

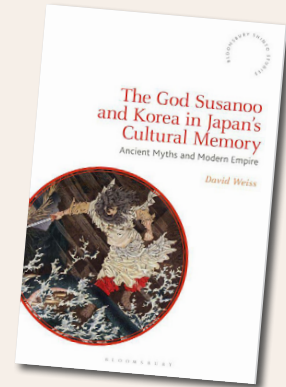
BOOK REVIEW

The God Susanoo and Korea in Japan's Cultural Memory: Ancient Myths and Modern Empire

By David Weiss

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ix + 243 pages.

Reviewed by Mark E. CAPRIO



From ancient times, a people's mythology has served the useful purpose of providing explanations for the inexplicable—the origins of peoples and objects as well as the “whys” behind otherwise incomprehensible phenomena. Myths are used to inject logic into the illogical. In recent times the function of these colorful stories has been replaced by scientific inquiry as a means to understanding such phenomena, rendering myths as little more than entertaining stories. They are obviously problematic when used to justify the political actions of a particular people over another. This, David Weiss shows, is what occurred in Japan, where people exploited such stories to explain their colonization of the Korean Peninsula from 1910 onwards.

Weiss describes his study as tracing “the role myths and legends surrounding Susanoo played in Japanese intellectual history from the ancient to the modern period ... As early as the medieval period, Susanoo was regarded as a ‘foreign’ deity who had come to the Japanese archipelago from the Asian mainland” (p. 2). Weiss looks at a wide range of ancient texts, as well as secondary interpretations of these texts, for the connections they made between archipelago and peninsula. Among these, he finds the *Nihon shoki* (720) and the *Izumo fudoki* (733) invoked more often than the *Kojiki* (712), which focuses more on domestic-centered stories than those foreign to Japan (p. 89). In Weiss's telling, Susanoo embodies the threatening role that Japanese saw the Korean Peninsula as having vis-à-vis Japan from even before the nineteenth century, as a base for military invasion or as a source of epidemics (pp. 21–22).

Weiss's analysis of this complicated issue is thorough and entertaining, yet at the same time disturbing. Susanoo is the mischievous younger brother of Japan's mythical creator, Amaterasu. The *Kojiki* accuses Susanoo of wreaking havoc on the fields that his sister had sowed in the spring: “He filled in the ditches, destroyed the sluices and the divisions between” the fields. “In autumn, when the grain was ripe, he stretched ropes around the fields, claiming them as his property, or he let horses loose in the fields.” As his sister was about to taste the new rice “he defecated inside the New Palace” that had been built especially for the tasting (p. 56). Indeed, this “trickster” is considered to be Amaterasu's antithesis, a marginal god who took charge of the *ne no kumi*, the underworld (p. 54), and frightened his sister into a cave, thus shrouding the world in darkness (p. 50). Weiss's study

details how “Japanese myths justified the colonial order by contrasting a corrupt, impure, and sinister Korea with the shining Japanese metropole ... Susanoo played a central role in this process” (p. 146).

In the colonial period, Japanese portrayed the Korean people as their not-so-distant cousins, as a people that once shared familial branches with them. Susanoo was considered an important part of this connection; indeed, according to some, he was identical or related to Korea’s ancient legendary first king, Tan’gun (p. 149). Japanese scholars reasoned that in earlier days “deities travelled to and fro.” Waseda University historian Kume Kunitake, for example, argued that Susanoo no Mikoto, along with his son Itakeru no Kami, crossed over to Japan from the ancient Korean kingdom of Silla (p. 159). Weiss quotes the *Nihon shoki* as stating that during the “Age of Gods” Susanoo declared that he no longer wanted to “stay in this land [Korea],” before he built a boat from clay to cross the seas that separated the two lands (p. 91). This mythical link justified Japanese claims that their “assimilation policy” (*dōka seisaku*) was nothing more than a natural return to the distant past, when the two peoples enjoyed similar roots.

Weiss draws attention to Eric Hobsbawm and Terrence Ranger’s “invention of tradition” in his discussion on the evolution of the Susanoo myth over the centuries.¹ He finds this idea useful for highlighting that “traditions are selectively ‘fashioned from both material and discursive antecedents’” (p. 19). The Japanese reinvention of this mythology following the 1868 Meiji Restoration particularly complicated matters. Weiss succeeds in showing just how complicated such an inquiry can become as he unscrambles interpretations of these stories that debated the location of places mentioned in these texts, how gods of different names were actually seen as the same deity, as well as how they are to be interpreted. In tracing numerous renditions of the Susanoo myth over the long term, he identifies how the interpretations of scholars differed from their contemporaries, and from other invocations of Susanoo in the past. However, these twists and turns make Weiss’s flow at times difficult to follow, a problem that might have been partially eased had the author included a glossary of the different gods and the alternate names by which they are associated. Weiss does note on occasion that Susanoo’s role on the margins is not unique to Japanese mythology, but also found in other mythologies, such as Norse stories (pp. 64, 69), an interesting point to which he might have devoted more attention.

David Weiss’s *The God Susanoo and Korea in Japan’s Cultural Memory* represents a careful analysis of rather complex issues, complicated by the different interpretations that the stories have assumed over the centuries. I would have liked to have seen more attention directed toward connections made around the early twentieth century, when Japan absorbed Korea into its empire. The author does note that the Japanese media frequently drew on the Susanoo myth as justification for their country’s absorption of Korea, but a few more tangible examples would have been welcomed. That said, Weiss’s discussions on the links that Japanese made between the gods, and the connections they invented with their neighbors’ ancient history, are interesting, informative, and convincing. For this reason alone, *The God Susanoo and Korea* belongs on the reading list of any initiative that concentrates attention on Korea and Japan’s historical relations, and particularly Japan’s colonization of, and subsequent policies toward, the Korean Peninsula and its people.

1 Hobsbawm and Ranger 1983.

REFERENCE

Hobsbawm and Ranger 1983

Eric Hobsbawm and Terrence Ranger. *The Invention of Tradition*. Cambridge University Press, 1983.