

Jeudi 24 janvier 2019

Séminaire interdisciplinaire du
Centre de recherches sur le Japon
(EHESS)

Société et culture du Japon contemporain

« The Politics of Sacred Forests in Japan: Shinto Ideology in a Secular Age »

Aike P. ROTS (Université d'Oslo)

Abstract

In this lecture, I will discuss the process by which Shinto has come to be redefined as an ancient tradition of nature worship, and provide a critical analysis of the popular claim that this tradition contains important resources for overcoming environmental problems today. I will also introduce one of the core concepts in contemporary discourse on Shinto and the environment: chinju no mori. This term refers to sacred shrine forests, which are said to possess important ecological, social and spiritual value. As I will show, these forests are subject to multiple, at times competing claims, which reflect different notions of “nature”, and different understandings of the role of Shinto in Japanese society.

One of the institutions that has expressed a concern for the natural environment – in particular, the preservation of sacred forests – is the national Association of Shinto Shrines, Jinja Honchō. This organisation consistently seeks to reclaim Shinto’s position in the centre of public space, both literally and metaphorically, by redefining shrine worship as “traditional Japanese culture” and denying its “religious” character. In fact, the current Shinto establishment has close ties to the ruling government, and actively contributes to the revitalisation of notions of Japan as a sacred nation surrounding a divine emperor. How can a worship tradition be simultaneously “sacred” and “secular”? And what is the significance of forests for this contemporary Shinto ideology? These are some of the questions that I will address in this lecture.