in Japan**

The cultural acceptance and implementation of the *Hitsuki Shinji* has generally reflected the times in which it was read. Tenmei Okamoto's original church closely fit the pattern of Occupation-era millenarian movements, and collapsed with the end of the Occupation. Yoshio Kawabata politicized the text in a political era, and Minori Okamoto read it spiritually in a spiritual era. The rediscovery of the text by Shin'ichi Nakaya coincides perfectly with the late modern reinvigoration of conspirituality. It is not unnatural to wonder what value the text has to these various players in enabling their respective practices.

In the fall and rise of the text, the most important change in its implementation is in the nature of the organizations that have grown up around it: a tight-knit new religious movement under Tenmei, as opposed to an atomized "new spirituality movement" under Nakaya. The best explanation for this is to be found not in the whims of these two proponents but in the expectations of wider society. Nao Deguchi's original Oomoto revelations were filled with pleas to come to her village and join the divine work. Tenmei's *Hitsuki Shinji* has no such specific pleas, but a group formed around him regardless. Regarding a text as divinely inspired seems to have implied forming a community to both of these prophets. More recently, though, writers have begun to consider the reading of sacred texts in much more individualized terms. In his work on Islam, Toshihiko Izutsu cites Jacques Derrida's language of *écriture* to propose that sacred text, unlike speech, offers the believer a liberty of interpretation. This hermeneutic freedom is restricted only by the awareness of other readings and acceptance of the authority attributed to them.<sup>54</sup> Where previous interpreters may have attempted to press various kinds of authority onto readers, Nakaya can see himself as offering freedom of belief, because his books primarily point to the

text, promoting individualistic and liberating *écriture* over institutional or traditional authority. (The extent to which such ideas of authority can actually be rejected is unclear.)

At the same time, though, the content of the text is not completely irrelevant to its cultural reception. Without assuming that there was in any sense an “esoteric tradition” in Japan, we can see that the Swedenborgian bent to the *Hitsuki Shinji* seems to have had an influence on its popularity or lack thereof during various periods. The “new spirituality movements and culture” that Susumu Shimazono has linked to the 1980s,<sup>55</sup> with their broad mass appeal, did not translate into a boost in popularity for the *Shinji*. It was only in the 1990s that a message from the Occupation-era “rush hour of the gods” found its new popularity. This suggests to me that while Shimazono’s theory carries more weight with local researchers than a direct adaption of the Western concepts of the “esoteric” and “new age,” there is still at least some place for Western esotericism in the postwar history of Japanese religions.

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- <sup>1</sup> Egil Aspem, *The Problem of Disenchantment* (New York: Brill, 2014), 418 and *passim*.
- <sup>2</sup> Kocku von Stuckrad, *Western Esotericism: A Brief History of Secret Knowledge* (Routledge, 2005), 10.
- <sup>3</sup> Colin Campbell, “The Cult, the Cultic Milieu and Secularization,” in Michael Hill (ed.), *A Sociological Yearbook of Religion in Britain* 5 (London: SCM Press, 1972), 119–136.
- <sup>4</sup> Yasumaru Yoshio, *Deguchi Nao* (Tokyo: Asahi Shinbun-sha, 1977), 21-77; and Emily Groszos Ooms, *Women and Millenarian Protest in Meiji Japan* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell East Asia Series, 1993), 21-31.
- <sup>5</sup> Nancy K. Stalker, *Prophet Motive: Deguchi Onisaburō, Oomoto, and the Rise of New Religions in Imperial Japan*. (Honolulu: University of Hawai‘i Press, 2008), 69-70.
- <sup>6</sup> *ibid.*, 112-113.
- <sup>7</sup> *ibid.*, 153.
- <sup>8</sup> Okamoto Minori. “Jidai ga kawaru... Okamoto Tenmei no *Hifumi*,” [“The times change... Okamoto Tenmei’s *Hifumi*”] in *Shintō ronri taikai*, eds. Wadō Kōsaka and Kashima Noboru (Tokyo: Shinkokumin-sha, 1984), 45.
- <sup>9</sup> Yasumaru Yoshio. *Ikki/kangoku/cosmology: shūensei no rekishigaku* [“Revolt/prison/cosmology: a historiography of the margins”] (Tokyo: Asahi Shinbun-sha, 1999).
- <sup>10</sup> c.f. Avery Morrow, “Divine Scripts and Lost Histories in Japanese Esoterica,” *Innovative Research in Japanese Studies* 1 (2014); and Jean-Pierre Berthon, “Production et utilisation d’apocryphes à caractère religieux dans le Japon du XXe siècle,” *Extrême-Orient Extrême-Occident* 32 (2010), 89-114.
- <sup>11</sup> Okamoto, “Jidai ga kawaru,” 46.
- <sup>12</sup> The “received text” which can be found in bookstores comes in two volumes, the second of which was extensively rewritten by Minori: Nakaya Shin’ichi, ed., *Hitsuki shinji (kan’yaku)*, in 2 vols. (Tokyo: Hikaru Land, 2011). Tenmei’s original translation is exceedingly rare, although a partial copy is accessible at the National Diet Library: Okamoto Tenmei, ed., *Hitsuku shinji (Kogane no maki, Shirokane no maki, Kurokane no maki)* (Komono-cho, Chiba: Hikari Kyōkai, 1951). NDL 8362329.
- <sup>13</sup> Nakaya, *Hitsuki shinji*, 1:451 (Umi no maki, v. 15).
- <sup>14</sup> Nakaya, *Hitsuki shinji*, 1:305-372 (Jishin no maki); Asuka Akio and Nakaya Shin’ichi, “*Hitsuki shinji*” *taidan* [“Roundtable on the Hitsuki Shinji”] (Tokyo: Gakken, 2015), 72; and Agō Kiyohiko, *Nihon jindai moji kenkyū genten* [“Sourcebook for study of the ancient characters of Japan”] (Tokyo: Shinjinbutsu Ōraisha, 1996), 455
- <sup>15</sup> Okamoto Minori was always pleased to tell of how her elder brother allegedly talked about the *Shinji* with Prince Mikasa. See Kurokawa Yutsuki, *Okamoto Tenmei-den* [“Life of Tenmei Okamoto”] (Tokyo: Hikaru Land, 2012), 242-3.
- <sup>16</sup> Nakaya Shin’ichi et al., *Fuji wa bakuhatsu suru zo! Hitsuki shinji ga kataru ima kono toki* [“Mount Fuji will explode! Hitsuki Shinji talks of the here and now”] (Tokyo: Hikaru Land, 2013), 127-8.
- <sup>17</sup> Shisō no kagaku kenkyūkai, *Après-guerre no kenkyū: Après-guerre no jittai kiroku* [“Study of the postwar: An actual record of the postwar”] (Tanbai-chō, Nara: Yotokusha, 1951), 99-100. Quoted by Nagaoka Takashi at his presentation “Minshū shūkyō to 1940-nendai” [“Popular religions in the 1940s”], “Shūkyō to Shakai” Gakkai, June 14, 2015.
- <sup>18</sup> [Nakano Yūdo], “Shinkō shūkyō Hikari Kyōkai.” [“The new religion Church of Light”] *Shūkyō kōron* 21.10 (1951), 34-37
- <sup>19</sup> *Sanzensekai* “Yokokuhen” (April 8, 1949), 2. George W. Prange Collection, National Diet Library.
- <sup>20</sup> Nakaya, *Hitsuki shinji*, 2:30 (Kogane no Maki, v. 50).
- <sup>21</sup> Okamoto Tenmei, *Reikai kōryū to saniwa hiden* [“Communication with the spirit world and secret record of spirit interpreters”] (1954), excerpted in Okamoto Minori, *Hitsuki shinji wa naze Okamoto Tenmei ni orita ka* [“Why was the Hitsuki Shinji conveyed to Tenmei Okamoto?”] (Tokyo: Tokuma Shoten, 1996), 168. See also Nakaya, *Hitsuki shinji*, 1:349 (Jishin no Maki, v. 13).
- <sup>22</sup> *ibid.*

- <sup>23</sup> Tenmei's work was exhibited in New York in November 1959, and in Israel afterwards. Okamoto, *Hitsuki shinji wa naze*, 105; Kurokawa, *Okamoto Tenmei-den*, 345.
- <sup>24</sup> The newsletter in question was published by the United Israel World Union, an organization that attempted to spread a universalist vision of Judaism throughout the world. Tenmei's article, entitled "The Link Between the Japanese and the Jews," appeared in their summer 1960 issue. Communication with United Israel World Union President Ralph Buntyn, May 13, 2015.
- <sup>25</sup> Mishima Yukio, "Jakyō." *Sunday Mainichi*, 18 April 1948. Quoted in Kurokawa, *Okamoto Tenmei-den*, 208.
- <sup>26</sup> Although the political situation was far from normal, apocalyptic religious groups gave way to radical political groups. See for example William Andrews, *Dissenting Japan: A History of Japanese Radicalism and Counterculture from 1945 to Fukushima* (London: C. Hurst & Co., 2016), 20ff.
- <sup>27</sup> Nakaya et al., *Fuji wa bakuhatu*, 125-7; Kurokawa, *Okamoto Tenmei-den*, 410.
- <sup>28</sup> Okamoto, *Hitsuki shinji wa naze*, 120.
- <sup>29</sup> Umehara Masaki, "Keisei-saimin e no shikō: Makoto no Ie" ["Aiming at a prosperous people and nation: The House of Truth"], *Dentō to gendai* 25 (January 1974), 188-198
- <sup>30</sup> Okamoto Tae [Minoru], "[Maruchon] Shinji to Okamoto Tenmei" ["The [circumpunct] Shinji and Tenmei Okamoto"], *Tama* 4 (January 1967), 27-30.
- <sup>31</sup> *Atarashiki taiyō*, August 1969, 11-15ff. National Diet Library.
- <sup>32</sup> Umehara, "Keisei-saimin," 198.
- <sup>33</sup> *ibid.*
- <sup>34</sup> Andrews, *Dissenting Japan*, 84ff.
- <sup>35</sup> "Hōdankai" ["Free talk"], *Sasura* 7.6 (June 1976), 4-74. Harvard-Yenching Library.
- <sup>36</sup> See Okamoto, "Jidai ga kawaru," as well as most of the issues of *Shion tsūshin* available at the National Diet Library. Nakaya's take was offered to me over several discussions in 2015.
- <sup>37</sup> Kurokawa Yutsuki in discussion with Nakaya Shin'ichi and the author, May 16, 2015. Kurokawa has a theory about who purchased the original text, but Nakaya has given up looking for it and believes it to be lost. See Asuka and Nakaya, "*Hitsuki shinji*" *taidan*, 88.
- <sup>38</sup> Nakaya Shin'ichi, "Watashi wa naze *Hitsuki shinji* o yo ni daseta ka (zenhen)" ["Why did I bring the Hitsuki Shinji to the world? (1/2)"]. *Shinsei Nihon* 35 (June 1997), 35-44. Collection of the author.
- <sup>39</sup> Asuka and Nakaya, "*Hitsuki shinji*" *taidan*, 96-105.
- <sup>40</sup> Egil Aspren and Asbjørn Dyrendal, "Conspirituality Reconsidered: How surprising and how new is the confluence of spirituality and conspiracy theory?" *Journal of Contemporary Religion* 30.3 (2015).
- <sup>41</sup> Nakaya Shin'ichi, *Hitsuki shinji: Uchū ishi yori jinrui e saishū no daiyogen* ["Hitsuki Shinji: The last great prophecy from the cosmic will to humanity"] (Tokyo: Tokuma Shoten, 1991).
- <sup>42</sup> Nakaya Shin'ichi, *Hitsuki shinji: Todome no ikusa* ["Hitsuki Shinji: The final battle"] (Tokyo: Tokuma Shoten, 1993).
- <sup>43</sup> On the use of anti-Semitic archetypes in Japanese conspiracy theory, see Tsuji Ryotarō, *Sekai no inbōron o yomitoku* ["Explaining conspiracy theories of the world"] (Kodansha, 2012).
- <sup>44</sup> Nakaya Shin'ichi, *Hitsuki shinji: Kanzen guide & navigation* ["Hitsuki Shinji: Complete guide and navigation"] (Tokyo: Tokuma Shoten, 2005), 78.
- <sup>45</sup> Harada Minoru, "Okamoto Tenmei no *Hitsuki shinji*," in Association for Skeptical Investigation of Paranormal (eds.), *Nazo toki chojōgenshō III* ["Solving the puzzles of paranormal phenomena 3"] (Tokyo: Saizusha, 2012), 47-56.
- <sup>46</sup> Nakaya, *Kanzen guide*, 260-1.
- <sup>47</sup> Nakaya Shin'ichi, *Uchū no chokuryū: <Seiyaku> Hitsuki shinji* ["The cosmic direct current: Hitsuki Shinji — the true interpretation"] (Tokyo: Tokuma Shoten, 1995), 35.
- <sup>48</sup> e.g. Nakaya, *Kanzen guide*, 267-318.
- <sup>49</sup> Nakaya et al., *Fuji wa bakuhatu*, 117.

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<sup>50</sup> Shimazono Susumu, *From Salvation to Spirituality: Popular Religious Movements in Japan* (Melbourne: Trans Pacific Press, 2004), 298.

<sup>51</sup> Charlotte Ward and David Voas, “The Emergence of Conspirituality,” *Journal of Contemporary Religion* 26:1 (2011), 103-121.

<sup>52</sup> Iikura Yoshiyuki, “Toshi densetsuka suru ‘sōzōryoku’ : ‘ōkina monogatari no sōshitsu’ to inbōron-teki sōzōryoku” [“Imagination made urban legend: ‘loss of great narrative’ and the conspiratorial imagination”] *Hikaku Nihon bunka kenkyū* 15 (2012), 53-63.

<sup>53</sup> Michael Barkun, *A Culture of Conspiracy* (University of California Press, 2003), 3.

<sup>54</sup> Izutsu Toshihiko, “Islam bunka” [“Islamic culture”] and “Koran o yomu” [“Reading the Quran”], in *Izutsu Toshihiko zenshū*, vol. 7 (Tokyo: Keio University Press, 2014). See pp. 35-7 and 276-8.

<sup>55</sup> Shimazono, *From Salvation to Spirituality*, 275-7.