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Review

Reviewed Work(s): A Year in the Life of a Shinto Shrine by John K. Nelson

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Source: *The Journal of Japanese Studies*, Vol. 23, No. 2 (Summer, 1997), pp. 477-482

Published by: University of California Press

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/133179>

Accessed: 02-11-2025 12:02 UTC

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spirits, *gaki*, goblins, and spirits of the dead, to mention just a few of the beings humans regularly encountered. Once this social reality is recognized, the next logical and necessary question to ask is not “Why would a member of elite society be interested in these sorts of eerie and irrational popular-level phenomena?” but how did members of medieval Japanese society experience the world and make sense of their place in it? What was *their* rationality? The impoverished methodological and theoretical state of the study of Japanese religion and literature stands out in sharp contrast to work done in the neighboring field of Chinese studies on writings on the “strange” or anomalous (cf. Robert Campany, *Strange Writing: Anomaly Accounts in Early Medieval China*).³

Other contributions to this volume display other problems endemic to the field. David Waterhouse’s “Notes on the *Kuji*” (pp. 1–38) is an example of an extremely detailed, technical, and overly dry account of textual references to a symbolic complex that is not contextualized for the reader, who never learns what role(s) these “nine syllables” played in the religious lives of medieval Japanese. Should we be surprised that college students find studies of this sort, which are all too common, to be impenetrable, irrelevant, and boring?

We really must begin to rethink the study of Japanese religion (and most other subjects as well) if we are to retain any credibility in the academy as serious scholars in our various disciplines. If we do not exercise intellectual and methodological rigor, we will find ourselves relegated to the ghetto of Japanese Studies we have created.

A Year in the Life of a Shinto Shrine. By John K. Nelson. University of Washington Press, Seattle, 1996. xii, 286 pages. \$35.00, cloth; \$17.50, paper.

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In *A Year in the Life of a Shinto Shrine*, John K. Nelson records his experiences attending a year’s rituals at the Suwa Jinja in Nagasaki. It is not, however, a straightforward academic book for it intertwines two different points of view and styles of writing, one academic and one not. On the one hand, Nelson writes as historian explaining the various factors that shaped the Suwa Shrine as institution. And as anthropologist, he gives functional ex-

3. Albany: State University of New York Press, 1996.

planations of how Shinto rituals mold values, behavioral rules, and mental categories (p. 37), of how it can “renew community consciousness” (p. 41) and give the worshiper “confidence and fortitude with which to manage the tremendous uncertainties of life” (p. 51). On the other hand, addressing an audience wider than just scholars, Nelson minimizes technical theoretical discussion in order to present “a substantive ‘inside’ account,” “a more human side to shrine activities” (p. 6). He takes seriously the problem of “a religion’s dual dynamics—one personal and subjective and the other institutional and objective” (pp. 9–10). For all this, Nelson writes long first-person accounts of the felt experience of Shinto ritual—elaborate descriptions of the sensations, the impressions, the pains that seared his immobilized legs, the thoughts that crossed his mind—all expressed in an exceedingly florid prose style. Thus, two voices speak in this book. Often they complement each other. Sometimes they do not.

The first four chapters of the book are the most obviously academic. In Chapter 1, “Frames and Focuses,” Nelson explains key terms such as “Shinto,” “politics,” “religion,” “tradition,” and “culture.” The second chapter, “Historical Momentums,” provides a short history of the Suwa Shrine. In Chapter 3, “The Kami,” Nelson attempts to clarify “what constitutes the sacred” (p. 27) in Shinto cosmology, and Chapter 4, “Ritual and Ceremony,” gives a capsule overview of theory of ritual and ceremony.

In the body of the book, Shinto rituals are grouped under seasonal headings “Spring,” “Summer,” “Autumn,” and “Winter.” There are chapters on change of season *setsubun* in February, the doll festival *hina matsuri* in March, the Ritual of Great Purification *ōharae* in June, and so on throughout the year. Nelson uncovers some interesting surprises. In its Hina Matsuri Dolls’ Day Festival (Ch. 9), the Suwa Shrine dresses pretty young women in ancient court kimono and then puts on a pageant—part Shrine ritual, part fashion show—clearly meant to appeal to the newspapers and television. Chapter 10, “Judgement by Scalding Water,” recounts *yutate-sai* in which the priest plunges his hands into a boiling cauldron and scatters scalding water to purify the world. There is one regrettable omission in this catalogue of rituals—no account of *taue-sai*, rice planting, so symbolically important in Shinto.

Each chapter on ritual counterposes Nelson’s academic and personal voices. For example, he provides abbreviated academic discussions of ritual pollution (pp. 101–6), the role of women in Shinto (pp. 122–25), the imperial rice rituals of Daijōsai and Niiname-sai (pp. 167–71), and so on. Then he switches to the first-person and drops the conventions of dry academic writing. In his account of *Okunchi*, the Nagasaki city festival (Ch. 15), a loudspeaker “crackles to life,” “volatile tension fills the halls,” until “the charged silence is finally shattered with a beat of the drum” (pp. 143–45). In the half-dark of the dawn, “my groping progress is passed by a flurry of

pounding feet and by eerie green glows within a concealed passageway” (p. 145). The festival dragon has awakened and suddenly you are there in the belly of the beast!

In six chapters, Nelson looks at the lives of the several priests and one priestess of the shrine. Chapter 5, “Finding the Measure,” recreates a day in the life of an average Shinto priest. Then chief priest Uesugi Chisato, a younger priest Matsumoto-san, and Ms. Mine who is Suwa Shrine’s only priestess (not to be confused with one of the many *miko*) each get a chapter to reflect upon their lives at the Shrine. Chapter 13, “I Shouldn’t Be Telling You This,” is a collection of anonymous shrine staff opinions not normally revealed in public. Chapter 18, “On Spirit, Geomancy and Sake,” is an interview in which head priest Uesugi deftly evades the obnoxious Nelson who keeps asking Uesugi to compare Japanese customs with those of American Indians.

Sixteen pages of black-and-white photographs complement the text; one photo shows the author in the garb of a Shinto priest. Appendix 1 gives a list of rituals for 1987. Appendix 2 is a “Map and Guide to the Shrine Precincts.” A glossary of Japanese terms, list of works cited, and index provide scholarly scaffolding.

Several aspects of this book are immediately appealing. Nelson clearly has a strong sympathy for the Shinto tradition. Through his friendship with Shinto priests, we hear them speak in their own voices. In addition, he focuses on Shinto ritual at the day-by-day local level, in contrast to recent scholarship that has tended to focus on the political and ideological aspects of Shinto at the national level. Finally, in this age of self-conscious scholarship, it is refreshing to read a book about a religious tradition and not about debunking the previous scholarship on that religious tradition.

Of the many questions we could ask of this book, let me ask: is Nelson’s narrative strategy—writing in two voices, one dry and academic, one rhetorical and personal—possibly connected with his conception of religion? I think yes. Writing in the personal mode, Nelson produces sentences such as “the flute’s somewhat melancholic tone . . . still seems to him like some kind of living, flying spirit that alights on the shoulders of the *miko*” (p. 51). Such a writing style may be appealing but it raises the question of just what it is that Nelson is describing: Shinto ritual, his own personal reactions to Shinto ritual, the standard Japanese experience of Shinto ritual, the ethnographic fieldworker’s experience? Nelson answers:

It seems presumptuous to assume that I can accurately convey the private, affective, individual experiences of those participating in Shinto rituals, but the reader will find numerous cases where I attempt to do exactly that. . . . My purpose in employing a variety of narrative techniques is to help readers overcome cultural distances so that, had they been in my place, a similar experiencing of the event would have been in their grasp. (pp. 9–10)

There is an “experiencing of the event” and apparently Nelson thinks it important that we should experience what he did. That is why he uses unusual narrative techniques.

The flowery language that is part of his narrative technique is often a disguised technical terminology. Note “realm of timelessness” in this passage:

the slow rhythm of the circular movements, the poised and careful positioning of their arms and heads, and the periodic but perfectly timed shake of the bells elevate the dance, offered in humility for the pleasure of the Kami, far beyond the confines of the ceilings and walls into a realm of timelessness. (p. 97)

Nelson depicts Shinto cosmology in terms of a dichotomy between sacred and secular, “this” world and the “other” (p. 33). The ordinary secular frame of mind is unaware of the sacred dimension, but Shinto apprehends the sacred within the secular, transcending the dichotomy between the two. Thus, Nelson expresses the thoughts of a Shinto priest on ritual: “it is here the vertical energy of heaven and the horizontal energies of human beings intersect. This place where he is standing is precisely upon the path of the Kami: *shin* (kami) *tō* (way)” (pp. 44–45; see also p. 76). Similarly he describes the early Shinto shrine as “the absolute reality, the ‘localized sacred,’ which transcended, yet at the same time manifested itself in the world” (p. 45). Language that refers to the sacred and to the Shinto apprehension of the sacred within the secular thus functions as technical terminology—“sacred time” (p. 45), “numinous power” (p. 45), “sense of communion with the Kami” (p. 51), “transition between the sacred and secular worlds” (p. 53), and “realm of timelessness.”

The assumptions that underlie this conception of religion have been spelled out in greater detail, and widely popularized, by Mircea Eliade in books such as *The Sacred and the Profane*.¹ At issue is whether the sacred is a fundamental category or a dependent variable of something else, such as social unity (Durkheim), psychological fixation (Freud), or class ideology (Marx). Eliade himself looked back to Rudolf Otto whom he admired for his analysis of “religious experience.”² Otto insisted that the sacred was not to be understood rationally and could only be known through personal experience. He coined, among other terms, the word “numinous” precisely to describe the ineffable, nonreducible quality of religious experience. Nelson likewise uses “numinous” and likewise describes Shinto comprehension of

1. Mircea Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane*, translated by Willard R. Trask (San Diego: Harcourt Brace and World, 1959). There is no reference to this book in Nelson’s list of Works Cited despite the similarity of ideas.

2. Rudolf Otto, *The Idea of the Holy*, translated by John W. Harvey (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1923). See Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane*, p. 8.

the Kami as “nonverbal, alogical” (p. 27). Otto argued also that one could use poetic and persuasive language to help others notice the numinous in their own experience. Thus, Otto’s work is full of prose more flowery even than Nelson’s: “recoil in a wonder that strikes us chill and numb,” “transports of strange ravishment rising often to the pitch of dizzying intoxication,” “a glimmering, billowing agitation,” and so on.³ These three—the sacred as fundamental, the ineffability of religious experience, and florid first-person prose—are thus conceptually tied together.

One could argue that Nelson is merely reporting the worldview of Shinto, a worldview he does not necessarily share. But it is not so simple, for religious experience confers authority to speak about a religion and Nelson wants to claim some bit of that authority for himself.

Then it suddenly dawned on me—so *this* is what Shinto holds as divine! Not a text or dubious miracles or what someone maybe said or a particular structure but the *actual phenomena* of the world itself. . . . My understanding was intellectual, of course . . . but I felt I had some tiny grasp of what the Kami might signify and what part of the nebulous social and cultural reality called Shinto might be about. (pp. 26–27)

Even though he disclaims his own experience as intellectual, the very words “suddenly dawned” imply that Nelson’s experience approached the alogical Shinto comprehension of the Kami. Nelson is not merely reporting the Shinto worldview, as would an anthropologist; he himself accepts the authenticity of this experience for it gives him a “tiny grasp of what the Kami might signify” and consequently the authority to write a book about Shinto.

Here I would have liked Nelson to bring his two points of view together. Nelson begins his book intending to eliminate the stereotype of Shinto “mysticism” and “inscrutability” by offering the quite reasonable academic explanation that Shinto rituals are “pragmatically designed to benefit not only the individual but his or her own community as well” (p. 6). But he also has a competing conception of Shinto ritual as that in which one experiences the numinous sacred presence of the Kami, a sacredness not to be defined in academic language (which might reduce it to something else) but to be grasped in the language of first-person experience. At several places, Nelson reasserts the claim that Shinto ritual functions to benefit individual and community but he does not explain how ritual effects that benefit.

A well-delivered *norito*, . . . reinforces the worshipper’s hopes and gives him or her confidence and fortitude with which to manage the tremendous uncertainties of life. The *norito* relaxes anxieties and doubts because one knows the Kami has heard it and will carry its supplications into realms

3. Otto, *The Idea of the Holy*, pp. 28, 31, 48.

beyond one's meager powers of comprehension and awareness, realms which transcend and yet suffuse the realities one calls home, business, family, and feelings. (p. 51; see also p. 96)

Just exactly how does a well-delivered *norito* (ritual chant or prayer) relieve anxiety? Does relief of anxiety come only if one experiences the numinous sacred presence of the Kami? The above passage certainly seems to imply as much. If so, then the inscrutability of Shinto has not been removed by, but merely removed to, pragmatic functional explanation, where it returns in the guise of the nonverbal, alogical experience of the numinous sacred. Thus, one voice sets out to destroy inscrutability while the other voice reinstates a new version of it. (And Nelson is really in scalding water if he should take the further step of claiming that Westerners are incapable of comprehending this unique feature of Japanese religion.)

Nelson's two writing voices allow him to present the people, practices, and institution of Suwa Shrine in a far more dramatic and concrete way than if he had written in more conventional style. Nevertheless, at the end of the book, there are important questions Nelson needs to answer in one voice.⁴

The Pursuit of Loneliness: Chinese and Japanese Nature Poetry in Medieval Japan, Ca. 1050–1150. By Ivo Smits. Franz Steiner Verlag, Stuttgart, 1995. xii, 235 pages. DM 88.

Reviewed by

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Ivo Smits has produced a thought-provoking book that sheds new light on the type of descriptive nature poetry that began in the mid-Heian period and led to what we now think of as the Shinkokin style.

4. Several improvements need to be made to the text. On p. 42, "marriges" should be "marriages." On p. 46, "yang(active)" should have a space between "yang" and the parenthesis. On p. 111, "couple foreigners" reads better as "couple of foreigners." On p. 123, "Smyres" should be "Smyers." On p. 168, *tsutoni* should be *tsutomi*. There seems to be inconsistency in what terms get italicized. For example, on pp. 142–43, "*miko*" is in italics but "*Guji*" is not; on the same pages, one ritual, "*naorai*," is in italics while others—"Korishinji," "juretsu mizoroi"—are not. The Glossary does not include all the Japanese terms that appear in the text. Some terms in the present Glossary lack *kanji*. In the list of Works Cited, some Japanese surnames are followed by a comma, some not, and some macrons have been omitted, e.g. Nippon Hoso Shuppankyokai (p. 277), *Chuo Koron* (p. 179). The entry for Preston, James is missing the article title. For the first entry for Hori, Ichiro, "*shamanism*" is an English word and not an accurate romanization of the Japanese, which is probably "*shamanizumu*." There is a similar problem with "*Groba-te*" in the entry for Burke-Gaffney. In the Index, "Aum Shinri Kyo" and "*bonenkai*" need macrons.