

BOOK REVIEW

Clans and Religion in Ancient Japan: The Mythology of Mt. Miwa

By Masanobu Suzuki

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vi + 161 pages.

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Detailed studies of ancient Japan available in English are relatively scarce, and so all the more precious. The scarcity attests to the well-documented difficulties: that is, how to discern, synthesize, and analyze the already existing or newly discovered archaeological and written sources that emerged in Japan before the eighth century, and, indeed, later records portraying the events of Japan's early past in retrospect with new goals and agendas in mind. Such studies usually reflect on methodological limitations in reconstructing the historical matter, and may reveal one or two struggles in finding the right tone in presenting a vista of ancient Japan and its role in the broader East Asia region. In English, numerous recent works have presented ancient Japan as a moving, unstable, changing entity existing in a lively terrain of constantly shifting imagination, enlivened by gods, political rivalries, geographical alliances, and conflicts which unfolded at different locations both within the Japanese isles and broader maritime regions of early East Asia.¹ This is not to mention the newly thriving field of the history of Shinto that has recently seen several contributions analyzing the veneration of Japan's local deities in a variety of historical contexts; few recent works can do without a consideration of the early forms of kami worship.

From this perspective, Masanobu Suzuki's study of the Ōmiwa clan, set as it is precisely within this vital and important period of Japan's history, could be another welcome addition to the already impressive, if limited, number of studies published in English. It abounds in historical and philological detail, and provides pages of carefully selected technical and historical information. The primary source quotations are meticulously provided, and the study gives an impressive overview of twentieth century and contemporary Japanese scholarship on all things related to Mt. Miwa, which is near Sakurai in present-day Nara Prefecture, and its early history. It may be helpful to know that Suzuki's study was published in Japanese in 2014; the volume's current English translation, conceived of as a contribution to the world's scholarly community, was made by the author on the basis of the Japanese monograph, revised and expanded.²

1 To mention just a few, Barnes 1988, Barnes 2007, and Barnes and Okita 1993. See also Batten 2006, Como 2008, Como 2009, Durhie 2014, Ooms 2009.

2 Suzuki 2014.

The one-page introduction starts from the premise that “Shinto is the unique and traditional Japanese religion,” and offers to “shed light on differences between the religious systems of Japan and those of other Asian countries and even differences between Eastern and Western cultures” (p. 1). To some readers specializing in the history of Japanese and East Asian religions, and Shinto in particular, this approach may indicate a certain path that this study intends to take. Rather than answering directly its own broad questions regarding Japan and “other Asian countries,” the book’s focus on ancient Japan is maintained through an analysis of the activities of fictional and historical figures from the Ōmiwa clan whose mythology and religious traditions linked them to Mt. Miwa, one of the earliest sites of ritual and political activities in central Honshu (pp. 10–35). This somewhat narrow focus allows a detailed philological analysis of Japan’s well known earliest written records and selected archaeological remains. Through these, Suzuki traces the political fortunes of the Ōmiwa clan from the late fifth to the early eighth centuries.

One of the most thought-provoking contributions this volume makes is a meticulous study of who exactly comprised the Ōmiwa (pp. 36–46). According to Suzuki, the cognate clans of Ōmiwa lived in Yamato Province, most likely within a short distance of Mt. Miwa. Based on the distribution of *sue* ceramic ware, their habitat extended through Yamashiro and Settsu in coastal and central Honshu, and Izumo and Buzen provinces in western Japan. There is, however, a sense that, despite the mythological connections of certain Ōmiwa deities to the lands “over the sea” (as is documented in the *Kojiki* and *Nihon shoki*), the Ōmiwa clan portrayed in the current study belongs firmly in Japan. The author evidences no recognition of, or willingness to discuss, its potential prior history and possible overseas origins, however forgotten or “written-out” these may have been from the eighth-century Japanese histories. One could well ask how the Ōmiwa were able to perform so successfully as ambassadors and military dispatches to the Korean peninsula or as skillful interlocutors of the Korean envoys in early Japan, had they not possessed a formidable hereditary expertise, based on their own overseas family connections and pedigree.

Chapters 5 and 6 discuss Mt. Miwa’s deities, or rather, as Suzuki puts it, the “Ōmiwa god” (which he seems to understand as a more or less single deity, albeit with a variety of different characteristics), and the change in religious activities, which he analyzes on the basis of archaeological remains and eighth-century written records (pp. 66–85 and 86–111, respectively). These and other arguments have already been attested to in twentieth century Japanese-language scholarship, which Suzuki uses meticulously and exclusively. Curiously, though, the current volume does not refer to scholarship in Western languages. The study is rich in detailed and potentially interesting and significant information. For example, Suzuki provides impressive lists of the Miwa clansmen whose abode he has been able to reconstruct through a careful reading of primary sources. In this regard, it may be disappointing that the necessary citations of Japanese written sources are quoted only in Japanese with short summaries in English, but with no direct translation. That these citations offer little philological detail in the main text that follows will not be a particular problem for a specialist scholar of premodern Japan, but for a broader scholarly audience, good English translations of primary sources will be sorely missed.

The vision of ancient Japan that emerges from this book is still confined to a narrow point, a kind of beautifully frozen fountainhead from which all things spring forth and travel to “other Asian countries,” with no deliberation of the possibility that historical

migration can operate in the completely opposite direction, as other studies have already suggested. The amount of work that has gone into the English translation of Suzuki's book is admirable, and its introduction of earlier Japanese scholarship is impressive. Is it not time, however, to try at last to bridge the divide between the competing and unconnected versions of Japanese history, including early Japan?

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