

REVIEW

Gary L. Ebersole, *Ritual Poetry and the Politics of Death in Early Japan*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989. xii + 338 pages, index, glossary of Japanese terms. Hardcover, ISBN 0-691-07338-4, US\$40.50.

This is a bold, ambitious, and important book which attempts to reorient our approach to early Japanese culture, particularly the seventh and early eighth centuries, as well as to our main documentary sources for the period – the *Kojiki*, *Nihonshoki*, and *Man'yōshū*. The author, a historian of religions, focuses on a little explored topic in English, the practice of double burial, especially the period of temporary enshrinement of the deceased emperor in the *mogari no miya* 殯宮 (the palace of temporary enshrinement), and argues it is a key for understanding the early Japanese world of meaning and the “politics of death.”

Drawing on comparative studies of court rationality, funeral rites, and oral literature, the author clearly demonstrates that the period of temporary enshrinement was a dynamic, liminal moment when the cosmic and social order of early Japan was rent asunder by the death of the emperor and a new order had to be reconstructed through the choice of a new sovereign and a subsequent redistribution of power. As often as not, this was not a smooth process of transition and succession but a period of intense competition, intrigue, and even assassination, in which the competitors employed all available cultural, ritual, rhetorical, and symbolic resources to ensure and legitimate their place in the new emerging order.

As the author stresses, the three main documentary sources for this period are part of the court's historiographic project to legitimate a particular line of succession and thus cannot be simply taken at face value. Recovering the dynamics of the period of temporary enshrinement thus requires a comparative reading of the *Kojiki*, *Nihonshoki*, and *Man'yōshū* and an effort to imaginatively reconstruct both the ritual life of the period of temporary enshrinement and the conditions governing the genesis, performance, reception, and textualization of what we now have as written texts.

There seem to be at least three methods at work here. One is a rather traditional effort to get behind the texts and to reconstruct the ritual and historical context in which they were generated. This is supplemented by an explicitly comparative approach which uses recent anthropological work on double burial in Greece to imaginatively bring to life the ritual activity and ambience of the *mogari no miya*. In a third approach, which is most explicitly addressed in the Introduction and Conclusion, the object of study is seen “finally to be

located in the scene of the writing itself" (p. 268). At this level, the effort at reconstruction is described as "a 'reading' rather than as an 'authentic' reconstruction" (p. 7). This distinction and its implications are less than clear; the first two approaches *seem* to be aiming at "authentic" reconstruction but perhaps they too are meant to be counted as a "reading." Related ambiguities run throughout the book but they are more than compensated for by what is brought to light by the author's overall approach.

Much of this work is centered on a stimulating interpretation of the early volumes of the *Man'yōshū* and draws on a rich sampling of Japanese scholarship. The work of Ian Levy, and particularly his reliance on Casirrer and use of the term "voice," provides the foil for the author's argument that much of this poetry should be interpreted as: 1) essentially oral, performative poetry, 2) initially composed in a ritual setting informed by the *tama* complex, 3) strategic action within the complex web of socio-political interdependencies constituting court society, and 4) revealing the aims of the court's historiographic project in the way they were textualized and anthologized.

Many of the readings of the poems offered here are, as the author acknowledges, hypothetical and open to question; and at times, many points cry out for fuller documentation and closer argumentation. A few questions, reminiscent at times of those raised about the relentless urge of the myth and ritual school to find a ritual beneath every text, rise again and again: Does this poem refer to a ritual or was it part of a ritual? What was the ritual and how was the poem used in it? Is the poem recorded in the text the same as that used in the ritual? What is the full argument for determining voice? What do we know about the process of textualization? These considerations do not, however, undermine the cumulative impact and significance of these readings: many of the general points seem sound and should do much to enliven present approaches, especially by literary scholars, to these texts. At the very least, the author has clarified the questions if not provided the definitive answers.

There is also an exciting, imaginative, and largely convincing use of the mythic narratives in the *Kojiki* and *Nihonshoki*. The mythic sequences concerning Izanagi and Izanami, Amaterasu and Susano-o, and others are used to illuminate the symbolic complex linking death, the period of temporary enshrinement, the *niinamesai*, and succession. In a particularly insightful argument, it is also shown how these mythic narratives might be used to read the later, more "historical" narratives concerning succession disputes. The myths, in other words, provide the grammar of narrative patterns for both the writing and reading of the later accounts. The author recognizes, however, that this is not a simple matter of history imitating mythic archetypes. The mythic narratives themselves are part of the historiographic project of the court and thus were also open to change and strategic use to guide the reading of events. Though little attention is given to the Japanese scholarship which has gone over much of this ground, these readings of the Japanese myths are among the most engaging we have in English.

There are points at which it is difficult to follow the argument closely. Some arguments are scattered throughout the book, and the reader sometimes struggles to trace how the introduction of a tentative possibility becomes an established part of the argument (e. g., the argument for the Ise priestess as a fulcrum for politico-religious power). And while many of the key building blocks of the argument (e. g., elements of the *tama* complex) are presented as reflecting a consensus of Japanese scholarship, it is sometimes difficult to track down the original argumentation and sources from the documentation given.

At other points, the consensus is simply not there. Though one partially dissenting voice is presented, it is assumed throughout that much of the ritual activity at the *mogari no miya* involved a denial of death and an effort to bring the dead emperor back to life. IWAWAKI Shin shows there has been considerable debate of this issue and, moreover, explicitly argues against the interpretation presented here (1979, pp. 149–53).¹ Though conceding a belief that the dead might be revived *shortly* after death and the existence in *mythic* and *legendary* sources of the dead returning to life, Iwawaki and others find it implausible that the early Japanese actually thought that a corpse which had been decomposing for several months might be brought back to life. It is ironic that the author, who is so critical of any sort of attribution of a “primitive” mentality to the early Japanese elsewhere, seems to follow the work of those Japanese scholars who take such an approach here.

Running throughout the work is a larger methodological argument that seems to be directed mainly against Japanese-area specialists and historians of religions. Citing the work of social scientists such as Bourdieu and Sahlins, the author is continually arguing that myth, ritual, and symbol should not be understood as “timeless” structures but rather as dynamic, changing elements in a dialectic of structure and event. The point in itself is well taken, and the author provides one of the richest studies to date in Japanese materials of ritual as a dynamic element in the ongoing construction of culture and society.

Considered as a theoretical argument *per se*, however, the discussion loses much of its force, and may cause some to hesitate, because the “opposition” seems at times a sketchily drawn “other” who is more of a rhetorical than real entity. Though the issues and their history, even in summary fashion, could be more rigorously and fairly posed, there is much here to stimulate those interested in theory and comparison rather than Japan itself. One does wonder, however, why it is not acknowledged that many historians of religions, even those such as Joseph Kitagawa or Manabu Waida who have written extensively on this period of Japanese history, have not only addressed but specifically focused much of their work on the question of the relation of structure and history. Much like a losing faction in a succession dispute, some historians of religions may well feel that the history of their lineage has been suppressed.

¹ Compare here also MACÉ 1986, pp. 149–253, which also fails to find evidence of an extended effort to revive the deceased emperor.

The tension between social scientists and historians of religions surfaces again at one of the climactic points of the book, the interpretation of the religious dynamics of the rituals conducted at the *mogari no miya* (pp. 190–96). The author draws here on Danforth's interpretation of Greek funeral practices, which draws in turn on the distinctions Geertz makes among religious, common sense, aesthetic, and scientific perspectives (DANFORTH 1982). The religious perspective clings to the idea that death might be reversed; the common sense perspective asserts that the dead will not return. Many *banka* 挽歌 (funeral laments) reflect a frantic and rapid fluctuation between these two perspectives which is resolved with the acceptance of the common sense perspective entailed by the final burial.

This interpretation is puzzling at points. As already suggested, it is built on the at least questionable notion that there was an extended effort to bring the emperor back to life. And whatever one may think of Geertz's rather essentialist distinctions, the author himself is bent at other points on denying any such effort to neatly parcel experience into discretely labeled boxes such as art, religion, and common sense. What is most difficult to understand, however, is how the dynamics of this funeral ritual form a movement from a religious to common sense perspective. Surely this entire ritual process, as the author suggests at other points, is a religious event, with the final burial marking a stage in the transference of the soul to the other world, rather than a move from religion to common sense. Though not cited, classic treatments of funeral rites and more recent work on incongruity and disenchantment in the ritual process by historians of religions would seem to provide resources for a more plausible and subtle reading of this ritual complex as well as of what evidence there is suggesting an effort to revive the dead.

There is much to question and argue about in this work, especially since the author is not timid in summing up his findings and their significance in relation to both Western and Japanese scholarship. Though the author, for example, has admirably developed and brought new significance to the points given in the list of "heretofore unrecognized aspects of early Japanese culture" on page 265, to claim them as "heretofore unrecognized" is simply breathtaking; they seem closer to being widely held assumptions about this period of Japanese history.

Such rhetorical excesses aside, this is one of the more exciting and engaging books on Japanese religion, politics, and literature to appear in recent years. This review has only suggested its richness. It does much to bring to life, if not a deceased emperor, at least an intriguing and formative period of Japanese history. The insights, comparative perspective, and methodological concerns embodied here should not only stimulate significant and interesting debate within Japanese studies. This book is also one of those rarities among books on Japan; it should attract the interest of some with little concern for things Japanese.

REFERENCES

DANFORTH, Loring

1982 *The Death Rituals of Rural Greece*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

IWAWAKI Shin 岩脇紳

1979 Mogari 殯. In *Sōsō girei* 葬送儀礼 [Funeral rituals]. *Sōsō bōsei kenkyū shūsei* 葬送墓制研究集成, Inokuchi Shōji 井之口章次, ed., vol. 2, 138–63. Tokyo: Meicho Shuppan.

MACÉ, François

1986 *La mort et les funérailles dans le Japon ancien*. Paris: Publications Orientalistes de France.

Richard Gardner
Sophia University