



Review

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

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produces both the child and its mother *as* mother, but she is less successful in achieving a second stated aim of her essay, that is, to draw parallels between the discontinuity in national consciousness owing to Japan's defeat in the second world war, and that in individual consciousness owing to the loss of a child.

Ian Reader examines the Shikoku pilgrimage, a historically important religious practice that continues to attract adherents today. Several significant themes in Japanese religion are manifested in pilgrimage, Reader argues. The Shikoku pilgrimage embraces both desires for individual salvation and worldly benefits—these are not regarded as contradictory—and pilgrims are taught to expect miracles as a result of their journey. Charismatic figures also play a role in pilgrimage, and the creation of new figures of inspiration exemplifies the Japanese tendency to bring religion ever closer to the human world. This essay, with its emphasis on personal and tangible experiences, gets to the heart of Japanese religion, rooted in concrete and particular phenomena.

In the final essay, Joy Hendry explores manifestations of wrapping, both actual and metaphorical. As everyone familiar with Japan well knows, the wrapping of a gift can be as significant as its content; similarly, outer surfaces that might be written off as merely superficial in the West are accorded great importance in Japan. Hendry discusses several examples of religious 'wrapping'; for example, the way in which Shinto shrine structures demarcate decreasingly sacred areas as one moves out from the center, and the power that seclusion—being wrapped—gives to hidden images (*hibutsu*) and ascetics who hide themselves away for religious practice. The emptiness sometimes found at the center, Hendry argues, can contain great spiritual power—as does the seemingly powerless emperor.

In the final pages of his chapter, Ian Reader has perhaps pointed out the true theme of this book: that we cannot write off as superstition the rituals, the concern with the dead and their spirits, and the ascetic practices that permeate much Japanese religion as it was and continues to be practiced. Despite some unevenness in the quality of the chapters, *Religion in Japan* persuades us to consider respectfully all facets of Japanese religion, and in achieving this aim the book is a fine tribute to Carmen Blacker.

A Year in the Life of a Shinto Shrine. By John K. Nelson. University of Washington Press, 1996. 288 pages. Hardback \$35.00; paper \$17.50.

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MUCH of the scholarship concerning 'Shinto' in recent years has focused on what it is *not*, painstakingly deconstructing the politically expedient myths that had managed to penetrate not only popular attitudes but scholarly assumptions as well. By tracing the complex shaping, deliberate and fortuitous, that the tradition called Shinto has undergone, scholars clearly have shown that there is no continuous, pure, indigenous religious tradition in Japan as was previously claimed. Yet even if it is to a large degree an invented tradition, something called Shinto does exist in Japan, and this something consists of more than 100,000 registered shrines and 20,000 priests. Almost no reliable studies have been done in English on this type of modern-day religious practice from the inside, and it is this gap that the present book by John K. Nelson wonderfully addresses.

Aptly summarized by the title, the work describes the 'life' of Nagasaki's Suwa Shrine in several senses—its ritual cycle, complex human community, and change over time. In contrast to Shinto studies that contain general or idealized descriptions of rituals, priests, architecture, and the like, Nelson's book integrates precise information about these matters with their actual lived dimensions: remodeled rituals, sweaty priests, controversial architecture. Suwa Shrine and its rituals are contextualized both historically and politically, and there are several poignant reminders that the shrine is located in a city that suffered atomic devastation some fifty years ago.

After some preliminary background information, the book's organization follows the shrine's seasonal round of major rituals, interspersed with a rich miscellany of priests' biographies and discussions of scholarly matters as they become relevant. The resulting pastiche of rituals, humor, prayers, PR, speeches, tensions, life histories, and often exquisite descriptions beautifully captures the flavor of everyday life at a shrine. (I spent eighteen months in the early 1980s working as a participant-observer *miko* at Yasaka Shrine, Kyoto, and find that Nelson's portrayal of Suwa perfectly captures much of what I experienced there.)

Suwa Shrine was established in Nagasaki in 1625 as part of a Tokugawa strategy to counter the power and appeal of Christianity by a revival of Japanese institutions. Its official date of inception is 1614, but the 'lack of a powerful personality to guide development kept the idea of a central shrine little more than an idea' (p. 17). The powerful personality arrived in 1623 in the form of Aoki Kensei, a yamabushi full of pro-Shinto zeal. He and his sons obtained priestly status from the Yoshida sect in Kyoto, but worship at the shrine was still minimal until the 1634 government decree requiring every person in the city to register as a member of the *ujiko* or risk suspicion of being a Christian. The bakufu also gave the shrine responsibility for *Kunchi* (from *kunichi*, the ninth day of the Ninth Month), previously a local fall festival of dancing and singing, which over the years has grown ever more elaborate and continues as a major *matsuri* in the present.

The most dramatic manifestation of the Suwa *kami*'s power occurred during the atomic bombing of Nagasaki. Because of its location on the southern flank of Mt Kompira, the shrine suffered virtually no damage from the nuclear blast, and this fact took on great meaning for the survivors. 'To people desperate for understanding, the fact that the Americans, known to be a Christian nation, had dropped this terrible weapon on the largest cathedral in all of Asia and left the city's main Shinto shrine untouched was a significant omen' (p. 22). This interpretation seems to have helped the shrine keep the local goodwill, for in much of the country people shunned the Shinto institutions with which they associated the war and defeat.

An important contribution of the book is the priests' emic explanations (for example, the paper used in purification acts as a magnet for pollution), but it would be useful to know when these are idiosyncratic and expedient, and when they are the official Jinja Honchō line. Nelson reports that all *kami* 'are thought to be subordinate parts of Amaterasu, the Supreme Sun Kami, whose principal shrine is at Ise' (p. 29), and presents Chief Priest Uesugi's metaphor of lesser deities as tributaries flowing into the mighty river of Amaterasu. In a footnote to this section, the author describes the campaign of the Jinja Honchō to systematize Shinto doctrine into something like 'a unified, monotheistic theology that places the Sun Kami at the top, venerates the emperor as a descendant of this Kami as well as her intermediary, and wins the heart and minds of the public in ways the prewar ideology never achieved' (p. 240).

This example illustrates the problem, albeit indirectly, and there are places where I wished for more clarification between 'local' and 'central' interpretations. *Shintō Jiten* describes the Suwa *kami* as 'the number-one deity of war' since the middle ages, but how does this relate to the choice of this shrine at the beginning of its history and to its seemingly demilitarized identity now? It is difficult to know whether traditions are local, invented, prescribed by the central organization, sanitized—indeed, it may be impossible to sort out the matter completely. More discussion of the specific traditions of the Suwa Shrine in light of this question would have complemented Nelson's skillful presentation of other complexities, such as diverse voices within the shrine, roles for women in Shinto, Shinto's collusions with politics and militarism, and so on.

There are surprisingly few errors in the book. Herbert Ross should be Floyd Ross (p. 33), Genichi Kato should be Genchi (p. 274), Daoist appears on p. 139, but Taoist is used on p. 231, and (worst of all) Smyres should be Smyers (p. 123). The maps and glossary are helpful; the photographs are mostly of professional quality and add a great deal to the book. The text reads well, in part because the translations sound natural ('17-chambered harmonium' for *shō* is masterful), but a few translations do jar. The usual 'divided skirts' for *hakama* may be awkward, but is preferable to the oft-mentioned 'bloomers' and even less accurate 'pantaloons' in the glossary (p. 254). And it took some time for me to work out the otherwise fascinating discussion of women in Shinto (Chapter 14) because of the author's logical but idiosyncratic use of 'shrine priestess', the term that usually translates *miko*, for female priest.

Using a capitalized, non-italicized 'Kami' is justified for two reasons: 'to give it the same kind of visual status with the text as the word "God" might have in a Christian context and, second, to thus divest it of the special attention italics are often meant to give a word or a concept' (p. ix). These are good reasons, but this solution may also imply a similarity between God and Kami that would not be accurate. Italics may, in addition to calling attention to a word, also merely indicate that it is in a foreign language and imply that readers must learn what the word means in its own cultural context as there is no equivalent term in English. But the question is really a part of a larger one: who is the intended audience for this book?

For most of *A Year in the Life of a Shinto Shrine*, there seems to be a kind of uneasy tension between description meant for the total novice and scholarly discussions directed at better-informed readers. At the very end, the tone shifts from descriptive to prescriptive, and there the author seems to be speaking to the Shinto community itself. The strength of Nelson's work is that it contains much to learn for each of its possible readerships. Those unfamiliar with Japan will find a well-written introduction to Shinto with picturesque descriptions, clear discussions, and a range of comparative examples from diverse sources, including Western and Native American religious traditions. Japan scholars also have much to learn both concerning the specifics of daily life at a particular shrine and from the scholarly discussions and references. And should the Shinto community take up this volume, they too will be impressed, both by the way in which the shrine has been so beautifully brought to life on the printed page, and by the succinct manner in which the problems Shinto faces have been captured. All readers will come away from this book feeling that they themselves have witnessed archaic rituals, met some remarkable priests, and have begun to understand some of the beauties, dangers, and complexities of contemporary Shinto.