

John K. NELSON, *A Year in the Life of a Shinto Shrine*. Seattle & London: University of Washington Press, 1996. 286 pp. ISBN 0-295-97499-0 (hardback); ISBN 0-295-97500-8 (paperback).

ALTHOUGH THE BODY of Western publications on Shinto is growing at a steady

pace, it is still small, and I am sure anyone who has marked undergraduates' essays on this subject will agree that much of the existing literature is confusing or even misleading. While I have some reservations about the present book, it is certainly a most welcome and useful addition to what is presently available.

A Year in the Life of a Shinto Shrine is the result of a year's fieldwork at Chinzei Taisha Suwa Jinja (or, to follow the author, "Suwa Shrine") in Nagasaki. In sections headed "Spring," "Summer," "Autumn," and "Winter," the book takes us through the year, interspersing descriptions of a selection from the many rituals and festivals performed at the shrine with conversations with shrine priests and, occasionally, other participants in shrine events. This is supplemented with an introductory chapter which, among other things, takes us on a brief trip through the shrine's history, offers some thoughts on ritual and ceremony in general and the basics of Shinto ritual in particular, and introduces the shrine's *gūji*. The book also contains two appendices, a glossary, and an index.

The strength of this book is in its descriptions of rituals and the attitudes of the priests in performing them. Nelson presents the priests as pragmatic, down-to-earth professionals, who regard the execution of rituals as their chosen form of art. He treats the rituals as aesthetic performances, each a "symphony dedicated to the deities" (p. 40), and endowed with its own "poetics" (p. 143). The priests appear as dedicated performers, who take their roles extremely seriously but once off-stage revert to their normal, bantering, sweating selves. I found this portrayal of shrine priests and their attitude towards ritual immediately recognizable from my own experiences of *jinja hōshi* at various shrines.

My main reservation about this book, however, is that Nelson submerges himself in the world of the priests to such an extent that his account of shrine life is often on the verge of becoming an "emic" description of a theological ideal, rather than a reflection of a lived reality.

A good example is his treatment of the ritual of *yutate-sai*, or "judgment by scalding water," in chapter 10. This is a ritual of Shugendō origin, one of a genre of rituals that were originally designed to attract crowds and advertise the performing priest's supernatural powers; but shrine Shinto orthodoxy has reinterpreted it purely as a ritual of purification. I am quite ready to accept that Suwa Shrine's priests see the *yutate-sai* as a purification rite and nothing else; but I must admit to some scepticism when Nelson tells us that it is the "felt need for the kind of benefits the ritual is thought [by the priests?] to bestow" (p. 86) that continues to draw in the crowds. Do people really attend this ritual because they feel the need to be ritually purified? Nelson seems to agree with the shrine priests that this is the case, and at the end of the ritual, he observes [?] that everyone feels "assured" that they "have been cleansed and, in a sense, reborn." He even notes with some satisfaction that "a trusting, almost childlike innocence can be perceived on their faces" (p. 90).

I find Nelson's assumption that the audiences of Shinto rituals perceive of these rituals in the same way as the priests too easy. The contrast between the small audience at the Ritual of Great Purification (described in chapter 12)

and the crowds at *yutate-sai* should suffice to show that more is going on. Has the growing preoccupation with supernatural powers in the Japanese religious scene something to do with it? What about the “show” element of rituals?

There is a greater issue behind this. Why is attendance at many shrine rituals and festivals increasing, in spite of the fact that the traditional outlooks that used to give meaning to these rituals and festivals seem to be fading away? Nelson skirts this fascinating issue on a number of occasions, but never addresses it. Instead he maintains again and again that “Shinto-based orientations and values...lie at the core of Japanese culture, society, and character” (p. 3), and that “Shinto cosmologies...continue to orient millions of individuals” (p. 208) in contemporary Japan. What are these orientations, values, and cosmologies? The only concrete example of a “Shintoesque orientation” Nelson gives is “the Japanese love of bathing” (p. 38). Here, again, Nelson appears incapable of breaking free from the rhetoric of the priests, and as a result remains unable to provide real insight into the role of shrines in the society of modern Japan.

Nelson displays the same uncritical attitude when he allows ideologically biased remarks by priests about Shinto’s roots in Japan’s distant past to go undisputed. Instead, he seems to accept that “Shinto has been at the heart of Japanese culture for almost as long as there has been a political entity distinguishing itself as Japan” (p. 3). Since the appearance of the works of Kuroda Toshio, assertions of this kind should at least be qualified.

Another issue Nelson appears to be avoiding is that of the emperor. Even when his informants bring the issue up, he refuses to pose them any critical questions on this subject. When the *gūji* tells him that he was trained as a kamikaze pilot, and that, at the end of the war, he was devastated to have been “unable to give [his] life in the service of the emperor” (pp. 56–57), he is trying to convey a message. So is the junior priest Matsumoto, when he tells Nelson that it was a revelation to him when the war veterans he interviewed told him they never “heard anyone cry out ‘Long live the emperor’ at the moment of death,” and that this “changed how [he] personally felt about the emperor” (pp. 73–74). Had Nelson chosen to follow up on hints like these, we might have heard something interesting about the changing values of different generations of shrine priests.

There are other obvious gaps in this book. *Jinja Honcho* is mentioned a number of times, but we are left in the dark over its influence on shrine life. Priests mention their education at the Kokugakuin and Kogakkan universities; but we are given virtually no information about their training. We are told that the *gūji* writes a weekly column in a local newspaper, that Matsumoto talks to children’s groups about Shinto, and that there is a “Suwa Shrine women’s group”—but what is the message the shrine conveys to society through these channels? Finally, it would have been enlightening to hear something about the shrine’s finances, although information of that kind might be difficult to obtain.

As a result of these omissions, as well as the author’s refusal to be critical and address controversial matters, the book falls short of its stated aim to expose “the dominant ‘moods and motivations’ which fuel [a shrine’s] activi-

ties, compel its priests and participants, and situate it within the community at large” (p. 6). Instead, we are left with a most readable and enjoyable, but rather bland account of some of the activities and ideas of shrine priests, that moreover has to be used with some caution.

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