

# The Substituted Forest: Political and Social Effects on Japan's Spaces of Worship

Yutaka SUGA

In contemporary society, forests are considered important because they are deemed to constitute a part of our invaluable Nature. During the latter half of the twentieth century, as a consequence of the world-wide diffusion of environmentalism with its emphasis on the importance of safeguarding Nature, the value of forests came to be increasingly appreciated globally and now activities to protect and restore life to forests are thriving. There is no denying that forests create valuable spaces that nurture animal and plant species and provide human beings with the various blessings of Nature. It is also true that at present, with the dire consequences of global warming looming large, forests are expected to perform a major role in absorbing carbon dioxide emissions through photosynthesis. Given these facts, very few people would deny the value of forests; their critical importance has been recognized from a variety of perspectives, certainly not limited only to the natural sciences. From the standpoint of folkloristics and cultural history, too, it is meaningful to take a fresh look at forests, for they are places with complicated histories, and they warrant more attention than simple appraisal as a means of preserving Nature.

In Germany, for example, there is a close link between forests and German national identity. The German folklorist Albrecht Lehmann offers an important perspective, analyzing forests not as simple natural spaces but rather as historical constructs that have been molded through various cultural and political influences. The forests to which German people feel strongly attached, he explains, have been used as political symbols. He particularly underscores the fact that during the Third Reich, forests were invoked as ethnocentric, totalitarian

and ultra-nationalistic symbols for the unification of the German people, and these symbols were very well-received by people. The image of an artificial-looking forest, made up of trees of a single species standing in a perfectly ordered fashion, evoked the image of a band of Nazi soldiers marching in file. In present-day Germany, people have reflected on the atrocities committed by the military in the past and now generally take a rather negative view of the military. Accordingly, the practice of associating forests with armed forces marching in file has been dispelled, and inversely, the German people have come to place a high premium on mixed forests consisting of a wide variety of tree species, with each tree having distinctive characteristics of its own (Lehmann 1999).

If we look in this way at the relationship between forests and human beings from a perspective that regards forests as political symbols, we can find similar phenomena in Japan, where forests also have been charged with significant cultural implications. Approximately seventy percent of Japan's land is still forested; these dense forests and the wood they produce have a close bearing on people's lives. A typical traditional Japanese building, for example, is made of wood, as are many religious facilities—temples and shrines—found throughout the country. Furthermore, in Shintoism, Japan's indigenous faith that has been passed down for many centuries, it is believed that trees are inhabited by divine spirits; forests are revered as collections of sacred trees and therefore considered holy spaces of religious belief.

Indeed, Shintoism, which still has many believers, has its origins in traditional Nature worship; even today many Shinto shrines, known as *jinja* (Shinto shrines), have forests attached to them. We can think of a shrine as a sacred Shinto space in which both a forest and a building (or buildings) for the purpose of religious rites are indivisibly fused into one. There are approximately 80,000 Shinto shrines in Japan today; as sacred spaces they continue to be visited by large numbers of worshippers.<sup>(1)</sup>

This article describes how, over the course of Japan's modernization process, a forest that was originally a locale for a folk belief specific to the area came under various political and social influences and was transformed into a

different kind of sacred place in the form of a "state forest." Furthermore, this same forest is now being transformed once again as it is infused with new value and meanings by contemporary environmentalist movements. Although it is customary in Japan to highly assess forests as manifestations of Nature, forests are in fact social and political constructs; as such, their significance is modified with the passage of time.

### The Transformation of a Folk Belief Forest into a State Forest

Harajuku, a district in downtown Tokyo, is a global fashion hotspot renowned for unique street fashions. Every day, the streets in this glamorous shopping and commercial district are filled with eccentrically dressed young people. This modern space populated by youth from all over Japan, is sandwiched between Shinjuku and Shibuya, Japan's two largest commercial and office districts. Shinjuku, the larger of the two, has the highest concentration of world-class high-rise buildings in Japan, many of which house the offices of government agencies and Japan's leading companies.

In this area adjacent to Harajuku, surrounded by bustling neighborhoods dedicated to business and shopping, there is a large Shinto shrine called Meiji Jingū. During the first three days of each year, over three million worshippers visit the shrine to pray for happiness in the coming year—in fact, Meiji Jingū receives more New Year's worshippers than any other shrine in Japan. It is no exaggeration to say that this is one of Japan's most renowned and well established places of religious belief. Moreover, Meiji Jingū has an expanse of rich green forest, so luxuriant that it may strike the visitor as almost unbelievable that a forest such as this can actually exist in the center of a metropolis of twelve million residents. Meiji Jingū's forest, which hosts a rich population of trees, certainly deserves to be known as an urban oasis. Not surprisingly, the forest is highly regarded both as Japan's first inner-city park and also as a nature preserve readily accessible to the public. Thus, from the standpoint of environmental conservation, the entire compound of the shrine has come to assume the

characteristics of a “holy place.”

But the forest has not always existed on this spot. At the beginning of the nineteenth century, a huge fir tree stood in the space where Meiji Jingû stands now. *Yûreki Zakki* (Jippôan 1814), a book documenting the scenes and manners of Edo (the former name of Tokyo), contains an entry on the folk beliefs surrounding this huge fir tree. At the time, we are told, a very large and famous fir tree stood in the compound of the Edo residence of the Ii family, the lord of the Hikone domain. The tree had a cavity at its base, from which water constantly dripped to form a small pool. The water dripping from the old tree was believed to be an effective cure for eye diseases, and people of all ages from neighboring areas would enter the mansion's premises to admire the mystical tree and to fetch water to treat their eyes. Given the fact that the huge tree was frequently mentioned in books published during the Tokugawa period (c. 1600-1868) explaining popular customs and manners in Edo or offering pictorial descriptions of sightseeing spots in the city, there is no question that the tree was considerably well-known among the city's dwellers.

The area where the huge fir tree stood was a place for indigenous tree-worshipping folk belief. The space was deemed sacred, even if the specific identity of the Shintoist or Buddhist deity remained unknown, and it was worshipped by local people who felt there a divine presence. The fir tree constituted a tangible cultural heritage, while the practice of using the water that dripped within its cavity to cure eye diseases constituted an intangible cultural heritage. Exuding an awe-inspiring ethereal atmosphere, the fir tree and its surroundings were spiritually lofty enough to induce people to believe that the water possessed medicinal properties.

The fir tree had a profusion of dense branches that spread out in all directions, spanning approximately fifty-four meters, and the perimeter of the tree's trunk measured as much as eleven meters. Unfortunately, however, this massive tree died before the Second World War, and the huge stump that remained was burned in the air raids of 1945. The tree's majestic figure is nowhere to be found today. In 1952, a new fir tree was planted in the same

location; it still stands by the side of the south entrance to Meiji Jingû.

The space where this second-generation fir tree stands, however, does not have the same significance as it did with the original tree. Today, no pool of water forms there, and no one comes to seek medicinal properties. Indeed, nobody even remembers the fact that such a folk belief once flourished there. The new fir tree may serve as a facade of the folk belief of bygone days, but the belief itself has been totally lost. The fir tree has been reduced to a simple tree with no unique qualities.

The Meiji Jingû compound where the new fir tree stands constitutes a quiet, peaceful, and venerable space for worship; shut off by the forest from the bustling noise of the outside world, the space is replete with the fresh aroma of trees. With its great number and variety of trees, the shrine forest looks as if it were an unspoiled, holy natural forest that had remained intact for centuries. The many Japanese worshippers who visit the shrine each year receive the awe-inspiring impression that they have stepped into a traditional sacred area where unspoiled natural beauty has been preserved. In reality, however, the sacred forest of Meiji Jingû is artificial. What is more, it is a new forest, constructed less than hundred years ago.

When the huge fir tree was in good shape, this area was part of Edo's outlying suburbs. Most of the adjacent areas were farmland, meadows, bamboo thickets, and marshlands, not particularly fit for woodlands. In fact, the area originally had only sparse forests. The beautiful forest we see today did not exist at that time; it was constructed as part of a government-sponsored project to commemorate Emperor Meiji, the great-grandfather of the present Emperor, who passed away in 1912.

When the Meiji Emperor died, many of the citizens of Tokyo expressed the desire to see the Imperial Mausoleum of Emperor Meiji built in the capital city. The government, however, had already chosen Fushimi-Momoyama in Kyoto as the site for the Imperial Mausoleum. In response, three influential persons of the time, including Eiichi Shibusawa, the doyen of Japanese capitalism in its embryonic days, established a committee of volunteers to petition the

government to construct a commemorative shrine in Tokyo as the “second-best alternative to erecting the Imperial Mausoleum” there (Meiji Jingû Hosankai 1932, 14). In 1913, the proposal was approved by the House of Representatives of the Japanese Diet and a Jinja Hôshi Chosakai (Investigation Council for Shrine Consecration) was established to draw up detailed plans for the construction. From among a number of prospective sites, the Council selected the present location, which had been incorporated into the Imperial Estate of Minami Toshima in the mid-Meiji period (1868-1912). The Council also came up with a majestic plan to create “a forest which retains a natural aura, and is calm, deep, orderly and solemn” (Teien Kyôkai 1920, 101).

Subsequently, in 1915, the government established the Jingû Zoei Kyoku (Meiji Jingû Construction Bureau) as part of the Ministry of the Interior, and as a new office to take charge of the actual planning and construction of the shrine. In the course of its planning work, the Bureau determined that it would be most becoming of the new shrine to have a forest that would give the impression of a traditional “eternal forest,” one that would sustain itself through an ever-lasting sacred process of natural regeneration.

However, this image of a traditional shrine forest had no direct linkage with the image of a sacred forest, which in itself was the object of indigenous, traditional and folkloric worship and devotion. It was, rather, a new image of a shrine forest that was formulated afresh to suit the ideology of the modern Japanese state. As a matter of fact, there was at the time no established idea of what a traditional Japanese shrine forest should look like. For example, Ôkuma Shigenobu, a former prime minister who was heading the Investigation Council for Shrine Consecration, apparently envisaged that typical sacred forests should consist of stately rows of *sugi* (*Cryptomeria japonica*) trees, such as those that lined the approaches to famous shrines of long tradition, such as Ise Jingû (Mie Prefecture) and Nikko Tôshogû (Tochigi Prefecture). His view clashed sharply with that of the academics, who insisted that the shrine forest should be a mixed one consisting of a large number of domestic tree species. Ôkuma finally gave in to the determined persuasion of the academics; this did not mean, however, that

the resulting shrine forest could actually be considered a genuine, natural forest made up of indigenous tree species.

### A Sacred Forest Created by the State

When viewed from the perspective of plant sociology, the present-day Meiji Jingû forest contains tree species that are numerous to the point of being abnormal (Matsui et al. 1992, 68). If the forest vegetation of the Tokyo suburbs of one hundred years ago still remained, the forest would consist of a very limited number of tree species. Had those in charge of the shrine forest construction project been interested in creating a genuinely “natural” forest, it would have been more appropriate for them to construct the forest as a wooded area of mixed, but limited, tree species. In reality, an illusory forest consisting of as many as 365 tree species, including a number which do not normally grow in Tokyo, was created, supposedly in accordance with the genuine image of a shrine forest believed to be “calm, deep, orderly and solemn.”

The reason the forest has this abnormally large number of tree species is because it was constructed by transplanting trees gathered from all over the country. As mentioned already, the original woodland area in which the huge fir tree stood had a rather sparse population of trees. Thus the Meiji Jingû Construction Bureau found it necessary to fill the vacant space with trees purchased on the market or transplanted from state-owned land plots elsewhere. What proved even more instrumental was a nation-wide campaign launched by the Bureau to call upon the country's citizens to donate trees. Many people responded to this call and more than 95,000 trees were donated from locations all over the country; these donated trees account for over eighty percent of all the trees in the Meiji Jingû Inner Precinct. In light of the need to create a forest that would be “truly symbolic of Japan,” the tree donation campaign rightfully made it a policy to reject foreign tree species. On the other hand, it accepted trees donated from Karafuto (Sakhalin), Taiwan, the Korean Peninsula and other colonial possessions of Japan at the time, and also from Manchuria (northern

China) and Beijing, which were being earmarked for Japanese invasion (Teien Kyôkai 1920, 101-112).

The tree donation campaign was the brainchild of Inoue Tomoichi, the first chief of the Meiji Jingû Construction Bureau of the Ministry of the Interior. Well known as a competent bureaucrat in the Ministry of the Interior and the person who first introduced British “garden cities” to Japan, Inoue displayed an uncommon acumen in the administration of local governments. He worked very energetically to promote the tree donation campaign. After the campaign was launched and the Ministry of the Interior convened meetings for government-appointed prefectural governors, Inoue never failed to attend these meetings, personally briefing the governors about tree donation. When the Ministry’s various bureaus convened their own meetings for prefectural officials, Inoue let his subordinates attend in order to explain about the campaign. He also saw to it that his Bureau printed pamphlets on the campaign to disseminate to municipalities throughout the country. Inoue seems to have designed this campaign not simply for the purpose of saving costs on purchasing trees, but with the much more profound objective of boosting the Japanese people’s sense of national identity.

After the Russo-Japanese War ended in 1905, the Ministry of the Interior launched the state-sponsored Chihô kairyô undô (Local Community Improvement Movement) with the aim of unifying the people under a nationalist ideology. This movement helped to subdue mounting social anxieties that were fueled by a financial collapse triggered by exorbitant war expenditures, deepening social contradictions and popular discontent with the Russian peace treaty. By funneling the energies of the people into the care and tutelage of the state, the movement was to lay the foundation for Japan’s imperialist expansion; it eventually also helped build momentum toward the national unification that was to remain at work until the end of the Second World War.

As a bureaucrat in the Ministry of the Interior, Inoue Tomoichi played an instrumental role in implementing the movement by taking charge of its practical aspects. During the period from 1909 to 1911, he organized and carried out



various programs, such as training sessions for local improvement projects and programs for training exemplary local leaders, which were all aimed at making municipalities strong enough to meet the requirements of the state. He was also deeply involved in the creation of the Meiji Jingû forest. It is safe to say, therefore, that the Local Community Improvement Movement and the campaign to donate trees for Meiji Jingû were actually twins sharing the same objective of unifying people under a nationalistic ideology (Takagi 1998, 16-27). The trees collected by the tree donation campaign under Inoue's leadership included tree species that grew in the territory of Japan proper as well as those in Japan's colonial possessions at the time. Consequently, the Meiji Jingû forest became a forest that could be found nowhere else in Japan. It can be thought of as a collage of trees that was created to serve as a state forest.

The foregoing observations demonstrate how the process of a forest planned and implemented by the state would appear. A localized, traditional and vernacular space for worship in the form of a huge fir tree is replaced, through state intervention, by another space for worship in the form of a Shinto shrine, with its significantly different, pan-Japanese tradition. In the sacred space of the shrine, rituals and rites are performed by Shinto priests and religious beliefs are practiced by the citizens of Tokyo who come there to worship. The emergence of this new religious space gave birth to a religious practice that reveres the Emperor Meiji as a god, while at the same time, the state implanted in this space its own cherished value of pursuing national unification.

### Modification of the Significance of the Forest by Environmentalism

We should not overlook the fact that the creation of this state forest, filled with an abnormally rich variety of tree species, was carried out parallel to another state-dictated undertaking of exactly the opposite orientation—one that destroyed many “groves of village shrines” throughout Japan. At the beginning of the twentieth century, the Ministry of the Interior's Jinja Bureau carried out a policy of merging two or more small village shrines into one. Consequently, the

number of shrines drastically decreased from 195,000 in 1905 to 141,000 in 1910. With its close link to the Local Community Improvement Movement mentioned earlier, the shrine merger policy was meant to establish one Shinto shrine in each local municipality.<sup>(2)</sup> The movement's heavily politically charged purpose was to merge small and fragmented community shrines into larger entities, turn the vacant sites of the abolished shrines into the assets of the enlarged ones, and make these latter shrines more powerful, enhancing their authority and thereby projecting Shintoism as the focus of people's reverence and the vehicle for their spiritual unification.<sup>(3)</sup> It is very likely that Inoue Tomoichi, who, in his capacity as a government official heading the Home Ministry's Jinja Bureau, was deeply involved in the establishment of Meiji Jingû, would have also played a role in the shrine merger policy. As a result of the policy, trees from the forests belonging to the large number of abolished shrines were reduced to freely marketable commodities, felled and sold off. And with them, the invaluable Nature that had been preserved as part of the groves of village shrines was gone.

In stark contrast, the Meiji Jingû forest, with its abundance and wide variety of tree species, was carefully preserved as a natural forest. Now, after this diligent and continuous preservation, a present-day interpretation and reassessment of the forest has imbued it with fresh significance in contemporary Japan. This newfound value transcends the role of the forest as a mere space for worship; instead it is being valued for the richness of Nature that it preserves.

In 1934, the Wild Bird Society of Japan was established as the country's first nature conservation group with a well-defined organizational structure.<sup>(4)</sup> It has since grown to be one of Japan's leading nature conservation groups, with its rosters expanding to some 40,000 members. The Society's local chapters sponsor bird watching tours and other events on a regular basis as a means of raising public awareness about the precious value of Nature. The Society is also active in campaigning for the establishment of bird sanctuaries. Ever since the Society's Tokyo chapter sponsored Japan's first bird watching tour in the compound of Meiji Jingû in 1947, shortly after the end of the Second World War, the Chapter has continuously held a monthly tour of the shrine. Thus, Meiji Jingû's forest has

long been used as a site for the activities of nature conservation groups.

Environmental conservation groups are not alone in utilizing Meiji Jingû to connect with the richness of the natural environment and appraising it highly from the perspective of present-day environmentalism. Included among the subscribers to this view are the local shopkeepers and proprietors who do business in the shopping and commercial district that stretches just outside of Meiji Jingû. Many of these business people, both large and small, also belong to the shopping district promotion association known as the “Harajuku-Omotesandô Keyakikai” (or the “Keyaki Society of Harajuku-Omotesandô Avenue”).<sup>(5)</sup> In 2001, the Keyaki Society made an “Eco-Avenue Declaration,” pledging to develop and enliven the district around the outskirts of Meiji Jingû by taking an ecologically sound approach. The primary objective of the Declaration was to boost the district’s business activities; in order to accomplish this the Keyaki Society decided to use the economic value of the district’s “ecology” to its advantage. With the perception that a pursuit of an ecology-oriented plan to develop the district would go a long way toward improving the district’s brand image, the Society was intent on using Meiji Jingû for this purpose. The Declaration spoke highly of Meiji Jingû, in particular praising its forest, which it characterized as “an ‘everlasting forest’ in which the blessings of Mother Nature and the wisdom of human beings work in perfect harmony to make it beautiful beyond comparison to anything in the history of the world.” They also labeled it “an ‘eternal forest’ created by the wisdom of the Meiji era, which had the foresight to see a hundred years into the future” (<http://www.omotesando.or.jp/tab3.php?lang=jp>: accessed on May 27, 2009). In the Keyaki Society’s characterization, Meiji Jingû becomes a symbol of the district’s Nature; by directly linking to the wealth of this Nature, the Society tries to establish a “beautiful” district.

Moreover, in response to this local initiative, the Asaza Fund, a nonprofit organization for environmental conservation, proposed a project that pivoted around Meiji Jingû as a keyword. Established in 1999, the organization is well known for its persistent environmental conservation and restoration activities at

Lake Kasumigaura, Japan's second largest lake located some sixty kilometers northeast of Tokyo. At a recent event for the "Harajuku-Omotesandô Eco Avenue MOVEMENT 21," held by the Keyaki Society on December 18, 2008, the Asaza Fund announced a draft proposal for the "Harajuku-Omotesandô Forest Blessings, Forest Winds Project." The proposal emphasized that "Meiji Jingû's huge forest is doing great service to mitigate the effect of an urban heat island in central Tokyo," and called upon people to "engage in dialog with the wind and living creatures of the forest, feel the blessings of Nature readily accessible in the center of the city, and jointly contemplate how to develop the area and plan for everyone's life in the future in such a way as to make the best possible use of the forest's blessings" (<http://www.kasumigaura.net/asaza/topics/topic01/090107omotesando.html>: accessed on May 27, 2009). By January 2009, this project had developed to the point of being identified by the Japanese Ministry of Economy and Industry's Panel for Studying Regional Experience-Based Environmental Education as an example of a good practice of an experience-based environmental education program. At present, a wide variety of participants, including private individuals and residents, private companies, environmental protection organizations, as well as the government, evaluate Meiji Jingû highly from the standpoint of environmental protection and preservation. These stakeholders are working together to encourage more and more citizens to appreciate the value of the forest.

### Shrine Forests Reconstructed by Modern Academic Disciplines

An ecologically motivated movement that extols well-preserved, unspoiled forests is gaining momentum around the world, with the active involvement not only of natural scientists and conservationists, but also of academics in fields within the humanities and social sciences. Japan is no exception. The Japanese version of this movement, however, leaves much to be desired: in its eagerness to celebrate the forests that have been preserved, it often fails to fully understand—or perhaps even simply ignores—the ways in which these

forests have been kept intact. Some of the folklorists who have joined this movement have done so with naïve intentions, while others come with an essentialist agenda.

Take, for example, the “Shasô Gakkai” (Association for the Study of Sacred Forests),<sup>(6)</sup> established in 2002 by researchers in various fields with the aim of promoting a cross-disciplinary study of shrine forests as a new academic endeavor, and working for the preservation and improvement of shrine forests. The Association's prospectus, issued at the time of its establishment, underscored the significance of studying shrine forests in the following terms:

*Shasô* means shrine forests, namely ‘forests of the *kami* (gods).’...When the people who first settled in the Japanese archipelago started to create ‘forests of the gods,’ they must have done so with the determination that they should not merely stand in awe of the severe but beautiful nature of Japan, or work to control it, but that they should also make positive efforts to live in harmony with Nature. It was the forests of shrines, as they came to be called later, that served as a symbol of the thoughts of the Japanese people, and as a node or joint for coordinating and punctuating their activities. As such, shrine forests have served as sanctuaries for preserving the natural environment of Japan.

This is also the case with the shrine forests of today, which preserve a wide variety of tangible and intangible cultural assets, including the vegetation of old times, animal species particular to an area, undisturbed soil, holy spots historically associated with deities, historical remains, relics, aged buildings, old-growth forests, antiques, antique documents, historic sites, scenic areas, special natural monuments, beautiful landscapes, the performing arts, traditional folk events, community organizations, water-use arrangements, the arrangement of houses in a hamlet, the occupation of residents, the environment and the creation of culture.

We believe, therefore, that by making concerted efforts to study shrine forests through mobilizing the expertise of various academic disciplines,

including botany, zoology, ecology, archeology, architecture, landscaping, aesthetics and art history, history, folkloristics, religious studies, agriculture, forestry, and fishery sciences, jurisprudence, sociology, geology, urban planning and natural land planning, civil engineering, environmental studies and cultural anthropology, we will be able to shed light on the thoughts, livelihoods, environment and culture of the Japanese people over the past several centuries. Through such undertakings, we will also be able to encourage numerous Japanese people, who are losing their own sense of identity, to become deeply aware of Japanese culture, which holds nature as its base, and help them regain and deepen their self-confidence. Making people interested in shrine forests will have the effect of preventing their destruction, and help restore green to the living environment of the people. We believe furthermore that through these efforts we will also be able to disseminate to the rest of the world a much-needed message about how to cope with the deterioration of the global environment, and this will become part of Japanese civilization's contribution to the world.

(<http://www2.odn.ne.jp/shasou/const.pdf> (in Japanese): accessed on December 22, 2009).

As a perusal of this prospectus makes clear, the Association has strong ideological fixations. Unlike a genuine academic association, which devotes itself to academic inquiries, this association does not limit itself to studying shrine forests from a purely academic perspective. Instead, it openly appraises the value of such forests from classical, essentialist perspectives. The Association speaks highly of Japan by using the expression “beautiful Japan,” a phrase that usually carries nationalistic or even ultra-nationalistic overtones, implying that the speaker is extolling Japan or things Japanese to an excessive degree.<sup>(7)</sup> Those affiliated with the Association pay attention to aspects of traditional Japanese cultural heritage, such as “folk events” and “traditional performing arts,” and according to their understanding, the essential value of Japanese culture is embedded in the “forests of the gods” where this cultural heritage is preserved

and practiced. They insist that the essential value of Japanese culture can be a source of encouragement for present-day Japanese, who are losing their own sense of identity; it will induce them to become deeply aware of Japanese culture and thereby regain their self-confidence. At a time when Japan's economic and political presence in the contemporary world seems increasingly on the wane, discourse such as this may sound pleasing and comfortable to the ears of many ordinary Japanese who are losing their memories of the Second World War. Some, if not many, of the folklorists in Japan who are involved in the Association and its movement are intent on trying to reinforce this discourse. Even while they are excessively deforming the true picture of shrine forests that are closely related to folklore, they are completely unaware of the political and ideological factors hidden behind such a discourse about forests.

There is no denying, of course, that many Japanese folklorists are conservative, but they have not become involved in movements such as this because they adhere particularly strongly to ultra-nationalistic ideas. Rather a convincing explanation of why they have joined this sort of movement so facily can be found within Japanese folkloristics (or *minzokugaku*) itself, a discipline that, throughout its developmental history, has retained strong leanings toward idyllic and romantic nationalism.

In the case of Germany immediately after the Second World War, many folklorists started to critically reflect upon the fact that their science of *Volkskunde* had sided with National Socialism during the reign of the Third Reich, and that many of their colleagues had supported the Nazi policies. These reflections led to a radical overhaul of the discipline (Kamenetsky 1972, 1973, 1977; Wilson 1973). In the United States, a victor country in the war, much discussion took place beginning in the early postwar years, critically pointing out the tendency for folkloristics to become politically charged and biased (Dorson 1976; Herzfeld 1982; Handler and Linnekin 1984; Abrahams 1988; Becker 1988; Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 1988). By contrast, it should be pointed out that folkloristics in Japan came into existence primarily in response to a sense of resentment toward the cultural transformation that was triggered by the

modernization process; as such, at the time of its inception it was strongly characterized as “Nativist Ethnology” (Ivy 1995). Given the circumstances that surrounded this emergence, by the time of the Second World War, Japanese folkloristics had not yet fully developed to the status of an established academic discipline, at least not to the extent that it could make a significant contribution to fascism as did its German counterpart. Thus, Japan’s version of folkloristics was not compelled to drastically change its academic orientation following the country’s defeat in the war, even though the timing would have been ideal for such an overhaul. The result was that, until fairly recently, the discipline was allowed to retain its essentialist perspectives and techniques. It is only in the past dozen years or so that folklorists in Japan have started to take an interest in the politically loaded nature of folkloristics and folklorism. But the findings of inquiries into these themes are still not duly absorbed by a majority of folklorists in the country. By international standards, therefore, Japanese folkloristics has been very insensitive to what we can think of as the political nature of the discipline.

Nonetheless, and despite the fact that many traditionalist researchers are still active, it has become all too clear by now that present-day folkloristics should not continue assessing shrine forests simplistically from an essentialist perspective, characterizing them as places of worship handed down uninterruptedly from ancient times. Moreover, given the foregoing observations about the process by which Meiji Jingū’s forest was constructed, it must also be clear that, contrary to what many nature conservationists, natural scientists and classical folklorists assert with their naïve words of enticement, we should not imprudently believe the richness of Nature preserved in shrine forests to be of unquestionably high value.

## Conclusion

At present, Meiji Jingū’s forest is recognized by many people as a space of rich Nature, and its environment is assessed to be of great value. The forest is



highly evaluated as a sacred space for worship inhabited by animistic deities; more recently it is also being extolled as an environmentally precious forest that preserves Nature. As pointed out above, however, the space in which Meiji Jingū currently stands was, up until a little less than 200 years ago, a sacred place for a local folk belief. Less than a century ago, this place was substituted with a forest newly engineered by the national government as a state forest, a space for worship charged with the task of promoting national unification and bolstering a sense of national identity. Currently, the forest still continues to function as a sacred site that boasts the largest number of visits by worshippers in Japan; at the same time, under the influence of a globally expanding environmentalist movement, the same space has additionally taken on a fresh identity as a forest of tremendous importance from the perspective of natural preservation. Many Japanese people, however, remain unaware that the modern Japanese state and its political ideology were not only deeply involved in the process that led to the creation of the valued and abundant forest of this sacred site, but also that this very same ideology led to the systematic destruction of numerous forests throughout the rural areas of the nation.

Shrine forests in Japan function not simply as religious devices. They also continue to function as political devices as well. Given this state of affairs, when dealing with any value that is politically constructed and that is taken for granted by the public, it is imperative for folkloristics to assume a fresh and critical perspective instead of uncritically accepting the conventional views.

## Notes

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- 1 In ancient times, permanent Shinto shrine facilities, such as main shrine buildings, were virtually non-existent; instead a wide range of natural objects, including mountains, rocks and forests, served as the objects of worship inhabited by *kami*

(gods).

- 2 It has been the conventional understanding among scholars of modern Japanese history that the transformation of shrine forests before the Second World War took place primarily because of factors that worked “from the top down” under the influence of the state’s religious policy. This understanding has recently begun to be challenged by a new school of thought that emphasizes factors working “from the bottom up” in the form of the involvement of local elites who, having been influenced by Taishō democracy, gained a greater say in the running of state affairs and committed themselves actively to fascism (Yamaguchi 2005; Azegami 2009). It should be noted, however, that such bottom-up factors were in fact inseparably connected to the state-led political movements of modern Japan; it is reasonable, therefore, to suggest that the transformation of shrine forests was carried out both by the state and people in interactive collusion with each other.
- 3 It is well known that the folklorist Minakata Kumagusu, who was active during the formative period of folkloristics in Japan, opposed this policy and staged a movement against it. Yanagita Kunio, the founding father of folkloristics in Japan, endorsed and gave assistance to the movement. It must be kept in mind, however, that the movement staged by Minakata at the time was neither a political movement nor an environmental conservation movement of the present-day variety; rather it was, by today’s standards, a rather naïve stance against the destruction of Japan’s traditional culture.
- 4 At the time of the Society’s inception, the folklorist Yanagita Kunio added his name to a list of its promoters.
- 5 “Omotesandō” is the avenue that leads up to the main entrance of Meiji Jingū, and “Keyaki” refers to the rows of *keyaki* (Japanese Zelkova) trees that line this approach.
- 6 *Shasō* means “shrine forest.”
- 7 “Beautiful Japan” is an oft-used expression of Abe Shinzo, Prime Minister from 2006 to 2007, and elected again 2012, who prides himself as the champion of conservatism in present-day Japan. Kishi Nobusuke, Abe’s grandfather, was imprisoned and purged from public affairs as a Class-A war crime suspect following World War II. He was later de-purged, became active in reinforcing the conservative political camp, and subsequently served as Prime Minister from 1957 to 1960.

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