

Scenes of Temples and Shrines: The Religious Sensibility of the Japanese People as Seen by Lafcadio Hearn

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Since the Meiji period, there have been numerous writings about Japan and chronicles of stays and studies written by foreigners who traveled to the country. Among them, the works of Lafcadio Hearn (1850–1904) must be primarily mentioned as the one still worth reading.

Hearn's naturalized name, Koizumi Yakumo, may be more familiar to some readers. He is probably best known as the author of "Yuki-Onna," "The Story of Mimi-nashi Hoichi," and "Mujina." While these stories have become known as Japanese ghost stories, they are actually works based on old Japanese legends and folk tales, which were uncovered and retold by Hearn over a century ago.

Hearn was unconstrained by Western supremacist prejudices, common for individuals during the second part of the 19th century. He wrote about Japanese customs, culture, folklore, and religion with excellent observation and an increasingly sympathetic eye, depicting the lives and feelings of ordinary people in the Meiji period. He further attempted to highlight the wonders of Japanese culture by skillfully weaving local legends, folk be-

liefs, and customs into his works.

Hearn was born on the Greek island of Lefkada (Lefkas) to an Irish–British military doctor and a woman from the Greek island where the British Army was stationed. However, he was separated from his parents at a young age and spent his childhood with relatives in Ireland. Later, he traveled to the United States alone and worked as a newspaper reporter in Cincinnati and New Orleans. He also stayed in the French West Indies and published a travelogue about his experiences there. After reading an English translation of the *Koji-ki*, he developed an interest in Japan and traveled to the country at the age of 39. Soon after, he was employed as an English teacher at the Shimane Prefectural Common Middle School in Matsue, followed by the Fifth Senior High School in Kumamoto, and then at Tokyo Imperial University and Waseda University. During this time, the number of books he published reached double digits. His works included *Glimpses of Unfamiliar Japan* (1894), *Out of the East: Reveries and Studies in New Japan* (1895), *Kokoro: Hints and Echoes of Japanese Inner Life* (1896), *In*

Ghostly Japan (1899), *Kwaidan: Stories and Studies of Strange Things* (1904), and *Japan: An Attempt at Interpretation* (1904). He married Koizumi Setsu in Matsue and became a naturalized citizen. In 1904, he passed away in his house located in Nishi-Okubo, Tokyo.

Hearn had an interest in folklore and focused on common people; he explored things in a manner not restricted by modern Western values. Hearn's roots in Greece and Ireland (two places on the frontier of the 19th-century Western world and connected to the ancient, pre-Christian world), his longing for his Greek mother and rebellion against his father who divorced her, and his exposure to Black society in the United States and Caribbean Creole culture, appear to have nurtured the abovementioned qualities. The fact that Hearn spent his first days not in Tokyo but in a provincial city where old cultural customs that predated Japan's westernizing and civilizing project remained strong, defined his experience in Japan.

Glimpses of Unfamiliar Japan (1894) is Hearn's first book written about Japan, which is centered around Yokohama immediately after Hearn visited Japan, as well as the Matsue and Izumo cities, where he spent more than a year. The preface states the book's aim, i.e., elucidating the spiritual climate of Japan that is unknown outside the country. The book is highly regarded for capturing the atmosphere and landscapes of Meiji Japan, as well as local people's lives.

The incipit of "The Chief City of the Province of the Gods" (in *Glimpses of Unfamiliar Japan*), which depicts a morning in Matsue, is probably the most well-known passage in Hearn's writings.

The first of the noises of a Matsue day

comes to the sleeper like the throbbing of a slow, enormous pulse exactly under his ear. It is a great, soft, dull buffet of sound—like a heartbeat in its regularity, in its muffled depth, in the way it quakes up through one's pillow so as to be felt rather than heard. It is simply the pounding of the ponderous pestle of the kometsuki, the cleaner of rice—a sort of colossal wooden mallet with a handle about fifteen feet long horizontally balanced on a pivot.... The measured muffled echoing of its fall seems to me the most pathetic of all sounds of Japanese life; it is the beating, indeed, of the Pulse of the Land.

Then the boom of the great bell of Tokoiji the Zenshu temple, shakes over the town; then come melancholy echoes of drumming from the tiny little temple of Jizo in the street Zaimokucho, near my house, signalling the Buddhist hour of morning prayer. And finally the cries of the earliest itinerant venders begin— 'Daikoyai! ka-buya-kabu!' —the sellers of daikon and other strange vegetables. 'Moyaya-moya!'—the plaintive call of the women who sell little thin slips of kindling-wood for the lighting of charcoal fires.

At dawn, Hearn hears and feels the sound of the kometsuki rice pestle. The sound seems to come from the depths of the earth through his pillow, and Hearn believes that it is the sound that supports Japanese life from below, the very pulse of the land.

Hearn is not only feeling that he is in a rice farming country where rice is the staple food. He probably recalls that the character for pestle, kine, is also found in the compound kitsuki. He writes that the old name of Izumo-

taisha shrine is Kitsuki-taisha, “as Izumo is especially the province of the gods... so is Kitzuki of Izumo especially the city of the gods, and its immemorial temple the earliest home of the ancient faith, the great religion of Shinto” (“Kitzuki: The Most Ancient Shrine of Japan,” *Glimpses of Unfamiliar Japan*). Therefore, the sound of the pestle, here likened to, and superimposed on, the pulse of the earth, heard in Izumo’s Matsue (“the province of the gods,” a place connected to Japan’s ancient mythological world) is, so to speak, a sound symbolizing Hearn’s idea of Shinto. However, after the Shinto sound, Hearn hears the great bell of a Buddhist temple, followed by the sound of drumming from the little temple of Jizo. This is subsequently followed by the voices of people coming and going, selling various goods. Hearn then opens the shoji and describes the spacious scenery of the morning sky, the mountains on the other side of the river, and Lake Shinji. He hears the sound of people clapping their hands together as they worship the morning sun on the riverbank, which is soon replaced by the sound of the geta sandals of people crossing O-hashī, the large bridge. The day’s activities begin.

In the transitory hour between night and morning, Hearn gives his religion-related thoughts free reign, sensing the local presence of Shinto and Buddhism. This presence is not seen with the eyes, but heard through his auditory sense—kometsuki, temple bells, Jizō temple drumming, people’s clapping hands, and so on. He is seeking to intuitively comprehend the entirety of what emerges from the depths through not his vision but his sense of hearing, listening closely to the sounds around him. Among this unfolding of sensations, next comes the sound of the geta

of people coming and going and voices of people selling local goods. In other words, for Hearn, the soul realm of religion and scenes of people’s daily lives are naturally linked, and his attention is directed toward religious things that are rooted in and support people’s daily lives.

In this manner, reading Hearn’s writings is a nostalgic reminder of Meiji Japan. However, this is not all. It is refreshing to come across passages that pose fundamental questions that extend to the present day. For example, in “Jizo” (*Glimpses of Unfamiliar Japan*), which Hearn wrote about visiting temples around Yokohama at the beginning of his visit to Japan, he states as follows:

What has most impressed me is the seeming joyousness of popular faith. I have seen nothing grim, austere, or self-repressive. I have not even noted anything approaching the solemn. The bright temple courts and even the temple steps are thronged with laughing children, playing curious games; and mothers, entering the sanctuary to pray, suffer their little ones to creep about the matting and crow. The people take their religion lightly and cheerfully: they drop their cash in the great alms-box, clap their hands, murmur a very brief prayer, then turn to laugh and talk and smoke their little pipes before the temple entrance. Into some shrines, I have noticed the worshippers do not enter at all; they merely stand before the doors and pray for a few seconds, and make their small offerings. Blessed are they who do not too much fear the gods which they have made! (“Jizo”)

For Japanese people, this is just an ordinary scene. However, Hearn was surprised by the brightness of this religious place. Prayers and worship are brief, people are chatting and laughing with each another, and children's laughter arounds. According to Hearn, there is none of the solemnness that one would expect to find at a place of religion. He also marvels at the "joyousness of popular faith" as a relaxed form of religiosity, free from grimness and self-repression.

Of course, others have also noticed how people worship at temples in Japan. For example, Isabella Bird (1831–1904), a British traveler who visited Sensō-ji in 1878, left the following impressions:

There, too, they pray, if that can be called prayer which frequently consists only in the repetition of an uncomprehended phrase in a foreign tongue, bowing the head, raising the hands and rubbing them, murmuring a few words, telling beads, clapping the hands, bowing again, and then passing out or on to another shrine to repeat the same form.... Merchants in silk clothing, soldiers in shabby French uniforms, farmers, coolies in "vile raiment," mothers, maidens, swells in European clothes, even the samurai policemen, bow before the goddess of mercy. Most of the prayers were offered rapidly, a mere momentary interlude in the gurgle of careless talk, and without a pretence of reverence; but some of the petitioners obviously brought real woes in simple "faith." (Letter 5, *Unbeaten Tracks in Japan*, 1880)

Bird was born in Britain as a minister's daughter and engaged in missionary activities

as a devout Christian. According to her impression, the hustle and bustle of Asakusa's temple is different from serious faith. While there are many visitors, the prayers are simple and brief, and everyone is engaged in light chat. The text suggests that she must have had a bitter expression on her face, seeing no piety. Moreover, many of the Western people at the time would have sympathized with the words of Bird, which are the opposite of Hearn's, to varying degrees.

Basil Hall Chamberlain (1850–1935), a Briton who lived in Japan for 38 years during the Meiji period, wrote in *Things Japanese* (1890) that a Japanese person, when "asked by a European traveller what their religion was—whether Buddhist or Shinto," would show a "look of blank perplexity," not understanding "what the enquirer was driving at" ("Religion"). He highlighted Japanese people's unique and, in his opinion, vague approach to religion. Chamberlain was a notable scholar of Japan who translated the *Kojiki* and Japanese waka poems into English and taught linguistics at the Tokyo Imperial University's Faculty of Letters. Chamberlain wrote the following about Shinto:

"Shintō, which means literally 'the Way of the Gods,' is the name given to the mythology and vague ancestor and nature-worship which preceded the introduction of Buddhism into Japan, and which continues to exist in a modified form.... we would here draw attention to the fact that Shintō, so often spoken of as a religion, is hardly entitled to that name... It has no set of dogmas, no sacred book, no moral code." He also wrote, "Shinto had no root in itself — being a thing too empty and jejune to influence the hearts of men," and "The Shintō temple (yashiro or jinja) preserves in a slightly elaborated form the type

of the primeval Japanese hut,... the Shintō temple is thatched,... the Shintō temple is plain and empty, while the Buddhist is highly decorated and filled with religious properties (“Shinto,” *Things Japanese*).

Regarding Ise Jingu Shrine, he wrote, “It may be a question whether the ordinary tourist would be repaid by going out of his way to visit the temples of a creed which binds itself to the severest simplicity---white pine-wood and a thatch of rushes, no carvings, no paintings, no images, nothing but an immense antiquity” (“I-se,” *Things Japanese*), and the “disappointed tourist” might conclude “there is nothing to see” (*A Handbook for Travellers in Japan*, 6th ed., London, 1901, 302.)

We can observe a shared perception among these Westerners that Shinto’s “vague ancestor and nature-worship” is too simple, that nothing should be considered religion, and that shrine architecture is no exception.

In response to such ideas regarding Shinto, Hearn wrote in his record of his journey to Izumo-taisha, “Shinto has no philosophy, no code of ethics, no metaphysics; and yet, by its very immateriality, it can resist the invasion of Occidental religious thought as no other Orient faith can.” He also wrote, “Indeed the best of our scholars have never been able to tell us what Shinto is. To some it appears to be merely ancestor-worship, to others ancestor-worship combined with nature-worship; to others, again, it seems to be no religion at all,” “Doubtless the difficulty of explaining Shinto has been due simply to the fact that the sinologists have sought for the source of it in books,” and “But the reality of Shinto lives not in books, nor in rites, nor in commandments, but in the national heart, of which it is the highest emotional religious expression” (“Kitzuki: The Most Ancient Shrine of Japan,”

Glimpses of Unfamiliar Japan).

Hearn’s rebuttal was an impactful and skillful argument against Chamberlain and others who valued Christianity. However, what does “lives not in books, ... but in the national heart” imply? What exactly lives, and in what manner does it do so? This counterargument is vague.

Hearn, therefore, takes various scenes and spaces in Japan and depicts them in succession to offer readers a sense of what lives and breathes there. He attempts to capture and show Japan’s spiritual climate as the totality of many spaces that are not doctrines or ideas. Matsue’s morning scene, which we explored earlier, is one of them.

Among these spaces, Hearn’s favorite was temple and shrine precincts.

During the daytime, these places are crowded with pilgrims who seem to enjoy themselves. On summer nights, they are the site of the Bon-Odori dance. When Hearn visited a small temple on the San’ in coast, he witnessed people singing and dancing in its precincts lit by the moonlight. Beside it was a temple cemetery, and Hearn thought about how Obon is a festival for the dead. He then portrayed the fantastical nature of this space, where people are dancing along with the ancestral spirits who have returned (“Bon-Odori,” *Glimpses of Unfamiliar Japan*).

It is also within the precincts of temples and shrines that children gather and play. According to Hearn, the difference between the gardens of Christian churches in the West and gardens of temples and shrines in Japan is whether one can hear the voices of children playing (*Japan: An Attempt at Interpretation*, 1904). The world of “The Nun of the Temple of Amida” (*Kokoro: Hints and Echoes of Japanese Inner Life*, 1896), an impressive little

story, is supported by the scenery that unfolds in the temple grounds. Every day, children from the village play with the Bikuni (i.e., the Nun) while a stone statue of the deity Jizo looks on. The Bikuni, who took vows after losing her infant child, is healed by interacting with children. When the children eventually grow up, they go off into the painful real world, but their children will come to play again. From generation to generation, the temple's precincts are a peaceful space of salvation for children. Here, too, Hearn superimposes present children and traces of children of the past, now gone, as echoes of playful voices in the same space.

Hearn was also fascinated by Japanese religious beliefs and practices surrounding trees and landscapes of sacred trees. For example, "The Story of Aoyagi" in *Kwaidan: Stories and Studies of Strange Things* (1904) is the story of a human being and the spirit of a willow tree who are united through poetry, and "Jiu-Roku-Zakura" is the story of a human being and an old cherry tree who are united through rebirth.

Hearn depicts shrines as spaces surrounded by trees that are deeply linked to people. He describes the charm of the paths leading to the shrines as follows.

Of all peculiarly beautiful things in Japan, the most beautiful are the approaches to high places of worship or of rest,---the Ways that go to Nowhere and the Steps that lead to Nothing

Perhaps the ascent begins with a sloping paved avenue, half a mile long, lined with giant trees, stone monsters guard the way at regular intervals. Then you come to some great flight of steps ascending through green gloom to a terrace umbraged by older and vaster trees; and oth-

er steps from thence lead to other terraces, all in shadow. And you climb and climb and climb till at last, beyond a gray torii, the goal appears: a small, void, colorless wooden shrine,---a Shinto miya. The shock of emptiness thus received, in the high silence and the shadows, after all the sublimity of the long approach, is very ghostliness itself.

Here, Hearn states that the approaches to shrines are "the Steps that lead to Nothing," and that when "a small, void, colorless wooden shrine,---a Shinto miya" appears at the end, people, engulfed by the shock of emptiness, are surprised. In other words, he witnesses the approach to a shrine as a space where people enveloped in mother nature, could discard all artificiality and turn into nothingness step-by-step, becoming one with nature, and sublimating. Hearn states that what can be felt in such a shrine space is "ghostliness itself."

Hearn's description here can also be read as an argument against Chamberlain, who regards the simplicity of shrine architecture as a flaw. Hearn approvingly notes that Shinto eschews doctrines and representations---the scriptures, sacred images, etc., that according to Chamberlain are the prerequisites of religion---as artificial creations, and instead embraces being with the trees of the forest and simplicity. He witnesses the relationship with nature as an important part of religion. He depicts the process by which humans unite with the ancient spiritual quality of nature residing in the gigantic tree, that is, with the essence of Life. This is something certainly different from the supposed "nature-worship." The shrines he depicts here are not just roofed places of worship. Nor is nature here regarded as an unapproachably lofty object of

faith.

As mentioned above, Chamberlain states that Shinto comprises “vague ancestor and nature-worship.” In other words, according to him, two elements are worshiped: “ancestors” and “nature.”

However, readers realize that there is something in Hearn’s temple precincts and shrine paths that transcend the difference between ancestor-worship and nature-worship. In the precincts, the spirits of the dead watch over the children playing in the afternoon, and on summer nights, they are found alongside dancers. As one climbs up a shrine’s path, old trees envelop them into the ancient spiritual quality of nature. The trees and spirits of living creatures in village forests interact with humans and occasionally connect with them.

In other words, Hearn consistently depicts the connection between humans in this world and various invisible spirits. He describes the sense that humans and nonhuman spiritual forces exist and come together in the same space. These spiritual forces, or the essential quality of all Lives, include from the deceased of past generations to animals, trees, and flowers, as well as nonhuman transcendent beings. People are surrounded by this essence of Life—that takes form as the so-called “eight million gods” —and feel they are in the presence of these multitudinous spiritual forces: Hearn thought that this was Japan’s spiritual climate and religious sensibility.

When we discover the foundation of our existence in this grand connection of life in space and time, we can no longer regard the dogmas, thought systems, and rules of the supposed “religion” as absolutes. These are just forms of linguistic religious expression. In other words, these doctrines can also be accepted if they decorate only the surface of

the underlying Japanese religious sensibility. This makes it easy to accept occasional changes in the surface layer or multiple surfaces coexisting without becoming attached to one. As a result, when people visit shrines and temples, they smile “lightly and cheerfully” in a manner that surprised Hearn in Yokohama. Mythology, Shinto, Buddhism, and folk beliefs all blend into one polyphonic resonant space, as depicted in Hearn’s description of the morning in Matsue.

Chamberlain and Bird discussed the vagueness of Japanese religions based on the assumption that people can only serve one religion’s doctrine. This characteristic of Japanese religion continues till the present day. When religious tolerance is preached, people generally converse about recognizing other religions different from one’s own, for example, a multi-religious society where churches and mosques coexist without conflict. However, Hearn thought that religious tolerance and the coexistence of multiple religions had already become rooted in people’s minds in Japan. Therefore, Hearn was fascinated by the Japanese religious sensibility that envelops and sustains people from the ground, as though rooted in the earth of nature and free of ideology; he used his five senses to depict those various scenes in his excellent writing.

At the end of the quote from “Jizo,” Hearn writes, “Blessed are they who do not too much fear the gods which they have made!” Christianity’s God, Islam’s Allah, Buddhism’s Buddha, and Japan’s eight million gods are all human creations. In view of today’s world, which is plagued with religious terrorism, Hearn’s comments hold much more weight. The ancient Japanese mind that Hearn discovered was, we may say, truly “blessed.”