



Susan L. Burns, *Before the Nation: Kokugaku and the Imagining of Community in Early Modern Japan*

Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003. x + 282pp. \$23.95, paper, ISBN 0-8223-3172-1; \$84.95 cloth, ISBN 0-8223-3183-7.

ANTHROPOLOGIST Margaret Mead often commented that the people of any culture experiencing momentous change must have a firm knowledge of their roots and that the loss of this connection to the past can cause problems of self-identity. Contemporary Japan is a fascinating example of a modern culture that is continually striving to define itself through endless studies and debates over what it means to be Japanese. This process, however, is by no means modern, for Japanese scholars as early as the early Edo period have been studying classical Japanese literature and ancient writings with the goal of trying to identify especially Japanese cultural elements or examples of purely Japanese culture. One of the results of this current was the development of a late eighteenth century intellectual movement known as Kokugaku (the “study of our country” or “national learning”).

Susan L. Burns, Associate Professor of History at the University of Chicago, has provided a superb analytical study of the Kokugaku movement before and during the early stages of the Meiji era. Burns’s goal is to analyze how various early modern Japanese scholars began to define Japan as a unique social and cultural identity, the “prehistory of Japanese nationness” (9). She begins her work with a thorough analysis of Motoori Norinaga’s *Kojikiden* (Commentaries on the *Kojiki*), which when completed in 1798 became one of the most important intellectual works of the late Edo period. She then contrasts Norinaga’s ideas with the work of three other contemporary Kokugaku scholars, Ueda Akinari, Fujitani Mitsue, and Tachibana Moribe, all of whom variously challenged many of Norinaga’s conclusions and greatly expanded the Kokugaku debate.

Burns regards her work as a “case study” of how “a self-consciously modern nationalism was constructed by deploying existing culturalist notions of commu-

nity” (225). Even though some scholars date the start of the Kokugaku movement to the late seventeenth century, Burns chooses to start her analysis with Norinaga because it was his work which formed the basis of subsequent debate on the idea of Japan. While admitting that her examinations of the work of these Kokugaku scholars “represent disparate and, with the exception of that of Norinaga, discontinuous forms of Kokugaku that played no great role in the major histories of nationalism” her study of Kokugaku from this perspective reveals “the emergence in the late Tokugawa period of a complex and contentious discourse on the nature of Japan. By interrogating language, textuality, and history, the Kokugaku scholars made the early Japanese texts the means to articulate new forms of community that contested the social and political order of their time. Against divisions such as status, regional affinities, and existing collectivities such as domains, towns, and villages, they began to make ‘Japan’ the source of individual and cultural identity” (220).

Burns’s study of these late Tokugawa writers exposes a gradually expanding debate concerning the nature of Japanese society during what was a tumultuous era marked by profound economic change, growing mobility, increased literacy, and the emergence of a burgeoning publication industry and a national media. One sees through Burns’s analysis of the debate among writers like Norinaga, Akinari, Mitsue, and Moribe how inadequate the early Tokugawa concept of a society where social and geographic mobility would be limited had become. Burns’s analysis of the profound differences between the intellectual ideas of these writers exposes the growing intensity of the intellectual ferment of the period.

In her last chapter Burns explores how Kokugaku became the basis for efforts by a variety of Meiji era scholars to develop new modern conceptions of nationness within such disciplines as national literature and intellectual history. She examines the work of such modern scholars as Konakamura Kiyonori, Haga Yaichi, and Muraoka Tsunetsugu, who “selected, reorganized, and adapted aspects of Kokugaku practice to sustain new conceptions of national character and national culture, a process that necessarily involved attempts to silence concepts of ‘Japan’ that had the potential to challenge the modern version of the nationness. Moreover, the referencing of early modern Kokugaku allowed modern scholars to conceal the historical moment that gave rise to the nation and its political exigencies. In other words, the rise of the Meiji state was portrayed as the result of nationalism, rather than nationalism as the product of the nation-state” (224).

*Before the Nation* is a work that will best be appreciated by well-trained Japanologists who have a solid background in classical Japanese literature and language. There are extensive quotes in romanized Japanese without English translations that would only be helpful to experienced scholars of Japanese studies.

Susan L. Burns has prepared a thoroughly researched in-depth analysis of the development of Kokugaku. She works from a very broad range of original sources and engages in extensive literary analysis of contemporary texts to support her arguments. Her work is like a brilliant search light that exposes the reader to both the complexity as well as the brilliance of Japanese scholarship in the eighteenth and

nineteenth centuries. She introduces us to long forgotten scholars who played a major role in shaping the modern concept of the Japanese state. *Before the Nation* is one of those rare feats of scholarship that should become mandatory reading for any student of pre-modern and modern Japanese history and politics.

Daniel A. METRAUX  
*Mary Baldwin College*