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<BOOK REVIEWS>Tama in Japanese Myth : A Hermeneutical Study of Ancient Japanese Divinity, by Tomoko Iwasawa

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Book Reviews

Tama in Japanese Myth: A Hermeneutical Study of Ancient Japanese Divinity

Tomoko Iwasawa

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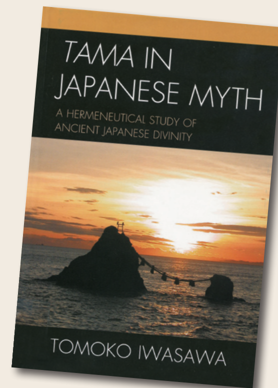

Tomoko Iwasawa's *Tama in Japanese Myth* enhances the rapidly growing list of Shinto studies in English. More philosophically informed than most other works in the field, it focuses on *tama* (rather than, say, kami) as the core of Shinto myth and experience. In developing her arguments, Iwasawa draws on the philology of ancient Japanese terms, theories of myth, hermeneutics, ritual studies, and history. Although there are weaknesses in the analysis, they do not significantly undermine the importance of Iwasawa's general conclusions about how to study Japanese myth.

The book has two halves. Part I, "*Tama* in Japanese Myth—Historical Investigations," introduces *Kojiki*, the etymology and use of the term "*tama*," and some of the major approaches taken by both traditional Japanese thinkers, especially Motoori Norinaga and Hirata Atsutane, as well as modern interpreters like Tsuda Sōkichi, Yoshida Atsuhiko, Ōbayashi Taryō, and Matsumura Takeo. Iwasawa's organizing frame for Part I borrows on terminology from debates between Rudolf Bultmann and Karl Jaspers: mythologizing-demythologizing-remythologizing. To mythologize is to take the narratives literally, univocally, and naively—a fundamentalist literalism. By contrast, when scholars demythologize, they undermine that naiveté by situating the text in its proper historical, social, and linguistic contexts. Although no longer naïve, demythologizing still seeks *the* meaning or *the* correct interpretation, however. Remythologizing, on the other hand, uses semiotics and hermeneutics to treat the text as polysemous. Its "hermeneutic circle" places the reader inside rather than outside the narrative, engaging reader and text in a mutually correcting and transforming "conversation." Iwasawa sees remythologizing as going beyond demythologizing in recognizing the religiously transformative value of myth.

Iwasawa's exemplars for remythologizing are not only the usual suspects from the twentieth century West such as Ernst Cassirer, Suzanne Langer, Mircea Eliade, Hans-Georg Gadamer, and Paul Ricoeur but also, and here is where the book becomes most intriguing, Norinaga and Atsutane as well. The Norinaga connection did not surprise me. He clearly believed his attempt to unearth the Yamato worldview beneath the surface text of *Kojiki* was not just a scholarly analysis, but also a ritual for participating in the creative power that made our world. By contrast, I found Iwasawa's interpretation of Atsutane to be more surprising and thought-provoking. She frames Atsutane's remythologizing as an exercise in "embodying *tama*," casting a new light on his interests in agriculture and peasant folklore.

Part II, "*Tama* in Japanese Myth—Concrete Manifestations," is more free-standing than a direct continuation of Part I and includes some repetition. (The book needs an index. Without it, one might not know the etymological discussion of "*musuhi,*" for example, begins on page 30, is picked up again on page 34, and addressed further on page 94.) Part II is a detailed analysis of the *Kojiki* myths in light of Paul Ricoeur's categories from *The Symbolism of Evil.* In that book Ricoeur investigates evil in the Near Eastern and Mediterranean myths, identifying three stages of evolution: defilement, sin, and guilt. Iwasawa quotes Ricoeur as saying the myth of evil as he outlines it can be said to "embrace mankind as a whole in one ideal history." So, Iwasawa asks whether his analysis can apply to the *Kojiki* myths. Not surprisingly, her answer is "not well." Her careful analysis concludes that the good-evil dynamic in Japanese myths does not fit Ricoeur's evolutionary model wherein good (order, life) tries to annihilate evil (chaos, death). At times Iwasawa even slips into claiming something "unique" in the Japanese worldview of complementarity and interdependence (see, for example, page 106). The first problem here is Iwasawa's not considering whether there might be no Japanese mythic equivalent at all to "good" and "evil," rather than claiming the relation between the two in the Japanese myths is somehow special. In this respect, she might have alerted her readers to the problems in translating "*tsumi*" simply as "sin," not to mention the bizarre designation of Susanoo as the "original sinner" (which she at least qualifies with scare quotes). Secondly, even if one does not buy into Ricoeur's uncharacteristically provincial hyperbole about discovering the "one ideal history" of "mankind as a whole," there is still nothing uniquely Japanese seeing order and chaos, good and evil, life and death as something other than simply antagonistic poles. That explains Yoshida Shinto's seeing opposites in a *yin/yang* relation, for example. Indeed, outside the Abrahamic traditions, most religions see matters in a way similar to the ancient Japanese.

Three other points of analysis struck me as particularly problematic. First, Iwasawa treats Native Studies as a remythologizing response to a Confucian demythologizing of the myths. The claim is insightful, but its supporting argument is weakened by Iwasawa's unnuanced tendency to collapse all Japanese Confucians (even Sorai) into a generic Neo-Confucianism that emphasizes "principle." Moreover, Iwasawa's characterization of Norinaga's theory of language ignores his roots in *waka* poetics, leaving us with an incomplete picture of his overall view. In fact, Iwasawa goes so far as to characterize Norinaga's idea of *kokoro* as going in an "abstract, mental direction" (p. 39). In fact, for Norinaga nothing was more concrete and immanent than *kokoro.*

The second point is Iwasawa's characterization of Norinaga's philosophy as "apolitical." Like Maruyama Masao (whom she follows on this point), that interpretation overlooks Norinaga's pacifism. He explicitly and sharply criticized the warrior morality and its lofty ideals of loyalty. For Norinaga no principle is worth dying for. Given his times, that hardly makes his position simply "apolitical."

Lastly, Iwasawa accepts rather uncritically Atsutane's mixing of rural folklore and ritual. Ritual practices may help inform us about the use of some term in a mythic narrative, but one should not (as both Atsutane and Iwasawa sometimes do) use ritual to *supplement* the myth with *additional* ideas and values. There is no *a priori* reason to assume the meaning of myth and the meaning of ritual are part of a seamless whole. In fact, many ritualists reject the structuralist assumption that rituals have "meaning" at all. And cognitive science has already established cases distinguishing what people think they believe and what they actually believe as revealed in their responses under testing.

Such minor misgivings aside, I heartily applaud Iwasawa for the boldness of her project. I especially agree with her call for more remythologizing in the scholarly study of Shinto myth, that narrative corpus that was mythologized by State Shinto and then has been so thoroughly demythologized in postwar scholarship. The occasional weaknesses in her evidence and analysis do not undermine the power and timeliness of her overall conclusion.

Reviewed by Thomas P. Kasulis