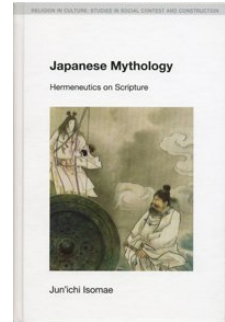


*Japanese Mythology: Hermeneutics on Scripture*,  
by Jun'ichi Isomae, translated by Mukund Subramanian

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In this monograph, Jun'ichi Isomae seeks to make contributions to the field of religious studies by focusing on the manifold interpretations of two of Japan's most historically, politically, and religiously influential texts: the *Kojiki* (712 CE) and the *Nihon Shoki* (720 CE). The importance of the mythological contents of the Kiki, as the pair of texts is commonly referenced, is not merely tied to some circumstances of the distant past; its stories were presented as facts to Japanese students in history textbooks from the early modern period until the Allied occupation (see 30–31). This literature emerged from a complex nexus of tale compilations and oral traditions, and the *Kojiki* and *Nihon Shoki* share content with one another with some notable variation. Isomae demonstrates to us how notions of the origins of the Japanese people and the Japanese imperial institution were constructed based on the Kiki, which eventually attained a canonical status. These constructed origins are shown to be the product of subjective biases and the agendas of textual commentators. Striking a postmodern tone, the author convincingly shows that both the roots of the original texts and subsequent commentary on them are marked not by some discoverable thematic unity, but an undeniable plurality.

The book consists of a preface, an introduction, and six individual essays. Due in part to some repetition, the chapters can be read individually. The text has been translated from Japanese, and, perhaps following a more Japanese style, the arguments and propositions tend to be found more in the conclusion of the essays rather than upfront. For non-specialists of Japanese religion, the first chapter is likely to be of the greatest interest. In it, Isomae gives a valuable overview of the Kiki's reception through its entire history, dividing his treatment up into an examination of ancient, medieval, and modern periods. This chapter could be employed valuably for use with graduate or upper-level undergraduate students of religious studies. The second chapter impresses the point that successful mythology has discernible

variants by looking carefully at the mythology surrounding the key figure of Susanowo. Continuing on in his investigation, Isomae explains that the Yamatotakeru legend is “an excellent vehicle for tracing the history of interpretation of Kiki myths” (66). He engages in this pursuit effectively in the third chapter, which offers a good set of specific examples to highlight the more overarching trends discussed in the first chapter. The fourth chapter looks at how these myths were approached in the early modern period and how the Kiki served rationalist (and by comparison non-rationalist) drives to construct a connection to a historical past (see 106). The fifth and sixth chapters are likely to be of greater interest to specialists, as they deal in great detail with how myths are employed by two individuals, Motoori Norinaga, a nationalist, and Ishimoda Shō, a Marxist.

Isomae aims to offer analytical contributions to the wider field of hermeneutics and the study of sacred writings. He states, “As we enter the twenty-first century, the theory of sacred texts has reached the point of stagnation” (6). Indeed, the author hints that new theoretical orientations may be something of an existential necessity, as such fields increasingly “fight for relevance at the modern forefront of religious studies” (6). The intention of this book is to open a “new horizon for conceiving a method for comparative religious studies” (6). It should be noted, however, that the comparisons he makes in this treatment are almost exclusively within Kiki and closely related discourse. More practically, if this treatment is to influence non-Japanologists, such readers may be well advised to familiarize themselves beforehand with the actual content and structure of the Kiki, as basic information on the texts comes only in bits and pieces over the first several chapters.

The most central line of argumentation throughout this treatment is that Kiki studies and sacred textual studies, more generally, suffer from major areas of neglect. The author posits that shortcomings are visible in a neglect of comparisons between oral traditions and written texts (6); neglect of non-canonical sacred texts, which over time have subsequently fallen out of consideration (7); and neglect of examining interpretations across historical eras (8). Isomae’s pursuit of consequential neglect in Kiki studies may be seen to lose a bit of potency when one realizes that the objects of such critiques are generally not contemporary scholars of religion who ought to know better, but include eighteenth- and nineteenth-century academics and commentators whose obvious agendas have them variously labeled as evangelists, fundamentalists, nativists, and Marxists. Biases from these camps are genuinely interesting, but perhaps not particularly surprising. For ex-

ample, much analysis is dedicated to the “fundamentalist/nativist” Motoori Norinaga (1730–1801), but Isomae explains that Motoori’s writings were considered extreme and irrational even among contemporary nativists (93). Additionally, the author’s discussion of modern scholars recognizes that they have in fact employed non-canonical sources in their treatments, and thus their work seems less exemplary of approaches neglecting key evidence, which might obscure the bigger picture (see 32, 90).

In conclusion, one could say that the importance of the subject matter and the depth to which Isomae explores interpretive history make this text recommendable to scholars of religion generally and to scholars of sacred texts and Japanologists more specifically. The treatment’s greatest strengths lie in the author’s obvious command of the plurality of interpretations of the *Kojiki* and the *Nihon Shoki* over a fantastic timeline. Whether or not his treatment succeeds in producing a new horizon to enliven sacred textual studies or whether he uncovers hereto-unrecognized perpetrators of scholarly neglect is perhaps still a matter of debate. Nonetheless, it is valuable to have these essays in English, and Isomae’s efforts to offer Japanese examples to inform wider theoretical perspectives on the study of mythology is highly commendable.

John A. Shultz  
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