

ISOMAE Jun'ichi 磯前順一, *Kiki shinwa no metahistori* 記紀神話のメタヒストリー. Tokyo: Yoshikawa Kōbunkan, 1998. 6 + 215 pp. ¥2000 paper, ISBN 4-642-07747-2.

ISOMAE JUN'ICHI IS A YOUNG Japanese historian of religions to watch. A graduate of the University of Tokyo, now teaching at Nihon Joshi Daigaku, Isomae is a scholar of great energy, diverse interests, and intellectual verve. Since 1994 he has published, among other things, a meticulously researched study of the religious significance of *haniwa* figurines and masks (*Dogū to kamen: Jōmon shakai no shūkyō hōzō* 土偶と仮面—縄文社会の宗教構造, 1994) and provided an invaluable research resource for future students of modern Japanese religions—a complete catalogue of the University of Tokyo archives on State Shinto. Currently he is pursuing a study of the early history of the academic study of religion in Japan.

Kiki shinwa no metahistori is a collection of five previously published essays, together with an introduction and afterword. If this work suffers from some of the weaknesses common to such collections (e.g., a certain repetitiveness, the preliminary nature of each inquiry), the cumulative power of the whole more than makes up for these. Collectively these essays, written when Isomae was a postgraduate research associate at the University of Tokyo, constitute a prolegomenon to a new kind of study of the myths in—and the academic myths of—the *Kojiki* 古事記, *Nihon shoki* 日本書紀, and *fudoki* 風土記. Isomae signals something of his intention in the opening sentence of his introduction: “This study does not set out to ask, ‘What is written in the *Kojiki* and *Nihon shoki* (*kiki*)?’ Rather, it asks, ‘How have the *Kojiki*/*Nihon shoki* been read?’ and ‘Why have they continued to be read over such a long period of time?’”

In an important sense, the “metahistory” Isomae is calling for is at once a Japanese version of the Euro-American “history of the book” project, a reception history of the *Kojiki* and the *Nihon shoki*, and a history of commentarial activity around these texts over the centuries. In contrast to the essentialist representation of these myths and their significance proffered by nativist scholars and their successors, Isomae argues that the “meaning” of these myths has always been disputed, as readers drew different meanings from them from their own diverse and distinct sociohistorical positions. In his opening essay on Motoori Norinaga’s reading of *kiki* myths, Isomae argues that the key to Motoori’s appropriation of these myths lies less in his *Kojiki-den* 古事記伝 than in the relatively ignored work *Tama kushige* 玉くしげ. In this essay he demonstrates that, although Motoori usually disparaged the *Nihon shoki* in favor of the *Kojiki*, he actually created his “true way” by using a *Nihon shoki* variant to read the *musubi-gami* back into the kami inhabiting the High Heavens. Isomae challenges the reader to ask why Motoori dealt with the different tellings of myths as he did. What we have in the case of Motoori is, of course, an ideological imperative driving the combinatory retelling *cum* reading of myths by an important intellectual. Yet, this practice is not confined in the history of religions to the elite sectors of a society. Common people, too, combine diverse, but related, narratives to form a composite narrative that

circulates orally and that is, thus, the “text” carried in the popular imagination. For instance, if pressed to recount the life of Jesus, most Christians would tell a composite story based on parts of all the Gospels, yet not identical to any of them. Thus, at times the “living” metanarrative, if you will, “harmonizes” the different versions or variants; at other times, commentaries attempt to guide different readings of the texts. Isomae is interested in both how influential elite scholars interpreted and re-presented Japanese myths, and how ordinary people engaged these narratives. In several of these essays he wrestles with the very idea of myth “variants” and the ways academics and others—including emperors—have treated these. He suggests, rightly I think, that the very act of labelling a mythic narrative as a variant presumes that there is (or was) an original, correct, and authentic narrative. Moreover, this “labelling” constitutes a claim that the person(s) making this assertion has (have) the power to discern the original or the authentic narrative from the distorted and inauthentic copies. In other words, naming a mythic narrative as a variant is an important attempt to exercise power by controlling and evaluating the tellings of such stories. Isomae notes, as others have, that the preface to the *Kojiki* itself clearly indicates that the act of committing these myths to writing was an attempt on the part of the Emperor Tenmu to exercise complete control over these myths and genealogies. If Tenmu proclaimed that his goal was to “correct errors” that had crept into the true mythistory of the land—and generated “variants” as a result—we must recognize this move to have been a part of his attempt to legitimate his rule, while delegitimizing the claims of others.

We are here in the heart of power politics. Isomae asks his readers not to avert their gaze, but instead to turn a critical eye to this history (or, in his terms, this aspect of the “metahistory” of the *Kojiki* and *Nihon shoki*). For Isomae, the canonization process occasionally involves a violent element of repression, as witnessed by the massacre of members of the Soga family in 645 and the burning of their alternative mythhistories (e.g., *The History of the Emperors* and *History of the Country*). Even when physical violence is not involved, however, the violence of the repression of other voices and versions of the past (and the present) is all too often evident. Aspects of this are found in Isomae’s essay, “Changing Legends: The Ancient and Medieval Yamato-takeru.” Without going into any detail here, suffice it to say that he uses the presence and/or absence of specific narrative details between and among myth narratives in order to suggest the politics informing the texts (e.g., while the tale of Yamato-takeru is found in the *Kojiki*, *Nihon shoki*, and *fudoki*, only the second, which stresses the character’s imperial status, contains the statement that the Kusanagi Sword was enshrined in the Atsuta Shrine). If the tale of Yamato-takeru is retold in multiple different ways in medieval works, such as *Sendai kuji hongei* 先代旧事本紀, *Heike monogatari* 平家物語, *Taiheiki* 太平記, and *Yamatohime no miko seiki* 倭姫命世記, to mention a few, the presence of this sort of textual politics remains a constant.

Isomae raises critical issues for all historians of religions and Japanese culture by challenging our simplistic understanding of what a “given” text, such

as the *Nihon shoki*, was and is. He does this through, among other things, a simple but critical methodological move signaled in his opening sentence translated above: he turns our attention to the question of how and in what form the *Nihon shoki* circulated and was read in the Heian period. (In the essay included here, he does not pursue these issues into later periods or into contemporary Japan, but clearly he seeks to move his readers and fellow academics to take up this task.) Isomae notes that in the Heian period, the *Nihon shoki* circulated with the *Shinsenshōjiroku* 新撰姓氏録, which functioned as a commentary on the historical chronicle. This fact suggests a number of important things. First, the “correct reading of this text was never finally determined, but was always contested or in the process as different groups sought to control it. Second, the Heian *Nihon shoki*—or, more accurately, one important version of it—was constituted in a crucial sense by the material form in which it circulated. Isomae argues that the myths within the *Nihon shoki* were read through the contextualizing interpretive lens of the appended commentary. By extension, when the *Shinsenshōjiroku* was later dropped from the set, we had yet another *Nihon shoki*, even if “the words on the page” remained the same. Third, as times changed and specific family/clan fortunes rose and fell, people felt yet again a pressing need to link themselves to the geneologies of the kami in this and other texts. To no one’s surprise, I would hope, rather than being timeless texts, the *Kojiki* and *Nihon shoki* are shown to have been continually remade through the encounters specific historical agents had with them in space and time.

None of the essays in *Kiki shinwa no metahistori* is exhaustive in its treatment of the issues raised by Isomae. The importance of this collection lies less in the answers the author provides than in the questions and issues he raises. It remains to be seen how long many of us will remain content to teach the *Kojiki* and the *Nihon shoki* as ahistorical, decontextualized texts and, in so doing, to be complicit in the ideological project of Japanese essentialism. Isomae Jun’ichi is a young scholar to watch, not least because he forces us to look critically and self-reflexively at our own position(s) and pedagogical practices as a part of *kiki* metahistory he has sketched here.

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