



EDITED BY
FABIO RAMBELLI

SPIRITS AND ANIMISM IN CONTEMPORARY JAPAN

THE INVISIBLE EMPIRE

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Contemporary Japan

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BLOOMSBURY ACADEMIC
LONDON • NEW YORK • OXFORD • NEW DELHI • SYDNEY

BLOOMSBURY ACADEMIC
Bloomsbury Publishing Plc
50 Bedford Square, London, WC1B 3DP, UK
1385 Broadway, New York, NY 10018, USA

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First published in Great Britain 2019
Paperback edition first published 2021

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A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data
Names: Rambelli, Fabio, editor.

Title: Spirits and animism in contemporary Japan: the invisible empire /
edited by Fabio Rambelli.

Description: London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2019. |
Includes bibliographical references and index.

Identifiers: LCCN 2018054907 | ISBN 9781350097094 (hardback) |
ISBN 9781350097117 (ebk.) | ISBN 9781350097100 (ePDF)

Subjects: LCSH: Animism—Japan.

Classification: LCC GN471.S55 2019 | DDC 147—dc23
LC record available at <https://lccn.loc.gov/2018054907>

ISBN: HB: 978-1-3500-9709-4
PB: 978-1-3502-0054-8
ePDF: 978-1-3500-9710-0
eBook: 978-1-3500-9711-7

Typeset by Integra Software Services Pvt.Ltd.

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Introduction: The Invisible Empire: Spirits and Animism in Contemporary Japan

Fabio Rambelli

Spirits Everywhere

A striking aspect of contemporary Japanese culture is the pervasive nature of discussions and representations of spirits, generally rooted in vaguely articulated discourses on animism that often exist separately from explicit religious forms. Indeed, to many Japanese their country has a split ontological outlook: on the one hand, there is Japan as the concrete place of their everyday lives; on the other, an invisible realm populated by all kinds of presences: ghosts, spirits, ancestors, gods ... Ancestors' cults (predicated upon the continuing presence, in ectoplasmic form, of deceased family members) have played a central role in Japanese culture and religion for many centuries, even though in recent years they seem to be less relevant for a growing number of Japanese (as discussed by Satō Hiroo in Chapter 1); still, the invisible dimension of reality occupies an important place in literature, the arts, popular culture (cinema, games, manga comics, etc.), and even in representations of Japanese cultural identity.

One of the most successful movies in Japan in recent years was *Kimi no na wa*. 君の名は。 (Your Name.), a visually poetic meditation on natural disasters, cultural nostalgia, spirits, and much more (see Chapters 10 and 11 by Jolyon Thomas and Andrea Castiglioni, respectively). Perhaps, the film is not unrelated to phenomena of spirit apparitions and possession now rampant in areas of Tohoku affected by the tsunami that struck the region on March 11, 2011, and triggered a nuclear disaster in Fukushima (Parry 2017). Before *Kimi no na wa*., in 2015, writer Itō Seikō いと うせいこう published the novel *Sōzō rajio* 想像ラジオ (Imagination Radio), based on the idea of a broken radio, a relic from the tsunami that ended up on a tree and became the unlikely instrument for the dead to speak and tell their stories. Even before March 2011, over many years, other Japanese authors have presented to us portals to a different reality, where people and things function in a different way; Murakami Haruki 村上春樹 is perhaps the most famous author who did so, but his is only one name in a long list. Much better known all over the world is the presence of all kinds of invisible beings in manga, anime, and computer games—the central mass products of what has been called “cool Japan.”

Ideas about spirits lingering around, most likely in the place where their human carriers died, can also be found in mainstream politics. Debates on the controversial Yasukuni Shrine 靖国神社 in central Tokyo, enshrining the Japanese war dead (including A-list war criminals sentenced to death at the Tokyo Trial for crimes against humanity), focus essentially on spirits and how to deal with them (Breen 2008). Prime Minister Abe Shinzō 安倍晋三, in his historical speech at Pearl Harbor on December 28, 2016, repeatedly evoked the presence of “spirits” and “souls” (both Japanese and American) on the bottom of the bay:

I paid a visit to that memorial, the resting place for many souls ... the souls of the servicemen who lie in eternal rest aboard the USS Arizona [...] the seabed [,] is the final resting place for a tremendous number of sailors and marines. Listening again as I focus my senses [...] I can almost discern the voices of those crewmen [...] I cast flowers [...] upon the waters where those sailors and marines sleep. (*Japan Times*, Thursday, December 29, 2016, p. 3)¹

In contrast, President Barack Obama’s speech on the same occasion contained only two references to theology and cosmology, and they are clearly Christian: “we think of the [...] American patriots [...] manning Heaven’s rails for all eternity” and “May God hold the fallen in his everlasting arms” (*Japan Times*, Thursday, December 29, 2016, p. 3). In other words, for President Obama, the dead servicemen are not in Honolulu; they are unmistakably resurrected in Heaven in the fullness of their bodies and are now in God’s embrace; for Prime Minister Abe, in contrast, the *spirits* of Japanese soldiers are at the bottom of Pearl Harbor and there is no other place for them to go.

The image of defeated warriors “living” on the seabed and haunting the waters where they perished has a long history in Japan, dating back at least to medieval stories about the defeated Taira 平 warriors in the waters of Dan no Ura 壇ノ浦 in 1181; their lingering ghostly beings were painted in *ukiyoe* 浮世絵 prints by Utagawa Kuniyoshi 歌川国芳 (1798–1861) in the late Edo period.

Aspects of traditional religiosity such as ancestor cults, and new popular phenomena such as manga and their offshoots in other media, are also related, in a complex symbiosis, to a constellation of other cultural phenomena. These include the study of monsters (*yōkai* 妖怪), which is a flourishing academic field and a successful publishing genre; occultism (in Eastern and Western forms); and tendencies that are harder to define, such as the interest for certain places, called “power spots,” where some kind of spiritual “energy” supposedly concentrates and can be experienced by visitors—interest that has been promoted by the mass media for more than two decades and is now being appropriated by established cult sites such as Shinto shrines and Buddhist temples (see Chapter 6 by Carina Roth). Whereas ancestor cults are traditionally the province of the family and its community, all other phenomena just mentioned are broader and more diffuse; now they are related to tourism as well, as visitors travel to sets of manga and anime, power spots, and even “haunted places” in Kyoto and other cities (as discussed by Andrea De Antoni in Chapter 7). Precisely because of their multiple entanglements and multilayered functions and relations, it is hard to determine at first sight whether these phenomena are manifestations of

“traditional,” ancestral spirituality in their adaptations to contemporary society, or whether they are instead forms of commercial merchandise created by the media for mass consumption—or a mix of the two, or none of the above.

Many scholars, especially in the West, tend to explain this Japanese interest in spirit entities by seeing them as metaphors for a number of things—for tradition, cultural identity, social and personal anxiety, and so forth. This is an important interpretive key, as it involves issues of identity and personal ontology, which in turn fosters a rich artistic production (see Chapter 8 by Rebecca Suter). And yet, in addition to this important aspect, many Japanese typically treat spirits as real (or at least potentially real) presences. While not many Japanese would perhaps subscribe to hard ontological beliefs about the objective existence of these spirit entities, many would be reluctant to simply discard the possibility of their existence. It is then important to pay attention to these claims and try to understand their often implicit ontological positions, without the assumption that us who describe know better than them who experience (or claim to do so).²

The idea that spirits linger around us, and at least in some cases can affect our lives, is of course not new and far from superficial. In fact, this set of ontological assumptions about spirits, especially surprising in a country known for its high degree of secularization, its technological advancement, and social development, is so deeply ingrained in the cultural fabric that it is almost always taken for granted as a typically Japanese form of animism rooted in the most ancient past. It is therefore in order for us to provide a brief outline of Japanese attitudes toward spirit entities, in the broadest sense of the term, because this will help us better understand the situation today.

A Brief History of Japanese Animism

It is obvious that animism refers to a range of different phenomena, entities, representations, beliefs, and practices, ranging from ideas of an animated nature (a sort of panpsychism if not pantheism) to accounts of different types of “spirits” (*tama* 靈 or *tamashii* 魂)—often not clearly distinguished from gods (*kami* 神), ancestors (*senzo* 先祖), ghosts (*yūrei* 幽霊), and monsters (*yōkai* 妖怪). These intangible entities belong to different, but partially overlapping, cultural spheres (religion, folklore, customs, the arts) and have different origins and cultural genealogies. The attempt to conflate and subsume all of them under the general term “animism” is often cause of simplification and confusion.

Most authors, especially in Japan, argue that the belief in the constant presence of spirits (the dead and other beings) in this world is one of the fundamental features of Japanese ancestral religion since the remotest past. Umehara Takeshi 梅原猛, a very influential author of books about Japanese thought, has been very successful in promoting the vision of a worldview in which the living and the dead (the latter, in invisible form) coexist harmoniously with nature, a worldview present-day Japanese supposedly inherited from their tree-loving Jōmon ancestors dating back to 12,000 BCE (Umehara 1989a, b). Almost three decades ago, medieval historian Hosokawa Ryōichi 細川涼一 questioned Umehara’s claims, stressing that no medieval sources support his vision; rather, Hosokawa argued, such ideas about spirits were created

by new religious organizations in the twentieth century (Hosokawa 1991). In fact, numerous new religious movements (NRMs) focus their teachings and ritual systems on interactions with and control of spirits, supposed to exist all around us and capable of affecting the living in various ways. These NRMs include Mahikari 真光, Shinnyoen 真如苑, Kōfuku no kagaku 幸福の科学, and World Mate ワールドメイト. And yet, it would be wrong to dismiss ideas of Japanese spirit beliefs as just another fad created by a few local gurus in search for self-promotion.

A genealogy of spirit beliefs in Japan is not the goal of this volume, which aims rather at formulating a map of discourses and representations of the spirit world in a broad sense in modern and contemporary Japan; still, an awareness of the complex historical background of these representations is crucial.

Many NRMs focusing their activities on interactions with spirits seem to follow a path that began more than a hundred years ago with Deguchi Onisaburō 出口王仁三郎 (1871–1948) at Ōmotokyō 大本教; Onisaburō was deeply influenced by the thought of Kokugaku 国学 (National Learning) author and activist Hirata Atsutane 平田篤胤 (1776–1843). Indeed, Atsutane seems to be the person most responsible for setting up the possibility and defining the contours of the contemporary metaphysics of spirits, with his theorization of an Invisible World (*meikai* 冥界) inhabited by *kami* and the dead, which existed in parallel with the visible world of the living and was ruled by the supreme god Ōkuninushi 大国主 (see Zhong 2017). Atsutane's vision of the invisible became enormously influential, but it was not a radical innovation. As Satō Hiroo discusses in Chapter 1, by the eighteenth century many Japanese had already formed ideas about the dead existing in invisible form in this world. Before that time, the dead were believed to transmigrate to a remote paradisiacal Pure Land (*gokuraku jōdo* 極楽浄土) envisioned in Buddhist terms. Those dead who remained in this world as ghosts were suffering beings that had to be pacified and controlled until they could also move on to the Pure Land.

It is still unclear how ideas about an invisible afterlife in this world developed, especially since they are so distinct from what appears to be the common understanding until the seventeenth century, but changes in social structure together with the growing impact of Chinese Confucianism in the development of ancestor cults in Japan are probably the main factors. Within this context, particularly important were Buddhist funerals, initially diffused all over Japan by Zen monks since the fourteenth century. Buddhist funerals since the beginning were a hybrid formation: they were devised to prevent the dead from going through transmigration so as to reach instead a stable and unchanging existence as semi-divine ancestors called “buddhas” (*hotoke* ほとけ). In the popular imagination, this translated into the image of the dead being forever present not in a remote Pure Land but at specific sites in *this* world: the place where they died, their tomb, and their homes (especially, the Buddhist family altar or *butsudan* 仏壇; see Rambelli 2010). Practices of memorialization centered on the family became the centerpiece of the Tokugawa 徳川 (1600–1868) government's religious policies, and in some form still continue today.

What is the worldview behind these new ancestor cults centered on funerals? In addition to Confucian thought, which, in its standard form, had only a limited impact in Japan, we should also consider the role of the newly imported Chinese literature of the Ming and Qing dynasties, which was widely read in Edo-period Japan and presented a

world inhabited by spirits, ghosts, and ancestors who, their invisible form notwithstanding, were able to intervene directly in human affairs. Hirata Atsutane may have in fact given a theological and ontological grounding, based on his own idiosyncratic understanding of Shinto, to ideas drawn from what was the “pop culture” of his time. In other words, popular culture (literature, theater, the visual arts), and not theological speculation, seems to be one of the pillars of animistic thought that was systematized by Hirata Atsutane.

Indeed, pop culture (in the sense of a mass culture produced mostly for immediate consumption, often incorporating foreign elements and models) plays an important role in the creation and diffusion of discourses about spirits and animism. Media coverage about NRMs and their scandals contributes to spreading a sense that their animistic ideas are in fact fairly standard and common, as Ioannis Gaitanidis shows in his contribution to the volume (Chapter 4). In addition, art forms of all kinds have for centuries given shape to spirits, beginning with Noh dramas evoking dead heroes still present in this world (in almost always invisible form), continuing with Edo-period *ukiyo*e representations of *yōkai* monsters and *yūrei* ghosts, all the way to contemporary Japan, when Murakami Haruki presents portals to a parallel alternative reality (as discussed by Rebecca Suter in Chapter 8), media artists create computer-assisted animistic installations (presented by Mauro Arrighi), and architects adopt ideas about a spiritual landscape to create a new urban image for Kyoto (in Chapter 5 by Ellen Van Goethem). Especially influential are, of course, manga, anime, and computer games, which constitute the repository of images and situations to describe the world to many among the younger generations; Andrea Castiglioni and Jolyon Thomas discuss the role of spirits in recent manifestations of pop culture and the nature of the “animism” they envision.

One of the aspects that emerge from contemporary developments in representations of spirits is their technological nature. This should come as no surprise, as the history of modern science in the West (and elsewhere) is deeply intertwined with spiritualism and scientific attempts to prove (or disprove) the existence of ectoplasmic entities, as Jason Josephson-Storm describes in detail (Chapter 2). In Japan, the combination of the nascent paradigm of modern science with “traditional” knowledge is most clearly detectable in scientist and polymath Minakata Kumagusu’s 南方熊楠 (1867–1941) work, which includes extensive gestures toward a metaphysics of the invisible reality of spirits and other entities (as discussed by Fabio Rambelli in Chapter 3). Even so, one of the reasons Minakata is so popular today is also because “spiritual intellectuals” such as religious scholar Nakazawa Shin’ichi 中沢新一 and others have exploited this “occult” side of his work in bestselling publications;³ in other words, Minakata is not popular today because his thought highlights ancestral Japanese perceptions but because segments of it have become fodder for the contemporary pop culture of spirits and animism.

A Japanese Neo-Animism

However, the sequence connecting Edo-period social transformations, Hirata Atsutane’s theology, NRM’s dealings with the spirit world, and contemporary pop culture is not the whole story of present-day Japanese animism. After all, one would imagine that, after Hirata Atsutane, modernization and its relentless campaigns

against superstition would have eradicated premodern beliefs in invisible agencies, also in light of the emphasis placed on modern Western science, but this is not the case. On the one hand, late nineteenth-century Western science was a combination of rationalism and spiritism, and in that form it was adopted in Japan (as discussed by Josephson-Storm in Chapter 2). Moreover, modernization may have reduced the interest of many Japanese for specific buddhas and *kami*, but massive state propaganda in favor of ancestor worship, emperor worship, and the cult of past heroes and the war dead, promoted a widespread idea that the dead continued to exist in some form, albeit invisible, in this world. It would be an oversimplification, if not an entirely wrong intellectual operation, to collapse and confuse these categories of “spirits”—and especially, to conflate them with “animistic” worship of nature, which was not part of State Shinto and was not encouraged until the end of the Second World War.

In fact, there is another crucial moment for the development of Japanese animism: the period of rapid economic growth in the 1970s and 1980s, followed by a sense of cultural malaise and decline from the early 1990s. It is at that time that animism, as an umbrella term for a disparate set of phenomena, came to be envisioned as a key feature of Japanese culture and spirituality. In this case, mass media, popular culture, members of the academia, a resurgent Shinto movement (under the leadership of the Association of Shinto Shrines or *Jinja honchō* 神社本庁), in combination with some type of resistance against the growing materialism and consumerism of Japanese society and a sense of crisis of the model of development chosen by Japan until then, converged in a proliferation of new discourses and representations of spirits, all subsumed under a supposedly traditional Japanese animism, referred to by the imported term *animizumu* アニミズム. This complex set of factors intersected with the diffusion in Japan of New Age tendencies (see the discussion by Carina Roth in Chapter 6; Prohl 2002, 2007).

As suggested by Hirafuji Kikuko 平藤喜久子, a popular discourse about the animistic nature of Japanese culture emerged in the 1970s (Hirafuji 2017: 43–44); this discourse was followed and amplified by a number of academics, authors (of manga, anime, movies, and TV programs), and journalists. It is perhaps impossible to firmly determine the prime originator of this tendency, but Hirafuji identifies in anthropologist Iwata Keiji 岩田慶治 (1922–2013) the first intellectual to create and develop a successful and influential discourse about Japan’s animism.⁴ Let us follow for a moment Iwata’s trajectory. The beginning of Iwata’s ideas can be found in *Kami no tanjō: genshi shūkyō* カミの誕生-原始宗教 (The Birth of the Gods: Primitive Religion), a book originally published in 1970 (Iwata [1970] 1990). Based on his own fieldwork in various Southeast Asian locations, Iwata traces the features of what he calls “primitive religion” (*genshi shūkyō*) and, especially, the origin and development of ideas about the gods. Interestingly, he distinguishes different types of gods (*kami*) by referring to them in *katakana* (カミ) and in *kanji* (神); the former refers to vague and primitive formulations of the sacred, whereas the latter points to more systematized representations of individualized gods. A turning point occurs with the 1973 book *Sōmoku chūgyo no jinruigaku: Animizumu no sekai* 草木虫魚の人類学-アニミズムの世界 (Anthropology of Plants, Insects, and Fish: The World of Animism) (Iwata [1973] 1991). Again based on fieldwork in Southeast Asia, this book contains references to Stanley J. Tambiah’s work on spirit cults in Thailand (Tambiah 1970) but

adds theoretical considerations, in an approving tone, on E. B. Tylor's (1832–1917) definition of animism, combined with citations from *Shōbōgenzō* 正法眼藏 (the main work of Japanese Zen patriarch Dōgen 道元, 1200–1253), the Zen poet Ryōkan 良寛 (1758–1831), and other Japanese classical texts. In *Sōmoku chūgyo no jinruigaku* we already find some of the later features of Japanese discourses about animism, namely, references to fieldwork in some remote locale in Asia (including Okinawa),⁵ envisioned as preserving elements of the “primitive”—in the sense of pristine and authentic—Asian civilization, interpreted through outdated ethnographical theories and peppered with snippets of Buddhist thought.

A third step in Iwata's development of a discourse on animism takes place in *Kosumosu no shisō: shizen, animizumu, mikkyō kūkan* コスモスの思想—自然・アニミズム・密教空間 (Cosmos Thinking: Nature, Animism, and the Space of Esoteric Buddhism) (Iwata 1976). Here, Iwata expands his perspective to a planetary and cosmic dimension, with references to naturalist Alexander von Humboldt's (1769–1859) later works, Japanese Esoteric Buddhism (*mikkyō* 密教), and anthropological descriptions of nature and the planetary awareness of folkloric cultures. After that book, for thirty years, Iwata developed the same ideas along the same lines: learning from “Asian cosmology,” highlighting differences between simplified concepts of animism and monotheism, emphasizing Esoteric Buddhism (especially, in the version originated in Japan by one of its leading Buddhist thinkers, Kūkai, 774–835) as the key for the emergence of a new “cosmic man” (*uchū ningen* 宇宙人間) with an elevated planetary awareness (Iwata 1989, 1993, 2005). Interestingly, though, Iwata also posits the need for a new kind of animism, which is no longer the form of religiosity of primitive peoples but a condition he defines as “before the primordial gods” (カミ以前)—a condition he sees as free of limits and limitations and open to infinite possibilities (Iwata 1989: 297–299). Years later, he characterized this condition as a multicentered world of infinite deities (*kami* カミ), infinite subjectivities, and deep freedom (*fukai jiyū* 深い自由) (Iwata 2000).

Iwata Keiji was joined in the 1980s by other authors who in turn became very influential in shaping current understandings of Japanese animism. Aramata Hiroshi 荒俣宏 has been relentlessly pursuing occult traditions all over the world, in essays (Aramata 1985) and novels; among the latter, his *Teito monogatari* 帝都物語 about the dark side of Meiji modernization (Aramata 1983) triggered a lasting boom in *fengshui* 風水 and the Onmyōdō 陰陽道 tradition (see the discussion by Ellen Van Goethem in Chapter 5). The previously mentioned Nakazawa Shin'ichi began his career as a Tibetologist and scholar of Esoteric Buddhism (Nakazawa 1983) with a strong interest in poststructuralism; gradually, he turned into the main proponent of a new brand of Japanese cultural identity which extols the virtues of prehistoric Jōmon culture (see Sakamoto and Nakazawa 2015), animism, and more generally an expansive neo-Orientalistic discourse (Nakazawa 1991).

Another author that can be singled out for his influence in shaping contemporary discourse about Japanese animism is environmental archeologist Yasuda Yoshinori 安田喜憲. In a recent book, Yasuda summarizes all the common topoi of a new brand of Japanese animism. He writes that humanity is facing environmental catastrophes and widespread military conflicts caused by agriculturalist and pastoralist monotheistic

peoples. He argues that the civilizational ethos of monotheism requires expansion, which is the direct cause of natural destruction. At the same time, the control of livestock requires force, so pastoralist cultures invented an entire system of transcendent metaphysics and ethics to justify violence and war. In contrast, communities engaging in wet rice cultivation and fishing privilege sustainability, as indicated by the advanced eco-compatible society of Edo-period Japan. Yasuda even proposes a “Transpacific Animist Alliance” (Kan-Taiheiyō animizumu rengō 環太平洋アニミズム連合) as the beginning of a movement to promote animism globally and, for Japan in particular, the creation of a “high tech animist state” (Yasuda 2006).

It is perhaps worth noting that the postwar wave of intellectuals promoting animism, from Umehara Takeshi to Nakazawa Shin’ichi, tended to consist of cosmopolitan left-wing intellectuals, trained in contemporary European philosophy, often with a background in cultural anthropology, and with a strong interest (if not an academic specialization) in environmental issues. Their vision of animism, which took shape during the postwar economic boom (a time of major transformations in Japanese society and the environment, including major environmental disasters such as in Minamata), was also a reaction against a certain model of development based on advanced capitalism and the hegemony of Euro-American discourses and ideologies. These intellectuals were also seeking an alternative society (after the ravages of the Second World War) in an idealized vision of a Japanese remote past, which they thought could be revised as a model for the present: thus, their emphasis on nature, harmony, and peace. However, their work ends up taking a more or less explicitly declared neo-Kokugaku connotation, while reviving (again, in a more or less explicit form) early twentieth-century debates on modernity (as Westernization) and the need to overcome it (Calichman 2008; Harootunian 2002); at a deeper level, these authors appear to share a classical idea of harmonious and homogenous primordial community, ultimately mediated from Daoism (especially, the *Laozi* 老子). A precursor in their idealized vision of primitive Japanese society was artist, critic, and ethnologist Okamoto Tarō 岡本太郎 (1911–1996). Okamoto studied in Paris with Marcel Mauss and knew Pablo Picasso and other leading artists and intellectuals of the time; back in Japan after the Second World War, he formulated his own vision of primitivism, which was not limited to animism but incorporated radical elements he had mediated from Georges Batailles and the Surrealists. Okamoto engaged in a long quest to retrieve what he thought was the primitive, original, and authentic form of Japanese spirituality (see Okamoto 2011).

Thus, these accounts of animism were attempts at creating a different description of Japanese spirituality in ways that were unrelated to wartime State Shinto and its authoritarianism; authors tried to reframe Shinto in a broader context that also included Daoism and Southeast Asian folk traditions. However, these brands of new Japanese animism were also part of a developing discourse, increasingly influential, about the uniqueness of Japan and its radical difference from all other countries (both in Asia and the West). This discourse, known as *Nihonjinron* 日本人論 or *Nihon bunkaron* 日本文化論, gave new forms to early twentieth-century ideas about Japanese exceptionalism. Further, this alternative discourse about the place of animism in Japanese cultural identity, deeply steeped in images of “reverse Orientalism,” merged

with discourses and practices of NRMs, also fueled by intense media campaigns, and later with attempts by Jinja Honchō 神社本庁 (the Association of Shinto Shrines) to rebrand Shinto as an environmental religion based on ancestral and immemorial animistic beliefs (see Rots 2017). As such, and despite their initial progressive stances, many aspects of contemporary animism are inescapably reactionary and dovetail with recent positions put forth by Jinja Honchō.⁶ We can observe the complexity and limitations of discourses on cultural identity related to animism not only in the “spiritual intellectuals” (especially, Prohl 2007; also Shimazono 2004) but also in the contemporary art scene (see the respective chapters by Mauro Arrighi, Chapter 9, and Ellen Van Goethem, Chapter 5). Animism, by creating a space of “hesitation” (Rebecca Suter, Chapter 8) between different orders of reality and different cognitive regimes, offers a consolatory antidote to personal and social issues. As such, animism can be either reactionary or progressive (Jolyon Thomas, Chapter 10), but either way it can be used as a political tool to formulate images of society and national identity.

Animism, popularized by the work of anthropologist E. B. Tylor in the late nineteenth century, was a fraught and problematic term from the beginning. Together with other terms such as fetishism, totemism, and magic—also extensively discussed by patriarchs of anthropology and religious studies such as J. G. Frazer (1854–1941), Émile Durkheim (1858–1917), and André Leroi-Gourhan (1911–1986)—it was used to describe the way in which “primitive peoples” conceptualized their own worldview. In conjunction with two other terms, polytheism and monotheism, it was envisioned as the first phase of human religious development in an evolutionary trajectory from primitive religion to Western post-Reformation Christianity (see Chapter 2 by Josephson-Storm). Overall, theories of animism from the beginning were deeply steeped in colonialism, as most recently reiterated by David Chidester (2018: 23–29). As early historian of religions Raffaele Pettazzoni (1883–1959) noted, animism is for Tylor a “philosophy,” that is, a “theory of personal causes elevated to a general philosophy of man and nature” (Pettazzoni 1929). It is not surprising, then, to see that many discourses on animism in contemporary Japan are essentially intellectual in nature, that is, they are not simply descriptions of beliefs and practices, but normative accounts of idealized visions of Japanese cultural identity and spirituality in general. On the other hand, another aspect of modern animism is the result of what Spyros Papapetros has called “a relationship that always oscillates between the inexplicable revolt perpetrated by objects and the dumb role we insist on assigning to them”—an “ambivalent attitude” resulting from a sense of “‘hostile external environment’ (*die fiendliche Umwelt*)” (Papapetros 2012: 21). This ambivalent attitude about reality resonates with the “hesitation” identified by Rebecca Suter, and perhaps also in recent products of pop culture and the arts (discussed by Ellen Van Goethem, Mauro Arrighi, Jolyon Thomas, and Andrea Castiglioni—Chapters 5, 9, 10, and 11, respectively), in which attempts to re-enchant the world, as it were, are motivated by potential or explicit threats. Furthermore, the original (and never forgotten) connection between animism and other forms of religiosity (polytheism and monotheism) also resonates with a widespread cultural primitivism in modern Japan—a primitivism which was promoted in modern times by artist and ethnologist Okamoto Tarō but has its roots in Edo-period nativism (Kokugaku 国学). Finally, the colonial context for the origin of

ideas about animism also allowed modern Japanese authors to appropriate it in a sort of postcolonial move of cultural assertion (what Mauro Arrighi calls “self-Orientalism”).

Spirit Ontologies

In this context, another issue that emerges, and cannot be avoided, is that of the nature and ontology of the spirits in contemporary Japan. An important aspect of received assumptions about Japanese animism is its homogenous nature. In most treatments of the subject, any and all formulations of spirits are understood as variants of the same belief that everything in nature is animated. In reality, however, even a cursory look at the chapters in this book will make clear that Japanese animism is anything but a single, homogeneous discourse. In Japan, as in the rest of the world, there are several kinds of animism, and what stands out is precisely the absence of a unified ontology about spirits and their agency. Thus, films and anime discussed by Castiglioni and Thomas, Arrighi’s media installations, Suter’s literary texts, Van Goethem’s *fengshui*-inspired architects, Minakata Kumagusu’s metaphysics of spirits discussed by Rambelli, De Antoni’s presences, and Roth’s enchanted nature have very little in common in terms of animism: the ontology, agency, and representations of spirits and energies they imagine are very different, if not even in contradiction with each other.

Jolyon Thomas in his contribution to this book proposes to distinguish among three modalities of animism, each with different ethical and political vectors, which he describes as “pejorative,” “recuperative,” and “obscurantist.” Typically, outside observers tend to consider animism a negative phenomenon, and are thus bearers of the pejorative position. For Japanese insiders, on the other hand, it is often difficult to distinguish between “recuperative” and “obscurantist” positions, because both are often intertwined with each other; as my previous discussion of neo-animism made clear, a progressive approach at rediscovering positive values (peace, harmony, ecology, etc.) in more or less imaginary past worldviews (“recuperative” animism) often dovetail with nationalistic and exclusivistic assertions of cultural superiority (“obscurantist” animism). Thus, it becomes essential to discuss what people actually mean when they speak of animism. As Ioannis Gaitanidis stresses, general and oversimplified labels cover a number of different theologies, cosmologies, and practices, which came to be as a result of multiple cultural and intellectual trajectories.

Early in Japanese modernity, Inoue Enryō 井上円了 (1858–1919) and, especially, Minakata Kumagusu (presented by Rambelli in Chapter 3) developed sophisticated ontologies of the invisible and its denizens. Later, leaders of NRMs proposed their own visions, but the media—and, often, academic authors as well—have continued to stubbornly rely on a vague and simplified definition of animism as a worldview in which spirits of various kinds abide in the landscape, with a privileged position given to family ancestors and to malevolent forces. These entities have an important role in contemporary Japanese society that cannot be downplayed, mitigated, or dismissed.

To the best of my knowledge, no systematic and comprehensive study exists on the ontology of spirits in contemporary Japan—its metaphysical foundations, theological

implications, historical roots, and connections with present cultural formations and concerns.⁷ I remember well a conversation I had years ago with a respected Japanese scholar of religion (who is also the head priest of an important Shinto shrine), in which I asked him if he really believed in the existence of the *kami*. He replied that “you Westerners always ask about belief and existence; I think it is necessary to distinguish between phenomenological existence and ontological existence.” At the time, that sounded like a sophisticated way to avoid giving me a clear personal answer. Today, I think there might be some value in that approach. After all, the ontological existence of anything (not only deities) is independent of any individual’s personal beliefs; on the other hand, the phenomenological existence of spirit-like entities can be experienced also by people who don’t believe in them, as Andrea De Antoni’s chapter makes clear. Moreover, experience of spirits’ existence can also be mediated by particular places (as discussed in the chapters by Roth and Van Goethem) and enhanced by media coverage and intersubjective discourses.

The presence of animistic and spirit-related themes in Japanese contemporary popular culture (also and especially outside of strictly religious discourses—and this is a point I would like to emphasize) is so pervasive that it is often taken for granted as an obvious feature of Japanese culture and spirituality. As a consequence, little is articulated about the nature of spirits and the characteristics of the multiple forms of animism that give them shape. This book is an attempt to redress this situation by looking at various ways in which spirits are evoked, experienced, and described. As such, it aims to contribute, in critical ways, to the growing arena of studies animated by an ontologically oriented approach about animism and the “agency of Intangibles” broadly understood (see Blanes and Espírito Santo 2014; for Japan in particular, Jensen, Ishii, and Swift 2016). Within this theoretical context, it may prove productive to direct our critical attention to fetishism—another fraught term in anthropology and religious studies, recuperated in its original definition as an agency attributed to material objects (see Morris and Leonard 2017; for a different approach, Latour 2011)—also in order to disentangle discourses on Japanese animistic spirituality from its disembodied form toward an enhanced attention to materiality. Often, in actual practice of Japanese religiosity, the intangible agency (often described as animism) lies primarily in material entities—particular landscapes, objects, and artifacts—and not in spirits supposedly inhabiting them.

The Chapters in This Book

This book is an attempt to take seriously not only the modes of representations and cultural meanings of spirits, but also and especially the metaphysical implications of contemporary Japanese ideas about spirits. The chapters offer analyses of specific cases of “animistic attitudes” in which the presence of “spirits” and spiritual forces is alleged, and attempt to trace cultural genealogies of those attitudes. In particular, they present various modes of representation of spirits (in contemporary art, architecture, visual culture, cinema, literature, the natural environment) while at the same time addressing their underlying intellectual and religious assumptions.

Chapter 1 by Satō Hiroo is an account of the transformations in Japanese visions of the afterlife and the status of the dead. Satō challenges received ideas of continuity by showing the vast differences in the ontology and cosmology of the dead and the afterlife separating the medieval from the early modern period. He also focuses on recent changes that jeopardize received practices of memorialization, such as “nature funerals” (*shizensō* 自然葬), in which the ashes of the dead are scattered in mountains or at sea, and “handy memorials” (*temoto kuyō* 手元供養), in which they are fused inside jewelry ornaments to be carried by the living (of course, both phenomena are not unique to Japan). Satō also draws our attention to existing regional traditions of memorialization, such as pictures showing the dead in everyday situations in their imagined condition in the afterlife. This chapter alerts us from the beginning to the existence of several discourses and practices about an invisible dimension of reality, discourses and practices that are far from static but change according to social and cultural determinations.

Next, Jason Josephson-Storm addresses the paradox of a highly developed, technological society such as Japan's that is also deeply enamored with and enthralled by spirits. He points out that in the Meiji period, when the modernization of Japan based on Western ideas began, the West itself was far from stripped of its belief in spirits, magic, and an animated nature. This chapter discusses Japanese portrayals of an enchanted Europe, and then provides a genealogy of European theorizing about fetishism and animism. Josephson-Storm concludes by showing how in the process of theorizing “primitive” civilizations Europeans were really describing themselves. The same attitude is still adopted by many authors in contemporary Japan, who, when writing about disappearing folk practices, Okinawan religion, Asian tribal religion, or the Jōmon people, are really trying to provide an idealized description of themselves.

Fabio Rambelli's chapter deals with the work of Minakata Kumagusu, one of the leading Japanese intellectuals between the end of the nineteenth and the early twentieth centuries. Not limiting himself to the physical world, Minakata also tried to explain the existence of spirits and other ectoplasmic entities by outlining a multilayered ontology of reality based on different epistemological systems—what has recently been termed “Minakata mandala.” In order to construct this ontology, Minakata brought together a serious understanding of classical Buddhist philosophy, deep scientific knowledge, and awareness of the Japanese folk tradition. This chapter thus presents various interventions by Minakata as forming one of the most systematic attempts to outline an ontology of spirits in modern Japan.

Next, Ioannis Gaitanidis addresses the role of the media in another important field, that of public perceptions of new religious movements (NRMs) and their animistic positions. Through a multipronged approach involving historical developments, academic studies, and discourse analysis of media coverage, Gaitanidis shows the crucial role of the media in spreading a sense that animism is part of ancestral Japanese culture while at the same time they criticize NRM's egregious behaviors. In other words, unusual occurrences of manipulation, money scandals, and violence are chastised while animistic beliefs are not only condoned but even normalized. Many scholars also seem to follow this attitude, which is intrinsically paradoxical, as it ends up providing widespread support and recognition to the worldview of NRMs.

Ellen Van Goethem explores the urban landscape and architectural interventions in it, based on the idea that Kyoto is a city animated by invisible agencies. Inspired by the belief that the city was designed and built according to the core principles of Chinese site divination (popularly known as *fengshui*, Jp. *fūsui* 風水), it is now generally assumed that Kyoto is vitalized by the invisible flow of *qi* 氣 (Jp. *ki*) and protected by the guardian spirits of the four directions. However, Van Goethem shows that such widely spread assumptions about the city actually emerged in the 1990s, when a *fengshui* boom gripped Japan, and when a number of people and organizations began to find ways to justify and promote the building of the new Kyoto Station. Architects such as Iozaki Arata 磯崎新 also incorporated *fengshui* in their creations as a way to connect their work to an imagined traditional past. This is a clear instance of new phenomena trying to find legitimization in elements from a long-forgotten ancient past.

Carina Roth continues the discussion on enchanted landscapes by focusing on recent developments in Japanese religiosity that give special spiritual value to certain places known as “power spots” (*pawā supotto* パワースポット) and to forests as agents of healing. The idea of “power spots,” sites that are considered to be receptacles of spiritual energy, was imported in Japan around the mid-1980s, most likely following New Age developments in the United States. The rich and luxuriant forests of Japan have also become the sites for “forest therapy” (Jp. *shinrin'yoku* 森林浴, lit. “forest bathing”), a medical treatment officially sanctioned by the Japanese government that has quickly spread abroad. Either way, the idea that something intangible, “spiritual,” can be acquired at specific places is part of a more general concern for a so-called “invisible world” (*me ni mienai sekai* 目に見えない世界), inhabited by numerous spirit agencies—what has been called “diffuse spirituality,” in which mass media have been playing a crucial role in their diffusion.

Andrea De Antoni develops arguments on the ontology of spirits by an investigation of recent cases of spirit possession (*tsuki* 憑き, *hyōi* 憑依) as it is treated at Kenmi Shrine 賢見神社 in Shikoku. This is a way to understand the concrete impact of spirit beliefs on the bodies of individuals affected by spirits and their social environment, and, at the same time, a window from which to glimpse ontological positions on spirits. Something that one tends to miss in the pervasive literature on spirit beings is the fact that they are not mere figures in tales and visual representations, but have agency of their own: they reside in certain places and in some cases affect humans, mostly by possession. De Antoni follows here the recent “ontological turn” in anthropology in an understanding of spirits based on their embodied nature and affective dimension.

In her chapter, Rebecca Suter shifts our attention to modern Japanese fiction, one of the most thought-provoking and elusive features of which is its portrayal of the realm of the uncanny. This of course is not unique to Japan; and the fantastic genre as a whole is normally considered to be one of the products of secularization in Europe and elsewhere. The spirits that populate Japanese literature (as well as film, manga, and anime)—whether ghosts from the past that keep haunting the present or liminal monsters that exist simultaneously inside and outside “our world”—offer a unique standpoint from which to reflect on contemporary Japan. By focusing on case studies drawn from works by Natsume Sōseki 夏目漱石 (1867–1916), Akutagawa Ryūnosuke 芥川龍之介 (1892–1927), and Murakami Haruki, Suter identifies what she calls a

“fantastic hesitation” that prevents the authors from choosing a settled and defined position (be it rational or supernatural, psychological or spiritual, personal or political) to explain the reality they portray. This hesitation, perhaps gesturing toward a sense of undecidability of reality, seems to be one of the main gateways to the spirit world.

Mauro Arrighi shows that animism functions as one of the main creative sources for the evolving media arts scene of Japan, especially computer-aided performances and interactive installations. After a discussion of works by artists such as Hayakawa Takahiro 早川貴泰, Shinto priest Tanahashi Nobuyuki 棚橋信之, the AEO Group, Tabei Masaru 田部井勝, Ogawa Hideaki 小川秀明, and Hisako Kroiden Yamakawa 山川 K. 尚子, combined with interviews with them, Arrighi argues that their understanding of Shinto and Buddhist animism is closer to what is found in pop culture than to standard beliefs and modes of worship. Arrighi highlights the existence of a widespread and uncritical belief that objects, especially technological devices, have a soul and the often explicit role of self-Orientalism in their creators’ works, and explains the connections between these two elements.

Jolyon Thomas revisits the world of Japanese anime, a world replete with spirits. The chapter examines the characteristics of the anime medium that lend themselves to the portrayal of eerie phenomena before examining spirits as mediums for social connection and reconciliation in some recent anime. Whereas many professional observers of Japan prefer to view anime as a repository of Japan’s “animistic” heritage, Thomas argues that the putative connection between the spirits of anime and autochthonous *kami* veneration is tenuous. Thomas provides a threefold typology of animism, which he calls, respectively, “pejorative,” “recuperative,” and “obscurantist”—all underscored by what he calls the “specter of the ‘Real Animist,’” a silent and invisible category that pervades most contemporary discourses about Japanese animism.

Finally, Andrea Castiglioni discusses other instances of shifting and multiplying ideas of the spirits and the invisible through a close reading of recent blockbuster movies such as *Your Name*. and *Shin-Gojira*. Against the grain of dominant discourses about spirits and animism, Castiglioni sees a growing tendency to focus on violent spirit entities (*araburugami* 荒ぶる神), rather than benign, Totoro-like figures. Perhaps more significantly, the traditional symbolism associated with the countryside and the big city is questioned and reversed: the countryside is no longer the idyllic and idealized heart of Japanese traditional culture, but a boring place subject to disasters; it is the metropolis that has the power to solve those disasters and keep Japan alive. This novel attitude seems to gesture toward the emergence of a new national identity for Japan as a strong and resilient country that is uniquely able to control the unpredictability of nature and of malignant invisible agencies. It will have to be seen whether this tendency, a positive embrace of dystopia, as it were, will continue to grow.

The “Invisible Empire”

Finally, the title of this volume refers not too subtly to that of Roland Barthes’s *Empire of Signs* (Barthes 1982), a sophisticated exercise in what we could call “passionate Orientalism” or, perhaps, a “reverse reverse Orientalism”—that is, the acceptance in a