

Kukai's Thought of Shinbutsu-shugo (神仏習合)

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It is said that Buddhism, which had been introduced to Japan in the mid-sixth century, was firmly established by Prince Shotoku (聖徳太子) (574-622). He proclaimed the belief of Buddhism in the Constitution of Seventeen Chapters (十七条の憲法). Buddhism became an important element of Japanese culture, while mixing with ancient-Shinto. Such harmonization between Buddhism and ancient-Shinto produced a form of Shinbutsu-shugo, the coexistence of native deities with the Buddha, and became a great influence on Japanese moral culture.

For over 1000 years Shinbutsu-shugo ideology developed its numerous forms. Despite the anti-Buddhism movement, called Haibutsukishaku (廃仏毀釈), arising from the national and political policy of the Meiji government to segregate the gods and Buddha, Shinbutsu-shugo ideology survived to form the Japanese cultural base of today.

Kukai (774-835) fused the concept of Japanese native gods into a comprehensive thought of esoteric Buddhism and made a large contribution to the development of Shinbutsu-shugo ideological trends in the early Heian Period.

This paper discusses the historical development of Shinbutsu-shugo to clarify how Kukai subsumed ancient-Shinto under the world of esoteric Buddhism.

Shinbutsu-shugo is defined as the union and harmonization of the imported Buddhism with the ancient indigenous belief in the deities of Japan, which only later came to be called Shinto. These phenomena were generally first found in the relations between the Buddhism and the ancient Shinto of the Nara Period on which the framework of Japanese Buddhism was formed.

However, the origin of Shinbutsu-shugo can be seen when Buddhism was first introduced. According to Nihonshoki (日本書紀), a golden image of Buddha was regarded as a shining god and called Hotoke-gami (仏神), and one of the first Buddhist priests was one of the young girls (巫女) who served the deities of Japan, and weaved clothing dedicated to the deities. In the case of Japan, Buddhism was introduced with only an image of Buddha, some sutra and Buddhist altar fittings, but lacking priests. Therefore it is thought that before Prince Shotoku, the

maidens in the service of god led the teachings of Buddha.

Not long afterward, Buddhism was enthusiastically accepted for its defensive characteristics toward the host country, and became the basis for unifying the country.

Thus Buddhism regarded a foreign god at first gradually fostered the generous relations with the native belief, and Shinbutsu-shugo resulted in various forms such as jingu-ji (神宮寺). There can be seen two ideologic trends: one was that the Japanese gods hoped to gain deliverance of soul, and the other was that they became good gods and the guardian deities of Buddhism as Indian deities had become the guardians of Indian Buddhism.

After the period of these trends, Kukai developed his own Shinbutsu-shugo ideology.

When he found a place suitable for ascetic practices on Mt. Koya (高野山) and tried to build his temple, there were already two Shinto deities. So he invoked the help of these gods, and then enshrined them as guardian deities within the same temple precincts.

He also held the rituals of esoteric Buddhism to set up a seven-ri-boundary (七里結界). At that time he made a report to the Buddha, but the report was not only to the Buddha, and guardian deities of Buddhism, but to all Japanese deities. That is to say, he subsumed all Japanese deities under the Buddha of esoteric Buddhism and equalized the former with the latter.

With the same concept, he later built the guardian Hachiman shrine (鎮守八幡宮) in the precincts of Toji (東寺).

All these cases of Shinbutsu-shugo were understood from the principle of Dainichi-nyorai (大日如来), that is the Buddha who expounded esoteric Buddhism, in the realm of mandala (曼荼羅). In the teachings of esoteric Buddhism, all Japanese gods, even deities of Mt. Koya, were manifestations of Dainichi-nyorai. All things in the universe constitute the body of this Buddha. Therefore Kukai is considered to have constructed his own realms of mandala ideology by subsuming Japanese deities under esoteric Buddhism and fusing them.

Then what was a significance of Shinbutsu-shugo for him?

Though the practical aim of Shingon esoteric Buddhism (真言密教) was Sokushin-jobutsu (即身成仏), it needed hard ascetic practices and meditation. So to spread esoteric Buddhism, he needed to advocate to protect the nation and to relieve all beings in the real society.

However, in those days, Buddhism was mainly a faith of the intellectual class, while the interest of the common people depended on which god had the strongest spiritual power or answered their prayers. The gods that they believed might be permeating in nature. So trees might have been gods to them. It is said that the Buddhist image of Hachiman-god, which Kukai created, existed

in the guardian Hachiman-god's shrine in Toji. In such respect, we might say Kukai considered the image to be a unification of the Japanese deities and the Buddha.

In short, Kukai subsumed Japanese deities of nature under the esoteric Buddha on the base of a comprehensive ideology of esoteric Buddhism. Kukai's perspective of Shinbutsu-shugo ideology was aimed to relieve people from suffering, as well as to pray for rain to obtain a rich harvest, to construct the Manno Pond (満濃池) and Masuda Pond (益田池), and to establish the Shugei-shuchiin (綜藝種智院).