

REVIEWS

ITO Satoshi 伊藤 聡, ENDŌ Jun 遠藤 潤, MATSUO Kōichi 松尾恒一, and MORI Mizue 森 瑞枝, *Nihonshi shōhyakka: Shintō* 日本史小百科・神道. Tokyo: Tōkyōdō Shuppan, 2002. 318pp. ¥2500, ISBN 4-490-20446-9.

This book offers an introduction to Shinto (or rather, in the terminology of this special *JRS* issue, to kami worship) for a general audience. Its modest title does not in any way help it to stand out among the wide range of popularizing books with similar titles that one can typically find lined up in the religion section of Japanese bookstores; but those who pause to take a glimpse at its contents will soon notice that this book is different. Contrary to what the title may lead one to expect, this book is not just another encyclopedic collection of Shinto data, but offers an eloquent critique of established Shinto scholarship by authors who advocate a new approach to the specific subjects they cover. In their joint introduction (pp. 2–3), the authors point to a number of fundamental problems in the “modern understanding of Shinto,” and make it clear that this book is an ambitious attempt to open up new perspectives on the kami and their role in Japanese history. First of all, the authors question the practice of isolating Shinto from the mainstream of Japanese religious culture as “a uniquely Japanese, unchanging spiritual tradition,” and they point out that kami beliefs, far from being encapsulated in a closed “Shinto” category, have throughout history developed and functioned in a chaotic interplay between practices and ideas of various origins.

This perspective on the formative history of kami worship permeates the short essays that form the body of the book. More traditional accounts of Shinto history usually make due mention of “Shinto-Buddhist amalgamation,” but they tend to situate this phenomenon in the Dark Age of medieval Japan, as a curious and temporary derailment that was to be overcome in the early modern period, when “pure” Shinto was once more restored to its ancient glory. This Kokugaku-type view of history has led Shinto scholars to focus heavily on the ancient period, to give scant regard to the medieval period, and to draw a straight line from ancient kami practice to modern Shinto. This book reverses the balance, and focuses heavily on the late-classical (Insei) and medieval periods as a key period in the development of kami worship (see, for example, page 198). Instead of positing a continuity between ancient Shinto and “revived” modern Shinto, interrupted by a Buddhist period of syncretism, the authors stress that Buddhism was a major factor in the formation of Shinto, and radically transformed the concept of kami in a multitude of ways.

Where many introductions to Shinto isolate “Shinto-Buddhist amalgamation” from “Shinto proper” by discussing it separately, this book hardly includes a single essay where the Buddhist context of kami worship is not essential in some way. Examples picked more or less at random include the transformation of kami from invisible spirits to human-like figures and human ancestors; the perception of kami as benevolent protectors; the worship of kami in permanent shrines; the practice of making pilgrimages to

these shrines; the emergence of the now ubiquitous *matsuri* where the kami are paraded through the community in a *mikoshi*; the practice of entertaining the kami with various kinds of performances; the notion that the kami dwell within the human mind; the idea that Japan is a “divine land”; the creation of wholly new categories of kami, such as *gongen*; and the emergence of “Shinto art,” such as kami statues, scrolls, and mandalas. Taken together, the essays in the book are extremely effective in impressing on us the absurdity of assuming that modern Japanese practices around kami are living fossils of a pre-Buddhist past, or that modern Shinto is a direct continuation of “Japan’s indigenous religion.”

Another problem that this book aims to address is the fact that established understandings of Shinto depend heavily on doctrinal texts, and show little interest in popular beliefs and practices, or in literary sources on the kami. Especially on the latter topic, the book breaks new ground by incorporating recent findings of historians of literature in the history of kami worship. In his essay on the “medieval *Nihongi*” (pp. 148–57), for example, Itō Satoshi points out that tales and teachings (*gensetsu*) about kami that originated in the context of *waka* 和歌 initiations (which developed at the imperial court in the late Kamakura period), later came to feature prominently in Shinto initiations. This draws our attention to the fact that medieval Shinto was formed under the profound influence of Tantric forms of *waka* theory, and opens our eyes to the cultural context within which interest was focused on the kami during this crucial period.

This is just one example of the many ways in which this book succeeds in contextualizing the kami in new, refreshing ways. Throughout the book, the authors force us to look at kami practice from unfamiliar angles, and not only in the little-studied medieval period. Neither, of course, is the angle always a Buddhist one. In her essay on “modern perceptions of the kami” (pp. 18–23), for example, Mori Mizue traces the common understanding of Shinto as polytheistic nature worship to the influence of Western critiques of modernity in the early twentieth century. Especially, she points to the rise of Western occultism, which inspired Western writers such as Lafcadio Hearn, Joseph Mason, and Wenceslau de Moraes to develop an intense interest in Shinto as a primitive religion that can offer relief from the cold, rational inhumaneness of modern society. At the same time, Japanese intellectuals of the Romantic school discovered Shinto under the influence of their reading of such Western thinkers as Tolstoy and Heidegger, and their critique of the Christian view of nature. When they chose to see Shinto as animism and nature worship, this was because they sensed in Shinto the “possibility to overcome modern rationalism.” Here, Mori opens up a revealing perspective on the emergence of what have become the most common clichés regarding Shinto.

Continuing her discussion with a look at postwar Shinto, Mori concludes:

Today, many draw a straight line from the kami of “state Shinto,” who were held up as the basis for Japanocentrism and loyalty to the state, to the kami of today’s “generous, tolerant Japan” (*ōraka de kan’yō na Nihon*), who “represent the force of life itself,” “dwell in beautiful

nature,” and “are imperfect, and therefore human.” But is it right to connect these two understandings of the kami so easily? Should we really be satisfied with vague explanations of Shinto as animism, nature worship, ancestor worship, and the like?

So far, then, Shinto has yet to produce a modern understanding of the kami. (p. 23)

Here Mori tramples on all the established rules of Shinto theology, which often takes the form of a balancing act between one discourse that stresses the connection between Shinto, the emperor, and the Japanese state, and another that defines Shinto in terms of ecology, regional pluralism, and primitivism. As a result, she opens up a wide vista of unsolved problems and unexplored possibilities—some of which are addressed with an equally open mind in the other essays of the book.

It is difficult not to be inspired by this unconventional book, and it is warmly recommended both to specialists and to all others with an interest in the history of the kami.

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