



Gustav Heldt, *The Kojiki: An Account of Ancient Matters*

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GUSTAV HELDT'S translation of the *Kojiki* provides the English-speaking reader with the easiest access to Japan's oldest extant book. Two previous English-language versions of the eighth century Japanese work were intended for a scholarly audience. To be precise, Chamberlain's venerable 1882 rendition was not even a complete English one, the erotic passages of the book being considered by Victorian academics to require a disguise in Latin. PHILIPPI's impeccable translation was published in 1968. Japan at the time was still in many aspects the cultural Other par excellence. In search of a balance between universalism and particularism, today's thinking on Japan follows a less culture-specific perspective. Heldt's translation assimilates the *Kojiki* in an unprecedented way, mainly through the novelty of translating virtually all the names of sacred beings, humans, places, and so on. Chamberlain had adopted a similar translation attitude, but rather inconsistently, as he admitted—he translated the names of human and divine characters which appear in the first volume, but rarely translated them in the succeeding two, and never translated toponyms (CHAMBERLAIN 1982, xxiv–xxvi). As for the other translations in European languages, only in the French edition are names partly translated.

Heldt's translating strategy echoes Ongian opinions about the power of naming and the homonymy of "word" and "event" in oral cultures. Among the reasons for his choice of an onomastic translation the author also mentions the intimate intertwining of proper names and narratives in the *Kojiki*. From the very incipit, the book attests the seminal role of onomastic words: "When heaven and earth first appeared, the names of the spirits who came about in the high plains of heaven are these [...]" (7).

Translations of individual names which allude to defining moments in their life are of course the most pertinent ones. For instance, the triplets born just after their mother sets fire to the parturition hall, whose Japanese names are Hoderi, Hosuseri, and Howori, are called Bright Flame, Bold Flame, and Flickering Flame (53). This makes a striking contrast with Chamberlain's unembellished translation: Fire-Shine, Fire-Climax, and Fire-Subside. The onomastic choice may elsewhere look affected but I, for one, am grateful to Heldt for his daring decision, which results, to use his words, in "an opportunity for introducing nonspecialist readers to significant aspects of early Japan's material culture, religion, and natural environment" (xiv). The panoply of the *Kojiki*'s often very long proper nouns has always been an

embarrassing problem for translators. The transcription of Japanese pronunciation interrupts the flow of the translated text. Countless genealogies are particularly unfriendly to non-Japanese-speaking readers. Heldt is aware that his choice of translating proper names is in many cases a speculative exercise. One has to consider, however, that long before its versions in foreign languages, it was the Japanese early eighth-century reading of the *Kojiki*'s Chinese-looking prose that required conjectural efforts. It would not be too bizarre to assert that the *Kojiki*'s translations were begun by the Japanese philologists of the Edo period. Motoori Norinaga's *Kojikiden* (A commentary on *Kojiki*, 1798) contains the first complete reading of the almost entirely reticent original text. The eighteenth-century scholar established spellings of the *Kojiki* that many critical editions still accept. In this sense, the *Kojiki* is a sort of quintessential source text.

As KAMEI Takeshi pointed out (1957), nobody knows how to read the *Kojiki*. When Yasumaro recorded the recitation of previous writings performed by the court attendant Are, the literati were ill at ease trying to adapt the Chinese script to the features of the Japanese language. Yasumaro hints, in the preface to the work, at the instability of the writing system, describing a dilemma he had to cope with: a semantic use of Chinese characters would deflate the fascinating power of orality, and their phonetic use would result in lengthy and confusing sentences. The prose portions of the text, that constitute most of the work, are easy to understand thanks to the meaning value of Chinese logograms. Rather, they are rarely interspersed, with phonograms reproducing the sounds of Japanese expressions, nouns, and so forth. Chinese characters represent instead the syllables of Japanese in all of the *Kojiki*'s songs except one. Yasumaro's fear was well founded, since songs abound with obscure and variously interpretable passages.

The wavering of the text through oral and literary stages and through semantic and phonetic aspects of Chinese characters, which occurred at the birth of the *Kojiki*, did affect the whole history of its reception. While the book is supposed to record spoken traditions, it seems written down, in its prose portions at least, in order to purposely hinder the readers' efforts to guess Are's vocal utterances of thirteen centuries ago.

The readings of names do not usually vary according to critical editions, but their meaning is, to say the least, ambiguous. The syllable *ho* in the names of Hoderi, Hosuseri, and Howori, for instance, is written with the Chinese character for "fire," but etymologists believe that it stands for a *ho* meaning "rice ears." Heldt carefully explains such double meanings in the glossaries of personal and place names at the end of the volume.

In his introduction, Heldt emphasizes the role the *Kojiki* plays both in global culture, as a dramatic narrative similar to other relevant mythological texts, and in Japanese contemporary popular culture, as a source of inspiration for film-makers or cartoonists. He then summarizes the structure and the content of the work, provides the reader with dense information concerning the historical background of the

*Kojiki*'s compilation process, the peculiarities of its script and style, its significance for Japanese national identity, and finally elucidates some of his own translation choices.

The translation is fluid and often succeeds, through alliterative and repetitive strategies, in recalling the rhythm of some songs' lines and of the few prose passages phonetically recorded in the original version. The expression *koworo koworo* is perhaps a good example of this. In the sentence *shiho koworo koworo ni kakinashi* it simulates in a way a curdling sound. An island takes shape as the primordial couple stirs the salty ocean until it becomes thick and glutinous. Heldt translates "... when they lowered the jewelled spear to stir the sea below, *its brine sloshed and swished about as they churned it* (8, italics mine). A similar wording serves, in a song rich with alliteration, to evoke the sound of a leaf floating in a cup of wine. *Midzutama uki ni/ukishi abura/ochinadzusahi/mina koworo koworo*: the lovely jewelled saké cup/onto which, floating like tallow/a leaf has plopped down to drift,/sloshing and swishing about (170).

We welcome this translation as a work that will greatly influence the reading of the *Kojiki* worldwide.

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