



# Of Matter, Spirits, and Places

Japanese Discourses on The Bodies of the Shinto Divinities (*Kami*)

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One of the striking aspects of Shinto is the vagueness and multiplicity that characterize descriptions of the gods (*kami*). The general understanding today is that *kami* are spiritual (immaterial) entities that attach themselves to particular things (rocks, trees, mountains, etc.); however, there are also beliefs that natural objects are divine in

themselves. In addition, human beings can, in certain cases, be deified as well. The notion of *kami* also shares some semantic elements with concepts such as *mono* (entity endowed with supernatural powers), *tama* (spirit), and *kokoro* (mind). In this paper, I present some aspects of premodern Japanese discussions on the body of the *kami* (*shintai*), with their multiplicity and ultimate irreducibility, with special emphasis on medieval doctrinal texts and early modern philosophical treatments by Confucians and Nativists. I will suggest that a shared feature of the theology of the *kami* throughout history is a constant oscillation (and indecision) between materiality and spirituality, a structural oscillation that is responsible for both the constancy of certain themes and religious innovation.

Fabio Rambelli (PhD, 1992) teaches Japanese religions and cultural history at the University of California, Santa Barbara, where he holds the ISF endowed chair in Shinto Studies. His research focuses on Japanese esoteric Buddhism (especially, semiotics and representation theories and practices), on the interaction of Buddhism with local cults in Asia, and on the formation of Shinto discourses in premodern Japan. Books include *Vegetal Buddhas* (2001), *Buddhas and Kami in Japan* (with Mark Teeuwen, 2001), *Buddhist Materiality* (2007), *Buddhism and Iconoclasm in East Asia* (with Eric Reinders, 2012), *A Buddhist Theory of Semiotics* (2013), *Buddhist Anarchism* (2014). He also published two books on the Japanese understanding and imagination of Italy (Itariateki kangaekata, 1997, and Itariateki, 2005). Currently, he is working on an edited book on religious ideas and rituals related to the sea in Japan; transformations in religious thought during the Muromachi period; and the premodern Japanese imagination of India.

This talk is coordinated by Caroline Hirasawa (FLA) for ICC Research Unit "Materialities of the Sacred."

