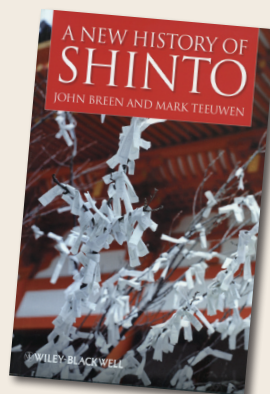


BOOK REVIEWS

A New History of Shinto

John Breen and Mark Teeuwen

Wiley-Blackwell, 2010
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Books on Shinto used to be scarce. Walk into a bookshop, and you were lucky to find one at all. If you did, it would be Sokyo Ono's *Shinto* (1962). The view it put forward was of a uniquely Japanese tradition that had existed in one form or another since time immemorial and which, in Meiji times, had been liberated from its Buddhist yoke to return to its original independent role. It is a view Breen and Teeuwen are eager to challenge in this thought-provoking book. The agenda is made clear in the opening chapter, in which the term "Shinto" is said to have been retrospectively and falsely applied to the distant past. The modern religion is, in short, an invented tradition dating from the nineteenth century when building national consciousness was a prime concern. "The crux of the matter is that kami shrines, myths, and rituals are a great deal older than their conceptualization as components of Shinto," write the authors.

The book impresses throughout for the wealth of detail and depth of research. Much of the information is unavailable elsewhere in English, and the extensive use of primary material enables those without Japanese ability to gain insight into scholarly work in the field. Influential figures are introduced, such as folklorist Yanagita Kunio (1875–1962) and scholar Kuroda Toshio (1926–1993). The latter argued that there was no such thing as "ancient Shinto" in the sense of an independent religion, since kami worship was subsumed into esoteric Buddhism until Meiji times. Breen and Teeuwen follow in his footsteps but with a difference, since they identify the roots of modern Shinto in the medieval period, particularly the fifteenth century thinking of Yoshida Kanetomo. "Before Kanetomo's time, Shinto had no currency in a sense at all recognizable today," the authors emphasize.

So, how about ancient times? How does one explain, for instance, the usage of '*shintō*' in the *Nihon shoki* of 720? The argument put forward is that the term was borrowed from the Chinese to refer to such activities as the placation of kami. Practitioners would have had no sense of identification with anything called Shinto; furthermore, the authors suggest, pronunciation at the time was probably *jindō* and denoted the Buddhist worship of kami. Along with this went a *jingi* court cult that sought to bolster the emperor and his allies by incorporating shrines and manipulating the mythology. For the authors, neither *jindō* nor *jingi* can be considered an indigenous tradition, since both inventions were largely based on imported notions. In order to demonstrate this, there then follow historical case studies

of a shrine (Hie), a myth (Amaterasu's Rock Cave), and a ritual (*daijōsai*). These form the heart of the book, and collectively they illustrate how such items have been constantly reinterpreted over time.

The chapter on Hie Shrine forms almost a third of the book, and for all the fascinations (at one time it was the biggest in Japan), one wonders about its selection over Ise given the obvious match with the imperial themes that underlie the other chapters. The authors respond by saying Ise is unrepresentative, though the charge could be more tellingly laid against the *daijōsai* as the choice of ritual, since it is used only at the time of the emperor's inauguration. The murky origins and development of Ise offer material well suited to the book's "alternative approach," and with the *shikinen sengū* rebuilding due for completion in 2013, it would seem an opportunity lost not to capitalize on the attention the shrine will get. It would have allowed, too, for discussion of Watarai Shinto, which is strangely missing from the book.

But this is in no way to detract from the many strengths of the book. Curiously for a history, it provides a particularly useful survey of the contemporary scene, in which the reader learns about such matters as the financing of shrines, the number of visitors, and the percentage of the population that partake in Shinto rites. There is talk, too, of the shortcomings of the Jinja Honchō (abbreviated by the authors as NAS or National Association of Shrines), which include a relative lack of concern with environmental matters and an Ise campaign that causes friction with local shrines. The suggestion is of a disconnect between policy makers and ordinary practitioners. Non-mainstream Shinto is also featured, with illuminating sections on Fushimi Inari, the Yasukuni controversy, and sectarian Shinto. There are important matters discussed here that feature in no other book in English of which I know.

It is a credit to the *New History* that it leaves one pondering so many questions. How to explain the *Nihon shoki* focus on Takami-musubi rather than Amaterasu as instigator of the descent from heaven? How come there is a mirror in the imperial palace said to be that of Amaterasu, when the general understanding is that this acts as the *goshintai* (spirit body) of Ise? Why do the authors presume ancient usage was *jindō* rather than *shintō*? Why aren't imperial themes celebrated at Fushimi Inari? What is the significance of the "golden rock" at Hie, where worship originated? Why, intriguingly, did a junior member of the shrine set about the chief priest with a metal pipe in the 1990s? And how about Yoshida Kanetomo, who emerges from the book as virtual founder of Shinto? He comes over as a somewhat dubious figure, who drew on esoteric Buddhism and Daoism to promote the Yoshida shrine as pre-eminent in the country at large. He even had the gall to claim that the holy relics of Ise Jingū had miraculously flown to Yoshida hill, then duped an emperor into certifying them.

At the end one can not help wondering what exactly is this puzzling thing called Shinto. Traditionalists see it in terms of continuity, but for Breen and Teeuwen it is characterized by change, conflict and construct. "Shinto in our view appears not as the unchanging core of Japan's national essence, but rather as the unpredictable outcome of an erratic history," they write. As such, this revisionist book is much in keeping with the work of leading scholars such as Allan Grapard, who has suggested the need to talk of "Shintos" rather than a unified Shinto. It is a measure of the book's achievement that it has managed to introduce such scholarly notions in a way that is at once accessible and instructive. Even

those skeptical about its claims would have to admit the solidity of the research, and the book renders valuable service by opening up debate about Shinto's origins to a general readership. Its influence is likely to be long lasting.

Reviewed by John Dougill