

Emiko OHNUKI-TIERNEY, *The Monkey as Mirror: Symbolic Transformations in Japanese History and Ritual*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1987. xv + 269 pages, references, index. Hardcover US\$29.95. ISBN 0-691-09434-9.

Emiko Ohnuki-Tierney provides the student of religious symbolism a challenging anthropological work that examines Japanese ritual, history, and myth with regard to three intertwined relationships: the monkey metaphor, the special status people (“outcastes”), and the monkey performance. The author’s main focus is on “intra-cultural variation and its effect upon the perception of ritual” (p. 17) by two groups of Japanese: the dominant Japanese and the special status people.

Anthropological studies normally concentrate on primitive and isolated communities, failing to take notice of complex cultures with long writing traditions. Ohnuki-Tierney admits that because of the disappearance of simple societies due to modern forces, the average anthropologist runs out of sources for study. She argues that modern institutions are just as important and interesting for research, and proves this by producing a study which balances the reader’s attention between ancient and modern interpretation.

The author discovers that multiple structures of meaning underlie various symbols which are understood differently by various groups – such symbols are referred to as “polysemic symbols.” The author looks at the structural transformations of these symbols over time and notes the changes in their meaning. For example, the monkey metaphor has symbolized such disparate ideas as mediator and clown through history.

In part one, the author discusses the definitions of her study. She narrows the study to two transitional periods of Japanese history (the late Medieval period and contemporary Japan), and places organizational limits on the work which are defined with a concern for ethnographic and historical information. She places an emphasis on “the relationship between history and culture, and on the relationship between structures of meaning involved in historical processes and those expressed in myth and ritual” (p. 5). With this in mind the author applies this emphasis to three interrelated parts: the monkey metaphor, the special status people, and the monkey performance. Within these three areas reflexive frameworks are her main concern, for they are “the most important structure of meaning in any culture” (p. 11). She concludes this section by concentrating on the monkey as a metaphor for humans and as an anomalous symbol. Her inquiry includes an interesting deliberation on the uneasy relationship Japanese have with the monkey. The Japanese attempt to create a division between themselves and the monkey to counteract their close evolutionary association. For example, within Japanese folk tradition there are numerous examples of human metamorphosis into animals. However, according to T. Nakamura’s study, of “the forty-two cases in which humans metamorphose

into animals, only three involve a monkey, and in all three cases, humans are transformed into monkeys as a form of punishment" (p. 33).

Part two comprises the diachronic analysis as it relates to the historical and ethnographic development and changes of the monkey metaphor, special status people, and monkey performance. The author begins by tracing the alteration of the monkey metaphor from the mid 1500's to the present, exploring the roles the monkey portrays as mediator, guardian, healer, trickster, scapegoat, and finally clown. The author debates the roles which the introduction of agriculture and Buddhism into Japan played in these changes.

The historical changes the special status people underwent leads the next discussion. Though the stereotypical image held by most Japanese of the special status people denotes a people engaged in a "defiled" and "defiling" occupation(s), a closer inspection of the history points out that "the meaning and cultural valuation assigned to the occupations and the people who held them have gone through significant transformations over time" (p. 76). The author notes that most of these professions involved religious, artistic, and artisan specializations that were non-agrarian in nature (including the occupation leading this discussion, that of trainer of the monkey for the performance).

The third focus of this study brings the monkey metaphor and the role of the special status people together. The author contemplates the historical changes of the performance from 300 B.C. to the present. There are two types of historical records detailing the monkey performance: "as a ritual at horse stables and as a form of street entertainment" (p. 106). The monkey performance in the stables was a ritual performed to maintain the health of horses. Later (during the Meiji period) after lasting peace was established, horses lost their significance for warfare and the ritual developed into a form of street entertainment, and slowly began to lose its religious overtones.

In part three the approach is synchronic with importance placed on the basic, processual-contextual, and multiple structures of the symbolism of the monkey performance from the late Medieval period to contemporary Japan. In the Medieval era the emphasis is placed on the symbolism of the stable ritual and as street entertainment. The author examines the clown metaphor within two contemporary performances, 1980 and 1984.

Part four concludes the study with a review of reflexive symbolism of myth and ritual through history. Structural transformations of the monkey metaphor from mediator to clown are discussed. The author concludes that culturally "the monkey metaphor represents the generative power of the Japanese who are engaged in the never-ending quest for the transcendental self" (p. 240), the same force that drives the Japanese to excel in technology and economics. But these are pragmatic achievements; rather they are driven by an appreciation of aesthetic nature.

The author demonstrates impressive analytical skill in this book. Few contemporary works break into new territory in the manner that this has. However, this volume may be too advanced for the undergraduate student.

Therefore, I can strongly recommend this study for the graduate level and those familiar with the subject area.

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