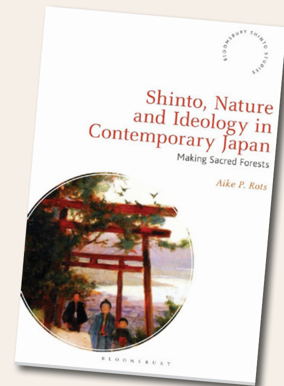
Book Review

Shinto, Nature and Ideology in Contemporary Japan: Making Sacred Forests

By Aike P. Rots



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x + 260 pages.

Reviewed by Matt HAYLER

Researching for a project about ecology and human entanglements with environments, I wanted to learn more about non-Western traditions which conceived of those relationships differently: not as relationships of conquest and domination, but instead, perhaps, as meetings of active, maybe equal, subjects, or as moments deserving respect and care. A friend had recently finished a book about Shinto, Japan's "indigenous nature religion," and recommended it as an avenue to investigate. Each book I read, starting with basic introductions and moving to official shrine and academic discussions, supported a view of Shinto as a source of unproblematic reverence for a natural world alive with agentic beings. An understanding of Shinto as, at the least, a spiritual outlook underpinning practices that should educate environmentalists both inside and outside of Japan is widespread, and the vast majority of books available as introductions to Shinto emphasize a worship of the natural world that is both ancient and unique to "the Japanese people." These assumptions, about Shinto, Nature, and Japan, are thoroughly questioned by Aike P. Rots in his *Shinto, Nature and Ideology in Contemporary Japan*.[1] He investigates the role that Shinto might play, or is positioned as playing, in contemporary environmental thought, and the other uses to which it has been put in recent Japanese politics.

Rots' study rests on the problem of defining "Shinto." It is a difficult thing to pin down because of the variety of paradigms by which it has been conceptualized, each of which persist to a greater or lesser extent today. His study focuses on the "environmentalist paradigm" that has come to dominate contemporary discussion, but this conceptualization, both consciously and unconsciously, draws on historic paradigms for mythic resonance, including "imperial," "ethnic," "local," "universal," and "spiritual" framings. In an environmentalist frame, Shinto has been positioned as apolitical; Shinto shrines are associated with an ancient, homogenous, and unchanging system of nature worship where sites and practices escape politics by dint of predating political systems and carrying on as they always have. Rots, however, traces the more complex reality of Shinto sites, particularly the Ise shrines, and their acting in a fundamentally romanticized and ideological way,

1 "Nature" is capitalized here to refer to the ahistorical and romanticized concept of "Nature" that Rots discusses throughout his work.

linked with potent and mutable conceptions of Nature, nation, and imperial power. "Much of what today counts as 'traditional' or 'ancient'—including the 'love of nature' supposedly expressed in ritual and (agri)cultural practices at Ise—goes back to nineteenth- and early twentieth-century myth-making and was part of the modern nation-building project" (p. 2).

To see Shinto as both Japan's indigenous religion, and as a fixed combination of beliefs, practices, and spaces which can be traced back beyond record, "essentializes 'the Japanese people' as a single entity with a singular historical experience … [denying] the diversity of beliefs, practices, and experiences of the various people who have lived in the areas that later became the nation-state 'Japan'" (p. 35). This kind of myth-making can be incredibly politically affective and effective, and Rots understands its appeal for a variety of actors, including politicians, priests, scholars, and corporations. He also brings out, in his challenges to a simplistic (and essentializing) notion of "the" Japanese people, the realities of attitudes towards Nature in contemporary Japanese society. The illusion of "the Japanese people" as universally reverent towards nature, thanks to Shinto's underpinning of daily life, occludes the reality of histories and presents (shared with a great many nations) of intensive deforestation, unsustainable consumer culture, pleasures taken in manicured and artificial (rather than truly "wild") environments, and emphasis on local and public health concerns over global ecology. Throughout his work, Rots brings out the damaging effects of myth-making on critical thinking: fuller understandings of Shinto, the concept of Nature, contemporary politics, and the experiences of people in Japan become impossible when conceiving of Shinto and Japanese citizens through essentializing and distorting frameworks.

This said, Rots is not dismissive of the possibilities that Shinto's practices—and its contemporary environmental paradigm—offer for environmental movements both inside and outside of Japan. Some of the same rhetorical, myth-making power that sees Shinto put to political work also sees it usefully motivating environmentalist and conservationist activity, and, in particular, bringing together actors across political divides who are able to agree on the significance of aspects of the shared stories of Shinto for Japanese life. Similarly, the sacred forests of Shinto shrines have both symbolic and physical importance: they function as both spiritual and political sites, but also as real spaces where non-human environments and environmental practices can be explored and communities can meet and become oriented around ecological interests. As Rots explains, "sacred," in this way, is not the same as "religious." The ways in which spaces are made sacred, and the physical and intellectual work that this enables, need not be tied to a particular, enduring belief structure; secular sites can still be sacred, and sacrality can be put to all sorts of ideological work. But the sacred is also the special, the worthy of attention, the worthy of protection. Identifying the sacred in non-human life will be a vital part of any ecological work that might undo some of the ongoing damage of an Anthropocene era. In this way, Rots gives us the less mythically satisfying, but more truthful and sustainable story of Shinto: even if we understand the (frequently cynical) construction and political nature of its paradigms, Shinto still causes people to look to the world around them with wonder, to see it as alive and worthy of protection, full of non-human agency. This is a starting point, not a solution, for changing human relationships with Nature, and one start among many. But to understand it better, as Rots undoubtedly helps us to do, is not to harm it or to underestimate its power.