

Karen SMYERS, *The Fox and the Jewel: Shared and Private Meanings in Contemporary Inari Worship*. viii + 271 pp. Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 1999. Paper \$27.95. ISBN: 0-8248-2102-5.

THE IMAGE OF JAPAN as a homogeneous society has been roundly criticized in recent decades, especially by Western theorists. The outward appearance of uniformity, they argue, masks a wide range of divergent attitudes and opinions lurking just beneath the surface. Moreover, the veneer of uniformity itself is not a spontaneous occurrence; it has largely been imposed from above by centralized institutions. Acknowledging the considerable diversity that exists within the Japanese population will aid us not only in delineating the mechanisms involved in constructing a national identity, but also in understanding the exercise of human agency in the pursuit of individualized objectives, even within a society supposedly inclined toward harmony and consensus. The Japanese are not mere automatons, mechanically reproducing certain preconceived patterns; they are self-interested actors who routinely bend the patterns to their own particular needs and preferences.

It is in this vein that anthropologist Karen Smyers has written *The Fox and the Jewel*. Through an examination of beliefs and practices directed at the deity Inari, Smyers presents a very individualized form of Japanese religion. In so doing, she challenges the perception of cultural uniformity while at the same time delineating the strategies that sustain this perception.

Smyers applies a Bakhtinian approach that assumes the presence of contending voices. Western theorists are no doubt more inclined toward this type of approach due to their own preoccupation with the individual. But in this instance the author is not simply imposing her own biases, as the notion of "my Inari" is frequently invoked by her informants themselves. This to some extent derives from the malleable nature of the deity in question. Inari may be considered either female or male, depending on location. Likewise, centers of Inari worship may be either Shinto or Buddhist, though they are more commonly associated with the former. Even so, Inari is not among the official pantheon of Shinto deities described in ancient myth and was never drawn into the politics of the state. It thus retained a fair degree of autonomy and has freely adapted to changing conditions. Beginning as a rice deity, Inari survived the transition from rural-agrarian to urban-industrial society and is

now equally at home in field and factory. The single constant in this complex background has been Inari's association with fertility.

The most ubiquitous symbols of Inari are the fox and jewel alluded to in the book's title. The jewel is recognized as an important source of creative power and is thus associated with individualized wish fulfillment. This helps explain Inari's appeal to the individual adherent. In general, however, it is the fox, along with the various connotations it evokes, that serves as the primary focus of the book. The fox is considered Inari's messenger, and statues and other images of the fox are almost invariably found in centers of Inari worship. In fact, the fox is so closely associated with Inari that it is commonly mistaken for the deity itself. This coincides with various folk traditions that attribute fox spirits with supernatural powers, including the ability to change shape, possess humans, and even assume human form themselves.

According to Smyers, Inari's widespread appeal derives from this very association with the fox, which serves as a symbol of liminality. The fox is categorically marginal. As a member of the canid family, it is related to the dog; but in certain respects its appearance and behavior are more like those of a cat. It is most active at dawn and dusk, both of which are considered transitional periods. It routinely exploits more than one type of habitat, in a sense transcending its natural limits. "Foxes not only live on the boundaries, they cross them. And by crossing, they challenge them" (p. 189). This enhances their image as mediators between humans and the divine.

Smyers describes the fox's alleged ability to change shape as a "cultural fantasy" (p. 179), an expression of the desire to transcend limitations. This desire is enacted through Inari worship, in that adherents actively change the procedures in keeping with their immediate needs. Change may be effected by ritually "dividing" the spirit of the deity into more than one segment. Like lighting a candle from an already burning flame, the original remains undiminished. New Inaris may thus be enshrined in other locations, often with different functions conferred upon them. In this way Inari can be tailored to local preferences.

Another means of introducing change is through shamanic revelation. Practicing shamans are often found in close association with Inari centers. While not officially sanctioned by either Shinto or Buddhism, they nevertheless develop close personal relationships with small groups of followers, thus offering an alternative to the formal priesthood. Unlike priests, shamans derive their authority through direct interaction with spirits and deities, who sometimes dictate the creation of new procedures. These possession experiences may stand in conflict with the "official" tradition; they are nonetheless tolerated as they enhance Inari's vitality and thus draw more visitors to the center. Priests, in fact, may concede to popular beliefs and practices in the interests of generating greater appeal. This interplay of forces should not be seen as disruptive, threatening, or contradictory, but rather as providing balance. They represent both revitalizing and stabilizing forces.

The book presents a considerable amount of supplementary information, which, while adding to the overall depth of the study, often seems irrelevant to the central argument. Much of the text seems loosely organized, as if relating

casual field observations in the order they occurred. On the other hand, this in a sense recapitulates the fieldwork experience by demonstrating how random vignettes and observations lead to important insights, which are eventually woven into meaningful conclusions. One of the book's subtexts is that by investigating not one but several Inari worship centers, the ethnographer achieves a comparative viewpoint that is unavailable to the ordinary adherent. In fact, Smyers notes similarities between the fox figure and herself as anthropologist in terms of crossing categorical boundaries, mediating between groups, and assuming new identities.

The book's major contribution appears in the sixth, or penultimate, chapter. Here Smyers describes a mechanism for maintaining the appearance of cultural uniformity while simultaneously allowing the expression of differing attitudes and opinions. This consists of five strategies, some of which are so similar as to be almost indistinguishable. Screening refers largely to the print medium. In their promotional materials, Inari centers edit the testimony of shamans and other adherents to remove the more mystical elements, presenting possession experiences as dream sequences, for example. Refraining is the exercise of self-restraint, whereby personal opinions are voluntarily suppressed in order to preserve the appearance of uniformity. Priests, for example, refrain from airing their own impressions of Inari worship because they do not wish to contradict the "official" version. Wrestling involves indirect, nonverbal forms of contention, whereby lay worshippers persist in certain activities despite official prohibitions, essentially pretending not to have heard. Othering utilizes the distinction between insider and outsider to strengthen group cohesiveness, in this case making Inari worshippers appear similar by emphasizing their distinctiveness from others.

Finally, layering (which seems virtually synonymous with refraining) relates to concealing one's own sentiments beneath an outward show of compliance. This commonly results in two different versions of "the truth," one that is publicly acknowledged and the other that is privately held. Smyers admits that this latter concept is simply another way of expressing the well-known distinction between *tatema* and *honne*. Her contribution lies in applying the concept to a better understanding of Japanese religious activity. She is careful to point out that concealing divergent opinions while outwardly conforming should not be seen as simple duplicity; both "layers" are genuine, but in different ways. The central point, however, is that focusing only on the outer layer can be highly misleading. To clarify, she employs the image of centripetal (toward the center) versus centrifugal (away from the center) forces, the two acting in opposition but nevertheless holding the bodies they act upon in balance. Centripetal, or aggregating, features are more readily observable and thus often taken to represent the norm. To fully understand a situation, however, one must consider both forces in interaction.

The five strategies collectively maintain a sense of unity through adherence to a single set of symbols, while at the same time discouraging the open expression of potentially disruptive individualized interpretations of these symbols. Inari worship thus maintains an image of unity while allowing diversity to flourish. In short, "[t]he lack of definitive central dogma and single

controlling institution, coupled with the lack of communication between groups, make it possible for multiple forms to exist without people realizing that they are not in perfect conformity” (p. 211). This explains why Inari worship can be both an expression of cultural unity and a distinctly personal or individualized form of religious practice. Like the shape-shifting fox of folk tradition, Inari adapts itself to varying needs and circumstances.

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