



Ellen Schattschneider, *Immortal Wishes: Labor and Transcendence on a Japanese Sacred Mountain*

Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003. xiv + 268 pp. Glossary, bibliography, index. \$21.95 paper, ISBN 0-8223-3062-8, \$64.95 cloth, ISBN 0-8223-3075-x.

THIS STUDY of religious experiences gives a personal, detailed, insightful analysis of certain religious activities centered around Akakura Mountain Shrine in northern Honshu, informed by anthropological, religious, economic, and social concerns. Through a detailed presentation of historical background and current practical experiences in this local area, the author is able to provide an analysis that is full of fascinating insights and thought-provoking asides concerning the role of religion in this corner of Japanese society. One is impressed again with the complexities of local religious practices, with the interweaving of various historical and social influences, such that the hard categories of “Buddhist” and “Shinto” seem an artificial imposition on the complicated goings-on that Schattschneider describes.

The “immortal wishes” of the title derives from Freud’s use of the phrase in the context of his meditations on the nature of unconscious desire (210). Freud uses the image of the Titans encased by a mountain to illustrate the psychological function of repression, “the most fundamental of human impulses and longings, rooted in the psychic terrain of infancy and early childhood, concealed but never annihilated by the apparatus of civilization” (4). In her conclusion the author points out that “in borrowing Freud’s Olympian metaphor for the title of this book, I have sought to evoke the simultaneous capacity of landscape forms to reveal and conceal, to make manifest and to repress” (225). Thus, in this book the phrase refers to the ambivalent reactions people experience through coming in contact with Akakura Mountain. It also refers specifically to the “divinization” (and hence a sort of immortality) of Kawai Mariko through her experiences with the mountain kami and the subsequent enshrining of her spirit as a kami on the mountain slopes. Again, the phrase also plays on the first ideogram of the compound *sennin* 仙人 (“immortal person”), since the book is about the experiences of “people” with a “mountain.”

The contents are best described in the author’s own words (14–17). Chapter 1 “locates spirit mediumship and ritual performance at Akakura within a larger historical geography of remembered crisis and trauma in the Tsugaru region.” The main focus is on Kawai Mariko, an important medium who had visions of Akakura Daigongen and became the leader of an Akakura Mountain Shrine congregation. Chapter 2 “emphasizes [how] the enduring predicaments of indigeneity, household integrity, labor, and kinship have helped structure the shrine’s emerging architecture and popular apprehensions of Akakura Mountain’s sacred topography.” Chapter 3 “examines the integrative functions of ritual performance within this intermediate

landscape, bridging dynamic frontiers between the visible and the invisible, the mortal and the immortal, the living and the dead.” Chapter 4 “explores how individual worshipers understand their exchange transactions with divinities and ancestors.” Chapter 5 “demonstrates [how] these processes of internalization and transposition are most powerfully experienced by those performing demanding physical austerities on the mountain slopes.” Chapter 6 “traces the micropolitical consequences of these experiences of transforming selfhood and interpersonal relations, with particular attention to revelatory visions by individual worshipers.” In the conclusion the author reflects on the various types of “immortal wishes” experienced by the people involved in various ways on Akakura Mountain.

It is difficult to summarize such a complex study. The author covers a lot of ground, as it were, both analytically and geographically (such as detailed descriptions of practices [*shugyō*] and rituals on the mountain). As an extra bonus, the author has prepared a website (www.brandeis.edu/~eschatt/ImmortalWishes/index.html) as a “teaching resource” for *Immortal Wishes*. This site contains extensive extra material, including pictures not included in the book, further details on Akakura and surrounding areas, and links to related materials on sacred mountains, spirit mediumship, *shugyō*, Shugendo, and so forth, as well as video clips of some of the rituals discussed in the book. The reviewer can do no better than point the reader in the direction of these valuable resources.

Paul L. Swanson
Nanzan Institute for Religion and Culture