

Donald L. PHILIPPI, *Norito: A Translation of the Ancient Japanese Ritual Prayers*. With a new preface by Joseph M. Kitagawa. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990. xxxviii + 95 pp. Bibliography, glossary. Paper \$9.95; ISBN 0-691-01489-2.

Two well-known verses from the *Man'yōshū* eulogize Japan as a "land blessed by the spirit of word" (*kotodama no sakiwau kuni*) (No. 894) and a "land where word-spirit lends its aid" (*kotodama no tasukuru kuni*) (No. 3254). These epithets serve as succinct reminders of the important place given to the spoken word in ancient Japan, and of the belief in the mysterious workings of creative speech. As Gary EBERSOLE has recently observed, orally recited verse was "frequently used and experienced as a form of the exercise of power. It was a linguistic means of manipulating religio-political power in the human sphere as well as of manipulating the spiritual powers, including the *kami* and the spirits of the dead" (1989, p. 19).

Yet the role of the word in effecting transformation is more often remarked upon in reference to the Hellenized West; its function as, in George STEINER's phrase, a "force and medium of creation" (1984, p. 17) has, until recently, been insufficiently addressed in studies of ritual Japan. All the more reason to welcome this new publication of Donald Philippi's *Norito*, long unavailable since its initial small release from Kokugakuin University in 1959.

Philippi's translation is composed of the twenty-seven *norito* (Shinto prayers) included in the eighth book of the tenth-century *Engi-shiki*, together with five additional prayers taken from other sources. These *norito* lay at the core of the oral liturgy of the ancient Japanese state and are commonly situated at the earliest headwaters of Japanese literature. Recited on a wide range of ritual occasions, *norito* reiterated the historical origins of shrines and *kami* (deities), offered praise to *kami*, emperor, and nation, and invoked divine blessings.

As Philippi notes in his introduction, the oldest of these liturgical verses contain elements "more akin to incantation than to prayer" (p. 3). Representing spells meant for the hearing of the *kami* alone, such formulae were whispered in a barely audible voice, a tradition continued even today in rituals observed at the Grand Shrine of Ise. Somewhat reminiscent of the Qu'ran, many *norito* represented the elevation of the spoken word to a kind of "God's speech." Not merely invocations, *norito* were, by their correct recitation, believed to summon the mysterious workings of *kotodama* in order to effect the very transformations they invoked.

The incantatory quality of *norito* is evident from their use of the formal *senmyōgaki* 宣命書, the archaic style of writing reserved for imperial edicts and, like the use of Latin in the Catholic liturgy, one which effectively imposed a "ritual distance" signalling the presence of the sacred. Intoned in a characteristic warbling monotone, *norito* were apparently meant less to be "understood" by the assembled audience than to be experienced as the audible workings of sacred power. As a result, in Philippi's words, "everywhere semantic clarity is sacrificed to sonority" (p. 1), a characteristic easily appreciated even today by anyone attending the actual recitation of a Shinto liturgy in its shrine setting.

The poles of "semantic clarity" and "sonority" are unavoidably reversed in

translation, though Philippi must be given credit for retaining a high degree of poetic diction in his renderings. In that context, the appearance of Philippi's translation in a more widely available edition suggests an immediate comparison with Felicia BOCK's version (1972), the only other complete English translation of the *norito* currently available. While Philippi's *Norito* demonstrates the translator's strong attempt to retain the poetic phrasings of the original, Bock delivers her *norito* in a scholarly prose that produces a high but frequently emotionless degree of comprehensibility. Compare the following two versions, taken from the conclusion of the *Kasuga matsuri*:

As a result of this worship,
Do, I pray, now and in the future,
Bless the court of the Emperor tranquilly and peacefully,
Making it an overflowing reign, an abundant reign;
Prosper it as eternal and unmoving.

(PHILIPPI, p. 24)

Since we serve thus by our worship, we pray that now and in the future our Sovereign may reign in his palace in peace and tranquillity and be blessed with a prosperous reign. May it be firm as solid rock, eternal as enduring rock, and be caused to flourish.

(BOCK 1972, p. 71).

Even more striking, from the preamble to the "Fire-pacifying Festival" (*Hishizume no matsuri*), compare Philippi's (p. 51):

I humbly speak by means of the heavenly ritual, the solemn ritual
words entrusted
At the time that the kingdom was entrusted
By the command of the Sovereign Ancestral Gods and Goddesses,
Who divinely remain in the High Heavenly Plain,
To the Sovereign Grandchild, saying:
"Rule tranquilly the Land of the Plentiful Reed Plains
and of the Fresh Ears of Grain as a peaceful land."

with BOCK's (p. 89) narrative,

By the divine command of the mighty ancestral gods and goddesses abiding in the Plain of High Heaven, the divine descendant rules in peace and tranquillity the land of rich rice-ears growing in the abundant reedy plains. Ever since the time he was entrusted with the land under heaven, the solemn liturgy of the heavenly magic formula has been repeated.

Such differences are manifest throughout the two versions, and serve as sharp reminders of the difficulty involved in rendering even the semantic "meaning" of these ancient charms, let alone approaching the effect of their ritual performance. As a single example, in the last excerpt above, Philippi has translated the original *ame no shita yosashi matsurishi toki ni, koto yosashi matsurishi amatsu norito futonoritogoto o mochte mōsaku* as a prologue invoking the past,

following the Japanese by adroitly linking “at the time that the kingdom was entrusted” (*ame no shita yosashi matsurishi toki ni*) and “the heavenly ritual, the solemn ritual” (*amatsu norito futonoritogoto*) with “words entrusted” (*koto yosashi matsurishi*). In contrast, Bock moves the entire phrase to the end of the verse, and renders it in a form making it appear mere reminiscence: “Ever since the time he was entrusted with the land under heaven, the solemn liturgy of the heavenly magic formula has been repeated.”

Since little agreement exists among Japanese scholars regarding the precise significance of a number of these expressions, it would be impertinent to suggest any dogmatic choice between the two translations on every point. At the very least, however, the comparison of Philippi’s long-unavailable work with the scholarly version produced by Bock should spark heightened interest in our attempts to understand this neglected side of Japanese ritual.

In addition to the translations themselves, *Norito* includes Philippi’s original brief introduction and glossary of terms, and an extensive new preface by Joseph Kitagawa. Given the passage of years since its original appearance, it may be unfortunate that Philippi has provided no new research to accompany the Princeton edition, although a substantial degree of background commentary is provided by the Kitagawa essay.

As a final remark, it should be pointed out that *norito* remain a living part of Japan’s Shinto legacy. The formulae included in the *Engi-shiki* were officially revised in 1875 and 1914, and again following World War II, and while emphasis is given to preserving the archaic style of the originals, the *Engi-shiki norito* are no longer recited at Japanese shrines. A number of works have been published in recent decades (primarily under the guidance of the Association of Shinto Shrines), setting out standards for the composition of *norito* for such modern purposes as blessing the inauguration of automobile production facilities and the launching of Japanese-built rockets. Readers looking for more recent research on ancient *norito* are advised to consult the special issue of *Yūkyū* 悠久 dedicated to the subject (No. 23, November 1985) and the bibliography compiled by KANEKO Zenkō (1982), pp. 71–91. Those interested in *norito* as employed within modern Shrine Shinto would do well to begin with the three companion texts published by the Jinja Shinpōsha: INAMURA 1956, JINJA HONCHŌ 1951 and 1976, and JINJA SHINPŌ 1962.

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