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Lecture 8
The Sacred, the Empire, and the Signs
Religion, Semiotics, and Cultural Identity in Japanese History

In this lecture we examine the impact of premodern Buddhist semiotics on modern Japanese culture. We will see that Japanese discourses on cultural identity are largely based on certain assumptions of a semiotic character. In particular, the Japanese are considered to be "directly" in touch with nature and reality—and such supposed "directness" actually defies semiosis as an inferential act of interpretation. As a consequence, Japanese are described as "sincere," "straightforward," "honest," and "incapable to lie." It is easy to see in these stereotypes a reversal of Western Orientalistic and imperialistic stereotypes circulating between the second half of nineteenth century and the end of World War II on the "dishonest" and "treacherous" Oriental. What concerns us here, though, is the fact that the Japanese anti-stereotype is based on an elaborate semiotic theory (albeit one that de facto denies semiosis). In this lecture, I will attempt to show that such a semiotics is more or less related, by way of multiple transformations, to the semiotics of esoteric Buddhism we have discussed in the previous lectures. In the present lecture I will also indicate some of the connections between semiotics, political ideology, and cultural identity.

In *The Empire of Signs* Roland Barthes describes his imaginary "Japan" as a veritable semiotic paradise, in which meaning has been finally "exempted" and neutralized and the signifier rules sovereign freed from the authority of all metaphysical Centers. However, the title of the book itself seems to suggest a connection between signs and the imperium—a connection between the ways in which Japanese culture is conceptualized as centered on the imperial institutions and Japan's semiotic peculiarity. In other words, we can detect a continuity between semiotic ideas and practices and a certain vision of the Japanese imperial system. This lecture expands on Barthes's intuition by attempting a sort of genealogy of such a connection. I shall show that throughout Japanese history, several semiotic notions were harnessed to describe Japanese identity; often, these semiotic notions were directly related to a definition of the role of the emperor. It appears that modern ideas about Japanese uniqueness are transformations of Edo period

(1600-1868) Nativist notions, which in turn are transformations of earlier, medieval Buddhist doctrines I have discussed so far in this course.

In this lecture I will further analyze the ideological implications of these semiotic ideas, especially for Japanese representations of political power, cultural identity, and nationalism. I will point to the complex historical developments that turned medieval elite Buddhist doctrines into modern mass ideological tools for social conformism and cultural exclusivism. Such a genealogical approach will expose the artificiality of many ideas of tradition based on cultural essentialism, and reveal that processes of cultural identity formation in Japan, as elsewhere, were often related to interaction with other cultures. I shall present Japan not as a well-defined, self-identical entity, but rather as one of what Karatani Kōjin would call "semiotic constellations" (*kigōronteki na fuchi*)—the result of complex and shifting signifying practices which affected political institutions and ideology and resulted in a certain vision of Japanese cultural identity.

1. Japan as a Semiotic Paradise

In 1970, Roland Barthes published a small book entitled *L'empire des signes* (Barthes 1982), in which he described a fantastic realm characterized by the presence of "an unheard-of symbolic system, one altogether detached from our own" (Barthes 1982: 3); that place, that "fictive nation" (Ibid.), Barthes called "Japan." This marked the beginning, in Japan and elsewhere, of extensive and explicit discourses about Japanese semiotics. It is true that Barthes made it clear that he was not analyzing "reality itself"—the "real Japan"; still, the cultural elements he isolated in his book are unmistakably "Japanese." "Japan," as the elsewhere ("faraway": Ibid.), is the secret site of the semiotician's desire, where there is the "possibility of difference... of a revolution in the propriety of symbolic systems" (Ibid.: 3-4). In spite of his critical disclaimers, Barthes appears to be prisoner of an Orientalistic discourse, as is clear from the subjects discussed in the book and the overall treatment. "Japan" is presented as the opposite of the "United States" (Ibid.: 4, 29) and, more generally, of the "West." Furthermore, Barthes's emphasis on Zen as the paradigm of the entire Japanese culture from food to *pachinko* slot machines is taken directly from D.T. Suzuki, who wrote: "Zen typifies Japanese spirituality. This does not mean that Zen has deep roots within the life of the Japanese people, rather that Japanese life itself is 'Zen-like'" (D.T. Suzuki 1972: 18). Barthes's book is thus a vaguely poststructuralist rendition of the more traditional Japonaiseries offered by tourist guidebooks: Japanese food (*bentō* lunch box: Ibid.: 11-18; *sukiyaki* stew: 19-22; upscale

tempura restaurants: 24-26), the puzzling urban structure of Tōkyō (without street names and numbers and supposedly without a center: 30-36), with its crowds (95-98) and its numerous train stations (38-42) and *pachinko* parlors (27-29), people bowing instead of shaking hands (63-68), the beauty of souvenir packages (43-47)—alle these are described together with Bunraku theater (48-62), *haiku* poems (69-84), calligraphy (85-87), the exotic faces of people (88-94, 99-102). Furthermore, Barthes's attention is caught by "traditional" elements, and he is very careful not to describe/analyze anything belonging to contemporary Japan and its rapid industrialization: he explicitly "leav[es] aside" what he calls "vast regions of darkness (capitalist Japan, American acculturation, technological developments)" (Ibid.: 4), and the "constipated parsimony of salaries, the constriction of capitalist wealth" (29), the mass of "vulgar 'souvenir[s]' (as Japan is unfortunately so expert at producing)" (46)—some of the most visible and striking features of Japan at that time. Even when Barthes addresses student protest, he describes as essentially different from its Western counterpart (103-106).

What does Barthes see in these features he isolates to form his Japan? In other words, what are the features of Japan that make it a perfectly post-structuralist (postmodern) place? In brief, Barthes's Japan is devoid of interiority and center: everything is pure surface (there is no depth), mere distinctive feature, combinatorial entity which does not stand for a meaning, also because the central Meaning of Western metaphysics, God, is absent—a land without meaning, paradoxical paradise of the semiotician. The food, for example, is "entirely visual," "not deep: ... without a precious heart, without a buried power, without a vital secret: no Japanese dish is endowed with a center" (22). Furthermore, food is a combination of "purely interstitial object[s], all the more provocative in that all this emptiness is produced in order to provide nourishment" (24)—in short, food is an "empty sign" (26). Empty signs, interstitial signifiers, can be found everywhere in Barthes's "Japan," from cities to short poems. For example, whereas in the "West" "all" cities are "concentric" and, "in accord with the very movement of Western metaphysics... [their] center... is always full: a marked site [where] the values of civilization are gathered and condensed," Tōkyō "does possess a center, but this center is empty" (30)—the "visible form of invisibility [that] hides the sacred 'nothing'" (32). Analogously, Bunraku theater challenges Western notions of the body and interiority centered on sin and, ultimately, God. Even more explicitly, the haiku poetic form, in Barthes's treatment, gives a final blow to Western metaphysics and its obsession with presence, depth, and meaning: "the haiku means nothing" (69), it "never describes" (77), it has no symbolic value; haiku "constitute a space of pure

fragments... without there ever being a center to grasp, a primary core of irradiation" (78). In other words, "neither describing nor defining, [...] the haiku diminishes to the point of pure and sole designation. *It's that, it's thus*, says the haiku, *it's so*. Or better still: *so!* " (83). Here we have a clear reference to "the spirit of Zen" (ibid.), as that peculiar Japanese intellectual system "which causes knowledge, or the subject, to vacillate: it creates an emptiness of language", it produces "the exemption from all meaning" (4). Barthes gives a semiotic explanation of D.T. Suzuki's Zen modernism, in which we find the interpretive key of Barthes's whole system. I shall return to the Zen connection. Here I would like to stress that Barthes's account of the Japanese mentality gives intellectual reputation and authority to all those who say that the Japanese mind is "unfit for abstract thinking" (Yukawa 1967). "Abstract thinking," which in this case refers to traditional philosophical reflection, seems to presuppose, in the mind of these authors, a central, fundamental signified, a transcendental meaning that gives sense to thought.

Barthes's "Japan" is a veritable "empire of signs"—a fragmented set of pure signifiers pointing to reality without any interference from meaning (metaphysical Meaning). Japanese culture is an immense play of surfaces and fragments producing a "vision without commentary" (82), the "designating gesture of the child pointing at whatever it is" (83)—no meaning, no interpretation, no agency, no ideology, no subject. In Barthes's book the Japanese appear capable to refer to reality as it is, directly, without mediation or intentionality, in a pure catroptic gesture: "So!"—whatever that is... Japanese signs, the signs of that empire, cannot lie. Why should they? Fragments refracting other fragments, they are not manipulated by subjects displaying their conscious (or unconscious) agency. We can understand why Edmund White, in his blurb on the back cover of the book, calls Barthes's Japan "a test, a challenge to think the unthinkable, a place where meaning is finally banished. Paradise, indeed"—a paradise in which the semiotic dream of a perfect sign becomes real. In this paradise, signs cease to be signifiers, since they are forever detached from any signified: here semiotics undoes itself. Signs cannot be used to lie; the distinction between words, meanings and objects is obliterated; signs do not refer to other signs within a semiotic universe, they are Reality. In this system the world is made of countless epiphanies in which experience, language, and thought coincide with their objects.

Barthes's book became very influential in Japanese semiotic circles and contributed to the consolidation of Orientalistic stereotypes in semiotics. The idea of Japanese signs as epiphanies of direct experience of reality, which extended to Japanese language itself, has been used to represent the semiotics of Japanese culture attitude, as

we shall see below, and has become an important factor in the definition of Japanese cultural identity. In addition, the idea of an empty center was decidedly appealing to intellectuals who were striving to develop new models more suitable to the new international visibility of Japan. In this respect, it is particularly interesting that Barthes decided to call his semi-fictitious semiotic realm an "empire." This is not a mere Orientalist exoticism: this appellation has a deeper, and more disquieting meaning. In fact, the "empty center" of Japan is the imperial palace in Tokyo and, more precisely, the emperor himself—the "sacred 'nothing,'" the center of the circular system of the Japanese imaginary (32). Japanese intellectuals were quick to associate Barthes's idea of the empty center with the figure of the emperor and its "symbolic" but fundamental and essentially ineffable role to define Japan. Whereas this move served to relativize and diminish the importance of the center, as advocated by authors such as Yamaguchi Masao and Ōe Kenzaburō (Ōe, Nakamura, and Yamaguchi 1980-82), it could also be used to "re-enchant" it by lending it an aura of necessity and a-historicity. As we shall see below, Barthes is not the only one to make a connection between the imperium (and its related notions of power, authority, identity, and cultural specificity) and a peculiar semiotics which supposedly distinguishes the Japanese and their culture from all other cultures.

2. The Discourse of Japanese Uniqueness

There is a wealth of published material in Japan addressing issues and features of Japanese culture and of the Japanese people from the perspective of cultural essentialism. This popular and influential genre of pseudo-academic works is known as *nihonjinron* (discourse on the Japanese) or *Nihon bunkaron* (discourse on Japanese culture). Peter Dale summarizes the three major assumptions of Nihonjinron in the following way:

> Firstly, they assume that the Japanese constitute a culturally and socially homogeneous racial entity, whose essence is virtually unchanged from prehistoric times down to the present day. Secondly, they presuppose that the Japanese differ radically from all other known peoples. Thirdly, they are consciously nationalistic, displaying a conceptual and procedural hostility to any mode of analysis which might be seen to derive from external, non-Japanese sources (Dale 1986: i).

Even though much Nihonjinron is not worth of critical analysis, lest one reproduces and gives cultural validity to its biased and preposterous assumptions, still its rhetoric and ideology need to be addressed here for they constitute, in a more or less preconscious fashion, a large part of the conceptual and emotional tools employed by many Japanese today to define their ideas of cultural identity. The first thing that strikes the interpreter is the entanglement of ideological and semiotic issues. Japan is defined as a static, a-historical geopolitical entity, whose boundaries are the frontiers of today's Japanese state, and whose center is an equally a-historical imperial system; the Japanese are envisioned as a homogeneous people sharing a culture whose basic determinations, which are immutable, can be described as a specific episteme—a distinct way to manipulate signs and relate to reality.

Masao Miyoshi and H.D. Harootunian argue that Nihonjinron "produced... a conception of Japan as a signified, whose uniqueness was fixed in an irreducible essence that was unchanging and unaffected by history, rather than as a signifier capable of attaching itself to a plurality of possible meanings" (Miyoshi and Harootunian 1989: xvi). This emphasis on the signified seems very different from Barthes's endeavor, for which Japan was pure, meaningless signifier; the results, however, are surprisingly similar. In such essentialistic treatments of cultural specificities, signifier and signified are almost interchangeable. What the authors have in mind is, in fact, not either one of the two components of a sign function, as in traditional semiotics, but rather some vaguely defined symbols in which the form is not separate from its content—an essentialized and condensed image of Japanese culture. Interestingly enough, these symbols of Japanese culture are extremely close to the most trivial Japonesque stereotypes (group orientation, women as the embodiment of culture, art as the expression of *satori*, technology as art, etc.)

Given the extension of the field of cultural nationalism and the limited scope of the present article, I shall restrict myself to discuss only some of the most important features of the Nihonjinron epistemic field: naturalization, binarism, immediacy, linguistic uniqueness. By "naturalization" I mean the reduction of culture to nature: cultural traits are ultimately reduced to natural characteristics, namely, environment, climate, or even the peculiar functioning of the Japanese brain. In this way, nationalistic authors operate an essentialization of culture in order to set Japanese culture apart and make it illegible from the outside. As Tetsuo Najita writes, in Japan "culture has been thought to be perfectly knowable, understandable from within, not requiring translation—not even the mediations of "language" and other "signs" as "a matter of the

human spirit—*kokoro*" (Najita 1989: 5). Nihonjinron authors "proceed from the presumption that the Japanese are "unknowable" except to Japanese, and that the role of social science is to mediate and define their self-knowledge in terms accessible to the world of others" (Ibid.: 14).

This move presupposes a strong sense of dichotomy between "us" and "them"; it is not a chance if "binarism" is one of the main features of Nihonjinron discourse. Everything in Nihonjinron is described in terms of binary oppositions in which one pole represents the Japanese side (which, as an essence, is therefore closer to nature), and the other pole stands for the rest of the world. The most common binaries are: nature/culture; East (specifically Japan)/West (sometimes used to refer to the rest of the world, more often designating the US); front (*omote*)/back (*ura*); surface (*tatemae*)/ hidden intention (*honne*); inside (*uchi*)/outside (*soto*). These binaries are not necessarily homologous, although some authors envision a series

//nature—East—Japan—inside—back—hidden intention//,

as opposed to its converse

//culture—West—US—outside—front—surface//.

Once Japanese culture has been structured in this way, the Japanese supposedly become able to connect directly with the essence of nature and things without useless "rationalizations"—mediations such as meaning or interpretation.

One of the most important conceptual nuclei of the entire Nihonjinron edifice is the polarity of "Japanese spirit" (*wakon*) and "Western technique" (*yōsai*). Popular since the Meiji period, when it substituted a previous Confucian slogan (*wakon kansai*: Japanese spirit and Chinese technique), it presupposes an idea of Japanese culture as the combination of an organizing essence of a more or less spiritual nature (the Japanese spirit) and of foreign additions (western technologies). Foreign additions remain on the surface and never affect the underlying spirit (although it is always possible to envision a potential, corrupting threat—when the spirit is hidden too many layers of foreign stuff, people might lose sight of it...). The spirit configures itself as a structuring principle which is not structured: in this way, the Orientalistic dichotomy between a rational West opposed to a spiritual East is maintained and affirmed: only rationality can be structured; spirituality, because of its intrinsic vagueness (emptiness?) operates on the

level of structuring. David Pollack summarizes decades of Japanese nationalistic semiotics, centered on the use of the dichotomy opposing Japanese spirit and foreign cultures, when he writes that the Japanese language is "almost entirely antithetical" from the Chinese (Pollack 1986: 4-5), thus reiterating a rhetoric of uniqueness. Essential to the Japanese language, according to Pollack, is the separation of the spoken word from its written form—a separation which was painfully aware to the Japanese since their first written text, the *Kojiki*: the "content, felt to be quintessentially Japanese, was unformed and ineffable, while that which gave form—the informing or formal aspects of meaning—remained in some sense 'alien,' at once powerfully attractive and fundamentally disquieting" (Ibid.: 7). More generally, argues Pollack, "for the Japanese, what was 'Japanese' had always to be considered in relation to what was thought to be 'Chinese' [...] the notion of Japaneseness was meaningful only as it was considered against the background of the otherness of China" (Ibid.: 3). Since Naoki Sakai has already produced a convincing critique of Pollack's position (Naoki 1989), I shall limit myself to underline some of the classic *topoi* of Japanese cultural nationalism in Pollack's argument: the a-historical and essentializing treatment (Japan and China are assumed to be unchanging and homogenous essences); dichotomic oversimplification (the opposition Japan/China ignores the important roles played by "India"—Tenjiku—and the Korean states in the definition of pre-modern "Japanese" culture); the centrality of language, which becomes a sort of cultural "prison-house"; the ignorance of multilinguism, a common practice throughout Japanese history (literate people used to write in Chinese and in more or less standard written Japanese, while speaking—and sometime also writing in—their local dialect); the ineffability of Japaneseness; and the dramatic separation between form (structured and rational but essentially alien—i.e., previously Chinese and now Western) and content (ineffable and understandable only to the Japanese themselves).

The term *wakon yōsai* lends itself to political and ideological uses (see Taki 1988: 62-63), and appears to be at the basis of most discourses on Japanese cultural identity. The expression *wakon*, which I translated above as "Japanese spirit," actually means "Yamato spirit." Yamato is the ancient name of the central part of the Japanese archipelago, and was used throughout pre-modern Japanese history as a mystified and heavily ideological kernel of power and cultural identity. The focus on Yamato hides the cultural diversity of the Japanese archipelago by positing an ideal and unifying center (both ideological and cultural); it also hides the complex historical processes that determined the formation of the modern Japanese nation-state and present-day Japanese

culture as natural transformations of an a-historical center (For an alternative interpretation of "Yamato spirit," see Ōe Kenzaburō 1995: 17-18).

Nihonjinron gives particular importance to the Japanese language as one of the privileged loci of Japanese cultural essence (See Dale 1986; Miller 1982). Authors in general distinguish between supposedly purely indigenous words (*Yamato kotoba*) and foreign words (*gairaigo*, words of Sanskrit, Chinese, and Western origin). Yamato kotoba are the main concern of Nihonjinron authors; as Tanizaki Jun'ichirō put it, "Our nation's language (*kokugo*) bears an unalienable relationship with our national character (*kokuminsei*)" (quoted in Dale 1986: 79); or, in the words of Watanabe Shōichi, "Yamato kotoba... have their roots... in the wellsprings of the soul of our race" (quoted in Dale 1986: 84). Miller and Dale have already pointed to the strong racist overtones in Nihonjinron treatment of the Japanese language. What is particularly interesting for us here is the fact that the indigenous words are considered to be endowed with an ineffable content; untranslatable, they are supposedly understandable only to the native Japanese (see Dale 1986: 56-73). Foreign loan words, in contrast, are the carriers of concepts and rational notions, described as essentially aliens to the Japanese mentality—an application of the "*wakon yōsai*" paradigm to linguistic phenomena. The authors do not seem to pay much attention to the fact that many Yamato words were of foreign origin or that the Japanese language is a complex linguistic system in continuous transformation.

Nihonjinron is painfully aware of the "limitations of language"—the fact that language in general cannot reach the essence of things and the deepest recess of the human heart. However, they maintain that Japanese language—and, specifically, the semiotics of silence that accompanies Japanese language—is free from such limitations and enable the Japanese to reach through language the essence of things: "such devices [typical of the Japanese language] as allusion, ambiguity and lingering resonance... serve as effective ways to both transcend the essential limitations of language, and to bear down to objects" (Suzuki Takeo, quoted in Dale 1986: 89). We will see later that the idea of a direct connection between the Japanese language and reality—a connection that bypasses signification and semiotic practice—already described by Roland Barthes, actually enjoys a long pedigree in Japanese intellectual history. Authors have tried to explain this supposed peculiarity of the Japanese language in "scientific" terms and in the "hard facts" of nature. Particularly famous is the theory, now completely discredited, formulated by Tsunoda Tadanobu, according to whom the brain of the Japanese lateralizes language differently from that of members of other cultures. Tsunoda writes:

> My tests show that the left cerebral hemisphere of the Japanese receives a wide range of sounds: not just the linguistic sounds (consonant and vowel sounds) but also such non-linguistic sounds as the utterance of human emotions, animal cries, Japanese musical instruments, the sounds of a running brook, wind, waves, and certain famous temples bells (quoted in Miller 1982: 71).

It is evident the attempt to show a continuity uniting the Japanese language, traditional sounds of Japanese culture (such as musical instruments and temple bells) and natural sounds. Tsunoda tried to give a "scientific" foundation to the claim that Japanese language can convey the essence of things, also because it is not essentially different from the sounds that produced by the things themselves (See also Tsunoda Tadanobu 1985. For a critique of Tsunoda's research, see Miller 1982: 64-85, 293).

Nihonjinron authors also emphasize the silent capacity of the Japanese language to transmit the deepest emotions of its native speakers. Countless pages have been written on secret and intuitive techniques of silent communication, known as *haragei* ("belly technique") or with the Buddhist term *ishin denshin* ("using the mind to transmit the mind") (See Dale 1986: 100-115). Kishimoto Hideo wrote: "One of the characteristics of the Japanese language is to be able to project man's experience in its immediate and unanalysed form" (in Ibid.: 219). As Dale sarcastically puts it, "Given the unheralded 'homogeneity of (Japanese) existence' (*dōshitsuteki sonzai*, the postwar euphemism for racial purity), the Japanese have developed an innate capacity over millennia for intuiting exactly what all other Japanese are thinking" (Ibid.: 92). In this, Nihonjinron is employing the rhetoric of pure experience deriving from Zen modernism and the philosophy of the Kyōto School (see below).

Semiotics has also been put at the service of Japanese cultural essentialism, as in a recent essay by Ikegami Yoshihiko on the semiotics of Japanese culture from the perspective of Barthes's idea of the "empty center" (Ikegami 1991). In this interesting essay, Ikegami reformulates the standard repertoire of Nihonjinron binary oppositions in terms of the semiotics of the empty center from the standpoint of cultural typology:

> A culture with an empty center would thus tend to work centripetally—it is somewhat like the astronomer's 'black hole,' which draws and absorbs everything into itself—without suffering any change at all. A culture with an

> empty center can accommodate and keep in it apparently diverse elements, not in a state of conflict, but in a state of harmony with each other (Ibid.: 15).

And also:

> Thus the function of the empty center can now be redefined as homologization. The philosophy of homologization says that anything and everything deserves to be given its own proper place within the whole cultural scheme. The empty center homologizes... It seems that the country [Japan] can better be characterized as "the Empire of homologization" with its strong empty center (Ibid.: 15-16).

Then the author proceeds to define another "deep-seated current or 'drift' in Japanese culture, namely, a marked tendency toward semiotically blurred articulation, or in other words, a tendency not to clearly mark off one cultural unit semiotically from others" (Ibid.: 16). A set of usual stereotypes follows: in Japanese culture, man is incorporated within culture; there are no significant distinction between the terms 'man' and 'god,' 'man' and 'animal,' 'man' and 'tool'; the group is more important than the individual (Ibid.); the context is more important than the text ("the text of the Japanese language tends to merge very much with the context in which it is used; the 'text' is not clearly articulated in contrast to the 'context') (Ibid.: 16-18). The entire discussion is concluded by a reference to Zen's *kōan* (Ibid.: 19-21). In other words, Japanese culture is presented as a-systematic in its refusal to uphold "standard" binary oppositions; as a consequence, it appears "irrational" (Zen's influence)—always in comparison to a mystified "West." One would assume that the distinctions between sign, meaning, and referent is blurred as well—so that the signifier can re-present the things as they are without individual interpretive mediation. In addition, the unfortunate expression "the Empire of homologization" has frightful totalitarian overtones: Japanese culture is presented as an inexorable mechanism that reduces all individual differences to sameness, with a disturbing implicit reference to the pre-war ideology of national polity (*kokutai*). This approach to the semiotics of culture is dramatically different from the one proposed by Yuri Lotman, Boris Uspenky, and the other semioticians of the so-called Tartu School. The latter employs broad binary categories to identify dominant ideological tendencies in specific historical periods and in locales. Japanese semiotics, in contrast, employs largely a-historical categories to show a continuity in Japanese culture since the remotest

antiquity. Let us now turn our attention to some philosophical antecedents of Nihonjinron rhetoric.

3. Zen Modernism

It is possible to identify some elements of Nihonjinron semiotics as outlined above (direct connection to the essence of things, lack of meaning and signification, impossibility to lie) in several threads of pre-war and war-time Japanese intellectual discourse, in particular as it was configured by those authors who strove to define the essence of Japanese culture at the interface of the "West" and the "Orient." A modernist interpretation of Buddhism played a central role in this discourse (See Sharf 1995a, 1995b). Given the nature of the present article, it is impossible to trace the complex philosophical and intellectual debates of Japanese modernism in their entirety (See for example Yamaguchi 1995a, 1995b; Heisig and Maraldo, eds., 1995). Two authors are particularly important for our discussion: the philosopher Nishida Kitarō (1870-1945) and the Buddhist scholar and cultural activist Suzuki Daisetz (1870-1966). Nishida is perhaps the most influential modern Japanese philosopher, the founder of the so-called Kyōto School. D.T. Suzuki is well known for his tireless effort to spread a certain vision of Zen Buddhism and Japanese culture to the West. Especially influential was also the ideological manifesto of wartime Japanese government, entitled *Kokutai no hongi* ("Fundamentals of Our National Polity"), written by several of the leading right-wing intellectuals of the time and edited by government officers. This infamous book, published in 1937 by the Ministry of Education, was distributed to all households of the country in order to indoctrinate all citizens to the militaristic and quasi-fascist ideology of the state. In this section I shall address the semiotic assumptions of Japanese Buddhist modernism, for they are directly related to wartime *kokutai* ideology.

In "Nihon bunka no mondai" ("The Problem of Japanese Culture"), Nishida Kitarō addressed what he envisioned as the basic features of Japanese culture:

> Japan's historical world, being an identity between subject and environment, and between man and nature, may also be said to have developed self-identically [...] A Japanese spirit which goes to the truth of things as an identity between actuality and reality, must be one which is based on this. Although I say "goes to things", that is not to say to go to matter. And although I say "nature", that is not to say objective or environmental nature. To go to things

> means starting from the subject, going beyond the subject, and going to the bottom of the subject. What I call the identity between actuality and reality is the realization of this absolute at the bottom of our selves, instead of considering the absolute to be in an infinite exterior (in Tsunoda et al., eds., 1958: 871).

The "self-identical development" of Japanese culture is a transposition of the *wakon yōsai* paradigm: the external cultural elements that are adopted by the Japanese do not modify its basic core, the Yamato spirit, which remains identical to itself even through the transformations of its external appearances. Nishida identifies the basic feature of the Japanese spirit with the gist of his own philosophical enterprise—the attainment of the essential and immediate "nature": "the absolute at the bottom of our selves." In this way, all true Japanese are wise, enlightened beings. Nishida further explains:

> As for the characteristics of Japanese culture, it seems to me to lie in moving from subject to object [environment], ever thoroughly negating the self and becoming the thing itself; becoming the thing itself to see; becoming the thing itself to act. To empty the self and see things, for the self to be immersed in things, "no-mindedness" [in Zen Buddhism] or effortless acceptance of the grace of Amida (*jinen hōni*) [in True Pure Land teaching]—these, I believe, are the states we Japanese strongly yearn for [...] The essence of the Japanese spirit must be to become one in things and in events. It is to become one at that primal point in which there is neither self nor others (in Tsunoda et al., eds., 1958: 869).

In other words, what Nishida considers the highest forms of Japanese philosophy, Zen and Jōdo Shinshū traditions of Buddhism, guide the Japanese to immerse themselves in things, to become "acting things." This is not a hermeneutics, for meaning is irrelevant here: what matters is the fusion of subject and object in a pure act. This semiotics of objectual immediacy is centered on the emperor. As Bernard Faure notes, in fact, "Interestingly, the translator of the excerpt, Masao Abe, the best known representative of the Kyoto School in the West, has omitted the following sentence [at the end of the excerpt quoted above]: 'This [process leading the "Japanese spirit to become one in things and events"] seems to have as its center this contradictory autoidentity that is the Imperial Household'" (Faure 1995: 254). Leaving aside the complex issue of the meaning of "contradictory autoidentity" (see for instance Dilworth 1969; Carter 1989), what

matters here is the central role of the emperor in the achievement of the Japanese spirit through the enactment of its peculiar semiosis which dissolves the subject in the act. Nishida's semiotics, which involves the "unity of subject and object" (*shukaku gōitsu*) or "the state of undifferentiation of subject and object" (*shukaku mibun no jōtai*), is based on an epistemology of direct, unmediated experience—"pure experience" (*junsui keiken*)—which Nishida identifies to the Buddhist experience of enlightenment and defines as to "know reality exactly as it is (*jijitsu sono mama*). It is to know by entirely abandoning the artifices of the self and by following reality... 'pure' means precisely the condition of experience in itself, without the admixture of any thinking or discrimination" (Dilworth 1969: 95-96).

D.T. Suzuki shared a similar vision. For him, "The basic idea of Zen is to come in touch inner workings of our being, and to do this in the most direct way possible, without resorting to anything external or superadded... When Zen is thoroughly understood, absolute peace of mind is attained, and a man lives as he ought to live" (cited in Sharf 1995a: 127-128). We find here once again the idea of achieving the absolute within oneself, an absolute which is at the same time the true principle of reality. As Sharf explains, "Suzuki began to render any and all Zen cultural artifacts—from *kōan* exchanges to dry-landscape gardens—as 'expressions of' or 'pointed toward' a pure, unmediated, and non-dual experience, known in Zen as *satori*" (Sharf 1995b: 248). However, as Faure and Sharf have shown, Suzuki's interpretation of Zen, as based on Nishida's philosophy, is totally unwarranted by the history of the Zen tradition in East Asia. The concept of "experience" as used by these authors is especially problematic in its anachronism (Sharf 1995a, 1995b; Faure 1991).

Despite the efforts of apologetes to present Zen as "an unconmpromisingly empirical, rational, and scientific mode of inquiry into the nature of things," Zen modernism was "predicated upon, and inexorably enmeshed in, the Nativist and imperialist ideology of late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Japan. Zen is touted as the very heart of Asian spirituality, the essence of Japanese culture, and the key to the unique qualities of the Japanese race" (Sharf 1995a: 111). There are historical reasons for that. Japanese modernization during the Meiji era (1868-1912) started with a violent persecution of Buddhism (Ketelaar 1990). As a consequence, Sharf explains, "Buddhist leaders actively appropriated the ideological agenda of government propagandists... They became willing accomplices in the promulgation of *kokutai* (national polity) ideology—the attempt to render Japan a culturally homogeneous and spiritually evolved nation politically unified under the civil rule of the emperor" (Sharf 1995a: 110).

In order to show their nationalistic zeal, Zen, and Japanese Buddhism in general, also became an active accomplice of the militaristic and authoritarian policy implemented by the Japanese government between 1868 and 1945 (Victoria 1997).[1]

The conceptual schema underlying Nishida's and Suzuki's highly ideological semiotics is strikingly similar to the ideas expressed in the infamous *Kokutai no hongi* ("Fundamentals of Our National Polity") (For a selection of excerpts, see Tsunoda Ryūsaku *et al*, eds., 1958,Vol. 2: pp. 784-795; the complete translation is in *Kokutai no hongi* 1949). One of the key concept of the text is "sincerity" (*makoto*), praised as the highest virtue of the Japanese. Sincerity is related to the nature of Japanese language, in particular its special kind of power called *kotodama* (the "spirit of words"). We shall address later the meaning and the history of this concept. Let us follow here the argument of the *Kokutai no hongi*:

> *Kotodama* means language that is filled with sincerity, and such language possesses... limitless power and is comprehensible everywhere without limitation [...] the word that possesses sincerity, by reason of *kotodama*, must inevitably be carried out. Thus, sincerity is found in the fundamental principle of the word able to become the deed. There is no room for self in sincerity. All of oneself must be cast aside in speech, for it is in the deed and in the deed alone that sincerity is to be found (Quoted in Miller 1982: 133-134).

According to the text, the Japanese language is only used to tell the truth, and to say things that can be carried out; it cannot be used to lie. Individuality (or, as Barthes would put it, subjectivity, centeredness, meaning) is separate from language, which by speaking the truth solely refers to and produces disinterested action. In a different section, the text emphasizes the idea of self-effacement that results from this vision of language: "In the inherent character of our people there is strongly manifested alongside this spirit of self-effacement and disinterestedness [...] The spirit of self-effacement is not a mere denial of oneself, but means living to the great, true self by denying one's small

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[1] Buddhist war ideology was supported by a disingenuous interpretation of epistemological and hermeneutical concepts, such as nondualism (funi) and the direct contact with truth and reality: see Fabio Rambelli, Review of Brian Victoria, *Zen at War*, in *Journal of* Buddhist Ethics vol. 5, 1998 (http://jbe.la.psu.edu/).

self" (Quoted in Tsunoda Ryūsaku et al., eds., 1958: 2/791). The meaning of "living to the great, true self" is further explained in the text:

> Our country is established with the emperor, who is a descendant of Amaterasu Ōmikami, as her center, and our ancestors as well as we ourselves constantly have beheld in the emperor the fountainhead of her life and activities. For this reason, to serve the emperor and to receive the emperor's great august Will as one's own is the rational of making our historical "life" live in the present; and on this is based the morality of the people. [...] By implicit obedience is meant casting ourselves aside and serving the emperor intently. To walk this Way of loyalty is the sole Way in which we subjects may "live"... Hence, offering our lives for the sake of the emperor does not mean so-called self-sacrifice, but the casting aside of our little selves to live under his august grace (From Tsunoda Ryūsaku *et al*, eds., 1958,Vol. 2: 787).

In other words, there is no space for autonomous, subjective activity: the meaning of one's life is to be found in the imperial will. The text explains: "in our country, differences of opinion or of interests that result from one's position easily [merge] into one through our unique great harmony which springs from the same source" (*Kokutai no hongi* 1949: 98). That "same source" is obviously the emperor: "In our country, Sovereign and subjects have from of old been spoken of as being one, and the entire nation, united in mind and acting in full coöperation, have shown forth the beauties of this oneness with the Emperor at the centre" (Ibid.: 99). There is a strong emphasis on "oneness," on the identity of opposites (possibly an and echo of Nishida's "contradictory self-identity"), on harmony as a natural, ontological condition of the Japanese: "This mind of fellowship and union which makes possible the singleness of this national foundation constantly runs through national life" (Ibid.: 126). The *Kokutai no Hongi* leaves no space for interpretation and free production of meaning: "There must be no self in truth. When one speaks and acts, utterly casting oneself aside, there indeed is truth, and there indeed shines truth" (Ibid.: 102. The section on "Truth" (ibid.: 100-102) contains explicit reference to Kamo no Mabuchi (1697-1769) and Fujitani Mitsue (1768-1823), two famous Nativist scholars).

The *Kokutai no Hongi* mobilizes an obscure archaic word such as *kotodama*—which, as we shall see, was one of the key concepts discussed by Edo period Nativists—in order to define the nature of Japanese language, the inherent character of the people, and the

central role of the emperor in all this. In particular, Japanese language is used not to convey meaning and personal interpretations (an aberration which results from Western individualism), but to enact, perform, carry out deeds. In proposing a theory of a language of events rather than of meaning, the *Kokutai no Hongi* sounds similar to Roland Barthes's semiotic fantasy in the *Empire of Signs*. The important difference between the two, however, is that the former grounds its vision of language and truth in theology and the divine nature of the emperor and its subjects. In other words, speaking the truth is a divine commandment that preserves the sacred ordering of the Japanese military state. Roy Andrew Miller has pointed out how the ideas of sincerity, action, utmost respect for the imperial orders in the *Kokutai no Hongi* were used to enforce mindless and uncritical obedience to the authoritarian regime (Miller 1977): here we see the most dangerous effect of the connection between semiotics and ideology in the formation of cultural identity.

All the afore-mentioned texts and authors, despite their different genres, vocabularies, and audiences, share a number of fundamental assumptions: Japanese culture (and the life of the Japanese) is centered on the figure of the emperor; the Japanese people, whose paramount virtue is sincerity (*makoto*), have the ability to attain the true essence of things; the Japanese language is unique in that it possesses a "spirit" (*kotodama*) which enables it to tell the truth and to make things happen—what is said must be converted into deeds. Once again, signs cannot be used to lie (at least not by the Japanese), signs are directly related to the truth, the essence of reality without the mediation of interpretation and meaning, and language is perfectly transparent to reality. All this is predicated upon the figure of the emperor—the "empty center" of Japan. As we shall see below, the semio-ideological edifice of Japanese modernism was based on the ideas developed by the Nativist tradition (*kokugaku*) during the Tokugawa period (1600-1868).

4. Nativism (*kokugaku*) and the Spirit of the Japanese Language (*kotodama*)

During the Edo period (1600-1868), language became an important field of inquiry. A new intellectual tradition in particular, known as *kokugaku*, "national learning" or, in H.D. Harootunian (1986)'s rendering, Nativism, developed an intellectual discourse on Japanese authenticity based on a minutious study of ancient and classical texts, such as the *Kojiki*, the *Man'yōshū*, and the *Genji monogatari* (Murasaki Shikibu 1978). The main exponents of this traditions were Keichū, Kada no Azumamaro, Kamo no Mabuchi,

Motoori Norinaga, Fujitani Mitsue, and Hirata Atsutane. It is in this context that arose the peculiar semiotics which grounds modern discourses of Japanese identity. These authors envisioned the peculiarity of the Japanese experience of the world as poetic and irrational. It was based on a unique language whose sounds were considered directly in contact with the reality they signify without the mediation of writing—a language whose signs are incapable of lying, and whose magical qualities are called *kotodama* (the "spirit of the words") (On Nativist discourse, see in particular Harootunian 1986; on language studies in the Edo period, see Naoki 1991).

Kamo no Mabuchi began to associate a sense of Japanese moral and cultural superiority with the qualities of their language. He wrote:

> the fifty sounds [of the Japanese phonological system] are the sounds of Heaven and Earth, and words conceived from them are naturally different from the Chinese characters... ever since Chinese writing was introduced we have mistakenly become enmeshed in it... but the fifty sounds suffice to express all words without the nuisance of the characters (In Tsunoda Ryūsaku *et al*, eds., 1958,Vol. 2: 519).

In Mabuchi's view, foreign ideas (mainly, Chinese Confucianism and Indian Buddhism) are abstruse and complex, and can be expressed only through the unnatural mediation of writing; they were distortions of the simple, perfect, and natural ways of ancient Japan, and ended up by corrupting the Japanese:

> Japan has always been a country were the people are honest. As long as a few teachings were carefully observed and we worked in accordance with the Will of Heaven [represented by the emperor] and earth, the country would be well off without any special instruction. Nevertheless, Chinese doctrines were introduced and corrupted men's hearts (Ibid.: 520).

Motoori Norinaga further developed Mabuchi's themes by attributing to the ancient Japanese a strong sense of irrational wonder for the deeds of the deities (*kami*) and poetic sentiment toward nature and humans. Motoori was a strenuous opponent of the rationalistic tendencies of Neo-Confucian philosophy and the complexities of the Buddhist cosmology, which he criticized in the following way: "in the foreign countries... men have tried to explain the principle of Heaven and earth and all phenomena by...

fallacious theories stemming from the assumptions of the human intellect and they in no wise represent the true principle" (Ibid.: 521). In contrast, Motoori stressed that "the acts of the gods cannot be measured by ordinary human reasoning" (Ibid.: 524); "one must acknowledge that human intelligence is limited and puny while the acts of the gods are illimitable and wondrous" (Ibid.: 527). Only the Japanese are innately equipped to realize and accept this: "The True Way is one and the same, in every country and throughout heaven and earth . This Way, however, has been correctly transmitted only in our Imperial Land" (Ibid.: 520). As a consequence, "our country is the source and fountainhead of all other countries, and in all matters it excels all the others. It would be impossible to list all the products in which our country excels, but foremost among them is rice" (Ibid.: 523. On the role of rice in the construction of Japanese cultural identity, see Ohnuki-Tierney 1993). Motoori further expands on the reasons of Japanese superiority:

> Our country's Imperial Line, which casts its light over this world, represents the descendants of the Sky-Shining Goddess [Amaterasu Ōmikami]... the Imperial Line is destined to rule the nation for eons until the end of time and as long as the universe exists. That is the very basis of our way. That our history has not deviated from the instructions of the divine mandate bears testimony to the infallibility of our ancient traditions. It can also be seen why foreign countries cannot match ours... their dynastic lines, basic to their existence, do not continue; they change frequently and are quite corrupt. Thus one can surmise that in everything they say there are falsehoods and that there is no basis in fact for them (In Tsunoda Ryūsaku *et al*, eds., 1958,Vol. 2: 523).

We see here outlined the usual connection between the superiority of Japan, centered on the emperor, and the allegedly particular epistemological attitudes of the Japanese. In other words, the Japanese are able to experience the absolute principle of things by virtue of their kinship to the gods through the centralizing mediation of the emperor.

Hirata Atsutane further increased the dose of chauvinism in Nativist thought:

> People all over the world refer to Japan as the Land of the Gods, and call us the descendants of the gods. Indeed, it is exactly as they say... Ours is a splendid and blessed country, the Land of the Gods beyond any doubt, and we, down to the most humble man and woman, are the descendants of the gods... Japanese

> differ completely from and are superior to the peoples of China, India, Russia, Holland, Siam, Cambodia, and all other countries in the world (Ibid.: 544).

One of the themes that runs through the entire Nativist discourse concerns the nature and function of language—and the Japanese language in particular. All the authors emphasize sound rather than written characters—in an open polemics against Confucian "grammatology" which takes the Nativists to identify speech with authenticity. For Kamo no Mabuchi the phonological system of the Japanese language embodies the "Yamato spirit," the fundamental principle of the entire Japanese culture, because those sounds are a symbolic representation of the cosmic order sustaining Japan as the "land of the gods" (Kawamura Minato 1990: 15). Mabuchi and other Nativists posited at the basis of the Japanese language a spiritual essence which they called kotodama, after a rare and archaic word appearing in the *Man'yōshū* and the *Kojiki*.[2] As Keichū wrote: "since in words there is a spirit, if one speaks words of blessing happiness comes, if one speaks words of cursing distress is the result" (Quoted in Kawamura 1990: 76). According to the linguist Tokieda Motoki, *kotodama* refers to the primitive belief according to which in words there is a spirit that makes the things one says happen. For example, if one says "it's going to rain," then it will rain (Kawamura 1990: 77). This belief, explained Toyoda Kunio, is based on the synonymy in ancient Japanese of the two terms "word" and "fact," both pronounced *koto* in Japanese—even though they are written with different Chinese characters.

For the Nativists, the connection between language and signs in general, cultural identity, and imperial ideology was clear and explicit. They considered the language of the Japanese empire (*kōkoku*), and in particular its phonological system, the only perfect one; foreign languages were imperfect and wrong, similar to cries of "beasts and birds" (Kawamura 1990: 16-17). The perfection of the Japanese language was due to the sacrality of the language itself, the country, and its ruler, the emperor. Among the most important Nativist thinkers, Hirata Atsutane was the most fanatical supporter of the theory of *kotodama*, to the point that he found the ground of his imperial ideology in the Japanese phonetics, which he envisioned as a sublime, divine, and spiritual entity (Ibid.:

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[2] As Kawamura Minato as shown, the concept of *kotodama* permeates early modern and modern Japanese philosophy of language (Kawamura 1990); even though different theories and explanations were proposed, they all assume a peculiar status of the Japanese language. Furthermore, *kotodama* is always associated to a certain cosmology, and a vision of the other world in particular.

40). Atsutane also developed a sophisticated form of cratylism, in which each sound of the Japanese phonological system corresponded to an element of his theology and cosmology (deities' names, orders of reality, etc.). In his view, the combination of such sounds would disclose and enact the cosmic operations of the Japanese *kami*.

Contemporary authors generally believe that a well-defined notion of *kotodama*, which supposedly arose during the Nara period (710-784), runs through the entire history of Japanese thought until today. In reality, there are several problems with this view: (i) there is no theory or explanation of the term *kotodama* and the conception of language it implies dating back to the Nara period; the term itself was very rare in ancient texts; (ii) as far as I know, the term *kotodama* never appears in medieval texts establishing connections between Japanese poetry and Indian theories of mantric language; (iii) *kotodama* becomes an important philosophical term only with the development of Nativism, in which it is used as one of the crucial marks of Japanese cultural identity and superiority. In particular, the Shingon monk and literary critic Keichū (1640-1701) was probably the first to discuss *kotodama* at length and in connection with Tantric philosophy of language. It is very possible, then, that *kotodama* was a very successful philosophical anachronism—a rare, archaic word appropriated by the Nativists in order to carry out their intellectual and ideological agenda by projecting back onto a mythological past contemporary Buddhist ideas about language and culture. In any case, it is clear that the role of the term *kotodama* in Japanese intellectual history cannot be taken for granted.

5. Japan as the "Divine Country" (*shinkoku*) and Its Wondrous Semiotics

Edo period Nativists were not the first intellectuals to develop a sacred semiotics by attributing a sacred nature to Japan and its language. The roots of Nativist semiotics and ideology are to be found in preexisting cultural formations, and in particular in the medieval Buddhist episteme.

Several medieval texts dating back to the thirteenth-fourteenth centuries report that when the two archaic gods Izanagi and Izanami churned the primordial ocean to make the islands of Japan, the most sacred and powerful spell of Buddhism appeared.[3] It is the five-syllable mantra *a bi ra un ken*, known in this case as the "formula of Buddha

[3] On the myth of creation of the Japanese archipelago, see *Kojiki*; on the medieval interpretations of this myth in light of Buddhist doctrines, see Yamamoto Hiroko 1998: 84-94.

Dainichi" (Dainichi no inmon), representing the enlightenment of Dainichi (Mahāvairocana Tathāgata in Sanskrit), the cosmic Buddha of esoteric Buddhism and, at the same time, the semiotic structure of the universe. Another textual tradition interprets that formula as one representing the Womb Mandala (*taizōkai mandara, garbhadhātu maṇḍala* in Sanskrit). This numinous event meant that, as Yamamoto Hiroko puts it, "the primordial Japan was created out of the truths of esoteric Buddhism" (Yamamoto 1998: 87). Thus, Japan was envisioned by medieval scholars as the original land of the cosmic Buddha: the official name of the country, the "Country of Great Japan" (Dainipponkoku) was reinterpreted as the "original land of Dainichi" (Dainichi no honkoku). As such, Japan was the semiotic synthesis of the universe—a geopolitical mandala, the most sacred country on earth. Buddhist exegesis developed the idea that Japan was a "sacred realm" (*shinkoku*)—the land of the *kami* and, at the same time, of the Buddha. However, it is clear that, despite some obvious chauvinistic and isolationistic implications (which became prominent only toward the fifteenth century), the notion of *shinkoku* was essentially used by Buddhist institutions to assert their ideological, political and economic role (On the notion of Japan as a "sacred land" (*shinkoku*), see Kuroda Toshio 1996; Rambelli 1996). Not only was it not meant to define an exclusivistic cultural attitude; on the contrary, it presupposed the entire Buddhist transnational world view, in which Japan, far from being a central entity, was explicitly defined as "marginal."

Japan's sacred nature manifests itself in the very shape of the country: medieval Buddhist documents represent Japan as a one-pronged *vajra*,[4] the main ritual implement of esoteric Buddhism symbolizing the cosmic substance, its power and its essence—enlightenment. In other words, medieval Buddhist exegetes constructed the land of Japan as a motivated sign—a symbol encompassing the entire esoteric Buddhist episteme. Semiotics operations (manipulations of language, signs, meanings) played a key role in this. Now if Japan was a mandala, everything in it was sacred, a direct manifestation of the Buddhist truth. The Japanese language was one of the privileged objects of this kind of esoteric exegesis.

Toward the second half of the twelfth century Buddhist intellectuals begin to develop the idea that Japanese language was essentially identical with the absolute language spoken by the Buddha. However, scholars focused in particular on the lofty language of classical *waka* poetry, which was compared with esoteric Buddhist formulae in Sanskrit such as *mantra* and *dhāraṇī*. Differently from the Edo period Nativists and

[4] Kōshū, *Keiran shūyōshū* fasc. 37, in *Taishō shinshū daizōkyō* vol. 76:p. 626b; see also Grapard 1998.

their modern epigones, medieval authors do not emphasize the sacredness of the entire Japanese language, but mainly of one of its subsets (*waka* poetic language). The poet Saigyō (1118-1190) was among the first intellectuals to develop such conceptions. To him is attributed the following statement:

> waka poems are the true body of the Buddha. Therefore, to recite a poem is like vowing to make a statue of the Buddha; to remember a stanza is like chanting a secret mantra. Through poetry I have realized the Buddhist Law [i.e., attained enlightenment] (Quoted in Hagiwara 1986: 164-165).

Another Buddhist intellectual, the priest Mujū Ichien (1226-1312), was both more explicit and comprehensive in his treatment of language:

> in India dharani is ordinary language, yet, when recited for religious purpose, its effect is to erase sin and obliterate suffering. Similarly, the vocabulary of waka does not differ from everyday language, but if a man expresses his thoughts and feelings through waka, they are moving indeed. Waka imbued with the Buddhist spirit are more moving still: these are undoubtedly dharani Quoted in Konishi 1986: 117 footnote).

This identity of Waka poetry with *dhāraṇī* spells became a standard and accepted idea in medieval literary theory. But we have to wait until the Edo period before the absolute value of the Japanese language was explicitly and forcefully theorized in the work of the great literate and philologist Keichū. The Shingon Buddhist monk Keichū (1640-1701), known as the first exponent of the Nativist school, was the link connecting medieval doctrines on language with a rediscovery of Japanese classics and a valorization of the symbolic and spiritual importance of the Japanese language—the first step in the development of the Nativist semiotic ideology (On Keichū, see Nosco 1990, esp. pp. 49-67). Later Nativist authors, such as Kamo no Mabuchi, Motoori Norinaga, and Hirata Atsutane, as we have seen, further developed Keichū's theory to make Japanese language one of the most evident features of the uniqueness and superiority of Japanese culture. Keichū wrote that each of the forty-seven syllables of the Japanese language is to be considered a *dhāraṇī*, and as such it is endowed with profound meaning and supernatural power. Keichū is also to be credited for introducing into the intellectual debate the concept of *kotodama*, which he defined as an "invisible divine spirit," the "result of the spiritual power present in the spoken words" (Quoted in Toyoda 1986:

184-185). He focused his attention on the phonetic aspects of language, traditionally downplayed in favor of the symbolic traits of writing. Human voice, the sound of language, is the result of the vibration produced by wind that enters the body and resonates in the organs. Linguistic sounds are not peculiar to humans: all orders of being, from buddhas and *kami* down to demons and animals and nature produce meaningful sounds.[5] Keichū's panlinguistic universe is arguably based on the philosophy of language of Kūkai (774-835), the founder of the Shingon school of Japanese Buddhism, systematized in the *Shōji jissōgi* (On Kūkai's thought see Hakeda 1972; for a translation of the *Shōji jissōgi* see Ibid.: pp. 234-246; on Kukai's semiotics, see the previous lectures in this course and, especially, Rambelli 1989; Abé 1999). Before Kūkai, our attempt to trace a genealogy of Japanese semiotic ideology would take us too far: perhaps, to Chinese Taoist ideas and practices of language on the one hand, and to Indian philosophy of language on the other. So at this point it is better to stop here and pause to reflect on what this brief genealogical attempt has shown us.

6. Conclusion

So far I have attempted to trace a genealogy of Japanese semiotic ideas in connection to visions of cultural specificity and imperial ideology. Roland Barthes's poststructuralist interpretation of Japan, in a sense, can be traced back to medieval Buddhist doctrines.

Among the common themes running through the history of Japanese semiotic ideology, the most important are (i) the sacred nature of language: language is an autonomous entity, directly related to the source of the sacred, and endowed with power upon reality; (ii) language determines (in a very strong sense) the cultural and psychological identity of its speakers; (iii) the connections between language and subjectification: its speakers are made to conform themselves to the moral principles and customs enforced by the language itself; (iv) language, when properly employed, cannot be used to lie; (vi) free interpretation is not allowed; the meaning of language must be retrieved to realize the cosmic order to which the users of the language must conform

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[5] Keichū, *Waji shōranshō*, in *Keichū zenshū* vol. 10: 103-279. Tōkyō: Iwanami, 1973; the citation is on p. 110. Here Keichū seems to provide an antecedent to Tsunoda Tadanobu's theories of the lateralization of language in the Japanese brain, at concerning the continuity between human language and natural sounds.

themselves; (vi) language is connected to the center of Japanese edifice of power, the emperor.

For example, in the medieval Buddhist speculations on the sacredness of language, meaning plays an important part. However, the goal of the esoteric Buddhist semiotics is that of eliminating the boundaries between language and reality, mind and matter, thought and action, to dissolve the human subject into a microcosm of the universe. The absolute language cannot be used to lie—it is a replica of the inner structure and functioning of the cosmos. In this respect, we can see important lines of continuity connecting this vision with later ideological formations: the Japanese language is directly in contact with the essence of reality; it is true; it induces action (actually, linguistic utterances are the noblest actions as soteriological practices: speaking is a mantra; writing poetry is praising the buddha, etc.); language not only does not challenge authority, but reinforces it by showing the subtle order of the cosmos which is reflected in society; finally, language and signs are centered on the ultimate source of "meaning" and authority, the cosmic Buddha Dainichi, whose emissary on earth is the Japanese emperor (On the relations between the imperial ideology and esoteric Buddhism see Iyanaga 1999). Similarly, Edo period Nativism maintains that it is in ancient Japanese language that one can find the essence of Japanese culture and therefore the correct principles of behavior that follow the Way of the Gods as represented by the figure of the emperor. This constituted the springboard for the authoritarian ideology of the modern Japanese nation-state, according to which its citizen were almost ontologically bound to "naturally" follow the Will of the emperor: no meaning here, no interpretation, no subject—only a powerful "So!" (to borrow once again Barthes's words).

However, such a representation of continuities and similarities downplays important and significant differences. The medieval Buddhist discourse on language was connected to doctrines on the sacredness of territory (*shinkoku*) and was essentially used to give legitimacy, symbolic capital, and ideological stability to the religious institutions at a time of important social changes. It developed within the transnational framework of Buddhist culture, and did not stress a sense of Japanese cultural supremacy. In contrast, chauvinistic nationalism was the primary effect of the Edo period Nativist semiotic interventions, which initially aimed to retrieve the archaic, "original" Japanese identity against Tokugawa Neo-Confucian orthodoxy. During the Meiji period and modernization, Nativist ideas on language became one of the tools for the construction of a sense of national identity. With the formation of an authoritarian,

quasi-fascist regime in the Thirties, the concept of *kotodama* was used as an ideological justification of obedience and submission to the military junta acting in the name of the emperor. After World War II, scattered ideas on the uniqueness of Japanese language, the remnants of previous discourses, were adopted by Nihonjinron to reconstruct a sense of Japanese cultural identity in a global reality.

As we can see, the permanence of certain conceptual interests and structural similarities in the treatment of language and signs hide very different ideological agendas. However, something troubling remains constant: the "empire of signs" presupposes an "emperor of signs," an ultimate master of signification—a master signifier that sutures the various antagonisms (between inside and outside, among the various local traditions, within history, etc.) at the basis of Japanese society. This "ideological fantasy," as Slavoj Zizek would call it, is the bottom line of nationalistic culturology. The advanced processes of globalization of Japanese culture show that the dream of Japanese uniqueness based on a peculiar rapport with the signs is now mainly a delusion, rather than a powerful and mobilizing ideological tool. It may still have a nostalgic appeal among certain strata of the Japanese populace, and it could still play a dangerous xenophobic role.[6] But it is now time to develop different discourses on Japanese culture, by relying on different historical accounts and traditions of the archipelago based on diversity, openness, and multiplicity.[7]

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[6] Several recent books address the theme of the "end of Japan"; conservative authors such as Etō Jun, Nishibe Gū, Nishio Kanji, and Fukuda Kazuya attribute the crisis of the Nineties to Western democracy, internalization, and individualism.

[7] A growing number of authors are working in this fascinating and exciting direction, in particular, Yamaguchi Masao with its archaeology of Japanese modernity, and Amino Yoshihiko, with his studies on local diversity, cultural interactions, and international relations in the medival Japanese archipelago.

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