



Isomae Jun'ichi, *Japanese Mythology: Hermeneutics on Scripture* (Religion in Culture: Studies in Social Contest & Construction)

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ISOMAE Jun'ichi provides us with an illuminating history of how the eighth-century myth-histories of the Yamato court, the *Kojiki* and the *Nihon shoki*, have been interpreted, as well as a sophisticated analysis of why they have continued to possess authority even as their original political function ceased long ago. The agenda of the volume, laid out in the introduction, is twofold. Applying the insights of critical theory, which denies the possibility of pre-discursive meaning to texts, Isomae shifts our attention from recovering original meanings to a meta-critical history of interpretations. His point, plainly stated, is that “as the content read into the Kiki texts changes [*sic*], so too did its social relevance” (117). Yet, even as he pays particular attention to the heterogenous discursive regimes the Kiki texts have occupied in the centuries since their composition, Isomae also finds a constant investment in the authority of the texts. He asks, “why did different classes of people, through distinct periods, reflect their thoughts and world views in terms of texts that belonged to an ancient kingdom?” (2). And so, in addition to cataloguing the historical migrations of the Kiki texts, Isomae pursues a theoretical project that seeks to explain the “sacredness” of the myths in terms of a “motivational force in the discursive space spanning the history of Kiki interpretation which repeatedly adheres to a sense of origin” (10). This is an ambitious project, and Isomae impresses with his ability to reference a global body of literature as he elucidates an often dense Japanese textual record.

After sketching the overarching argument of the book in the first chapter, Isomae turns to narrower arguments in the subsequent chapters that repeat and illustrate the shifting interpretive regimes that have shaped how the Kiki myths have been read. The second chapter, for example, appeals to the structural character of mythology to argue that variants of the mythological accounts were not deviations for a unitary original, but rather coexisting accounts that were excluded or co-opted in a process of canonization. Isomae's point is to drive home the fact that the myths, from their inception, operated in a pluralistic space and that even the initial effort to unify their content and function was an incomplete process. The shifting depiction of the Yamatotakeru legend from the Heian through the early-modern periods is then shown to be a function of changing textual modes and political constituencies in the third chapter. The shift from an original emphasis on the personality of Yamatotakeru to a more episodic focus on events in the story during the Heian

period, for example, is explained in reference to the ascendance of esoteric Buddhist cosmology and the spread of literary tales. While esoteric Buddhism subsumed the divine acts of the mythology as it localized its universalism, literary tales such as the *Tale of Genji* provided a more compelling means to explore the interior lives of characters.

Perhaps the most striking and nuanced insights come in chapters 4 and 5, where Isomae examines early-modern concerns with the Kiki texts. Using the prism of rationalism to trace the efforts of commentators to extract some authority from the myths even as literal acceptance of their content became impossible, Isomae proposes that rationalism, “satisfied people’s reasoning in a given period and facilitated the individual quest for identity... with a distinct feeling of security” (106). We see a consistent structure to Isomae’s argument here. Even as he relativizes the rationalism applied to the myths, Isomae identifies a constant, almost universal, pull of nostalgia, the desire to secure one’s identity. The argument that rational criticism of the Kiki myths strengthened rather than weakened their authority as repositories of historical origins is a suggestive one, though it does not fully address why the Kiki myths in particular served as attractive repositories of identity.

Isomae answers that question in his fifth chapter, where he points out that as the interpretation of the myths moved into the hands of a middle-strata of Confucian and Kokugaku scholars during the Tokugawa period, the Kiki were freed from “political constraints... to become relevant to a wide range of social classes” (119). This expanded ability of the Kiki to furnish a sense of origin provides what Isomae calls the “horizon for the modern interpretation of the Kiki,” and helps explain the attraction of the texts. Whatever liberating potential that horizon possessed under the Tokugawa regime with its largely apolitical emperor, the establishment of an absolutist form of imperial rule in the Meiji period, “instigated a process whereby the myths could be used assertively to attract people of the non-ruling class... to be a part of the imperial state” (122). Here Isomae provides us with a nuanced understanding of how eighteenth-century Kokugaku commentators and late-nineteenth-century ideologues occupied very different discursive regimes even as they both interpreted the Kiki as repositories of communal identity.

The final chapter presents material that is probably the least familiar to most readers interested in Japanese mythology. Focusing particularly on the postwar thought of Ishimoda Shō, Isomae demonstrates that even Marxist approaches to the Kiki quickly succumbed to the seduction of national origins. In addition to providing an excellent account of the place of the Kiki texts in postwar Japanese historiography, Isomae concludes with his central preoccupation: nostalgia and what he describes as the “fundamental intentionality of the epistemological subject” (125). Historical research, including any study of the Kiki myths must be, he admonishes us, a self-referential exercise that vigilantly examines why we seek to interpret.

By way of conclusion, a few words about the composition of this volume seem in order. This volume combines Isomae’s 1998 monograph, *Kiki shinwa no metahisus-*

torii, with a 2002 essay, and four of the six chapters have been published in English-language journals, including the *JJRS*. The introduction is new and the chapters have been revised, but for those familiar with Isomae's body of work through these earlier translations, this is recognizable terrain. For those less familiar with his work and those interested in a historical and theoretical approach to the Japanese myths, however, this volume offers a great deal. It is with some reluctance that I also address the issue of translation, especially since I am credited as the translator of an earlier version of chapter one. This book is a challenge to read, and the introduction in particular is impenetrable in parts. Clearly, closer editorial attention would have benefitted this book, as its rewards are often obscured.

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