

# **ESSWE9 Book of Abstracts**

**EANASE (East Asian Network for the Study of Esotericism) session: Alternative ancient histories of Japan in the 20th century**

**Convener:** Avery Morrow, Brown University

**Orion Klautau**  
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*Shōtoku Taishi in the Making of a Judeo-Christian Japanese Past*

Very few characters in Japanese history are as popular as Prince Shōtoku (a.k.a. Shōtoku Taishi, 574-622). Regent to the very first Empress of Japan, he is today regarded not only as the father of Japanese democracy and diplomacy but also as the individual responsible for the introduction of Buddhism into Japan. Between the eighth and twenty-first centuries, the prince has continuously appeared in different types of literary narratives, depicted as both warrior and pacifist, saint and sinner, prophet and politician. Despite, however, his strong historical association with Buddhism, from the early twentieth century certain intellectual currents began emphasizing alleged (Judeo-)Christian influences in his ideas and activities, which later evolved into claims that the prince himself would have been, in fact, a believer in the God of Israel. Boosted mostly by modern studies on the existence of Nestorian Christians in ancient China, these narratives postulated that the Hata Clan, one of the most prominent families of ancient Japan and one to which Shōtoku is considered to have been close, in reality descended from one of the lost tribes of Israel. This presentation will trace the genealogy of this image, which over the course of a hundred years developed from an obscure semi-academic theory into a popular aspect of contemporary Japanese occulture.

**Ioannis Gaitanidis**  
Chiba University

*"The Ainu were Ancient Greeks": Japan in post-WWII Greek Ethnocentric Imaginations*

During the rise of post-WWII ethnocentric ideologies that eventually led to the military dictatorship which ruled Greece from 1967 to 1974, many intellectuals engaged in a project of glorifying Greece's past. In this project, Ancient Greeks were re-imagined as truly global peoples who had travelled and subsequently influenced the histories of nations worldwide. One of those intellectuals was Ioannis Passas (1899-1987), a journalist and author of non-fiction literature who became famous in the 1930s for his involvement in several prolific liberal magazines. Later recognized as a hero of the resistance against the Nazi occupation of Greece, Passas turned his attention after the end of WWII to the editorship of the famous encyclopedia *Ilios* (*The Sun*). This voluminous work went through three editions and constituted, during the second half of the 20th century, a must-have source of knowledge for public schools and upper-class households. At the same time, and as illustrated by the title of his last monograph *Η Αληθινή Προϊστορία* (*The True Prehistory*, 1981), Passas, later in life, joined contemporaneous debates about "secret histories", "hidden histories" and "true histories" of Greece. He claimed that some Greek myths were historical accounts of actual events and that Ancient Greeks had toured the world, from North America to East Asia, including Japan. Passas was particularly

fascinated with the Ainu. The encyclopedia *Ilios* contains a substantial entry on the Ainu, and his other writings claim that the Ainu descended from a community of Ancient Greeks who had settled on the island of Hokkaido. This paper explores the political underpinnings of Passas's imaginations of Japan and locates them within a global post-war history of para-ancestries at the edge of modern empires.

### **Toshihiro Ōmi**

Musashino University

*Parahistories in Japan's Modern Buddhism: Takakusu Junjirō's Theory of the "Sumeru Race" during the Pacific War*

During the Pacific War, Takakusu Junjirō (1866-1945), a leading scholar of Buddhism in modern Japan, suddenly began putting forward ideas on the "Sumeru race". According to Takakusu, this "Sumeru race", would have arisen in the Kunlun Mountains between 6,000 and 7,000 years ago, contributing greatly to the formation of the ancient Babylonian and Indian civilizations, and leaving a significant impact on the languages and cultures of Southeast Asia. These para-historical discourses have many superficial similarities to other ideologies often presented in Japan at the time to affirm the superiority of the Yamato race. It also functioned as ideological support for the Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere, an official concept developed by imperial thinkers aiming at the creation of a self-sufficient bloc of Asian nations led by the Japanese. However, we should also not overlook the fact that Takakusu's ideas on the "Sumeru race" contained a number of assertions unique to him, presented from his position as a scholar of Indian Buddhism. In this presentation, I will clarify how Takakusu, whose global perspective did not contradict his strong nationalistic feelings, developed his ideas on the "Sumeru race".

### **Avery Morrow**

Brown University

*Globalization of Occult Shinto Practices and Parahistorical Theories through Aikido*

Starting in 1958, Japanese aikido teachers were rapidly dispatched around the world, including Singapore, South Africa, France, Brazil and the United Kingdom. Aikido quickly gained worldwide appeal as a martial art, but it brought with it two other types of knowledge, both of which originated in the early 20th century. First, aikido introduced methods of breathing practice, physical austerity, and bodily meditation which its founder Ueshiba Morihei connected to Shinto mythology and tradition. Aikido historians seem to assume these practices originate in Deguchi Onisaburō's religious movement, Oomoto, but in fact, they can be traced to Kawazura Bonji's Misogi movement, with Oomoto being a secondary source of spiritual language surrounding them. Second, Ueshiba's disciple Nakazono Mutsuro infused aikido with teachings about the symbolism of Japanese syllables, called *kotodama*. These teachings, which have found their way into many aikido publications, were combined with an unusual Japan-centric view of human evolution. Nakazono was inspired by the Takenouchi Documents, an alternative ancient historical narrative or, as I have called it in the past, "parahistory"; in this case, there are very few actual documents associated with the narrative. These more spiritual teachings of *kotodama* and parahistory originated with Nakazono's contemporary in Japan, Ogasawara Kōji, and most were most likely unrelated to the key concerns of the

founder Ueshiba. Through such esoteric beliefs and practices, aikido's fortunes became tied to an exoticized spirituality which perceived aikido's original masters as having special access to the flows, vibrations, and natural harmonies of the universe. In the 21st century, this "harmonious" worldview has isolated aikido from other martial arts and seems to be losing popularity.