Book Review


In this book, Aike P. Rots attempts to analyze the Shinto environmentalist paradigm based upon six months of field research in Japan from 2011 to 2015 and his thorough textual studies, with a special reference to the contemporary Shinto movement called Chinju no mori no Project. By focusing his analysis on the social discourse of Shinto priests and conservative-minded politicians and locating Shintoist social environmentalist discourse in scholarly and social contexts, Rots successfully reveals the modernist aspect of the Shinto environmentalist paradigm of claiming its ancient root. For example, he reveals that the Shintoist claim that the shrine forest is ancient has no scientific ground since those trees growing on the shrine space are not ancient but, in many cases, planted in the modern era.

Rots opens his introduction by describing a scene that on the 26th of May, 2016, Ise Jingu welcomed a group of leaders of the G7 summit. He argues that the scene illustrates that Shinto plays a central part in contemporary politics and ideology in Japan. The G7 leaders’ visit to Ise Jingu signifies a dramatic break of foreign perception of Shinto, which was regarded as a source of political ideology in the form of State Shinto up to the end of World War II. After the introduction, the book is divided into eight chapters.

In the second chapter entitled ‘Defining Shinto’, Rots acknowledges five competing paradigms of defining Shinto: the imperial paradigm, the ethnic paradigm, the local paradigm, the universal paradigm, and the spiritual paradigm. In the third chapter, Rots traces the historical genealogy of Shinto love of nature back to Motoori Norinaga of the eighteenth century, the central figure of Kokugaku movement, then examines how modern intellectuals such as Okakura Kakuzo, Masaharu Anesaki, Tetsuro Watsuji, and Daisetsu Suzuki contributed to constructing a view of Shinto as a culture of loving nature. In the fourth chapter, Rots introduces a concept of the Shintoist environmentalist paradigm to explain the social trend to conceptualize Shinto as a worship tradition intimately connected with ‘nature’ but admits that the environmental problem is not the main concern for most Shintoists. It is a Shintoist tactic to represent Shinto as socially significant, being able to address environmental concerns.

In chapter five, entitled ‘Chinju no Mori’, Rots focuses his analysis of the book’s central issue by introducing a popular-scientific glossy magazine’s romanticized description of the Shrine forest. The concept of Chinju no Mori has basic components: maintaining ancient forests, rich biodiversity, and spiritual purity. However, various social actors use the term Chinju no Mori differently, from scientists’ usage of it as an ancient environment of the shrine forest, a common
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forest with biodiversity and ecological continuity, a generic term for sacred forests of a shrine, and a term for shrine space and its surrounding communities. In chapter six, ‘Landscapes of the Past’, Rots begins his analysis by introducing Mt. Miwa, one of the oldest shrines in Nara, an ancient capital. Today, Mt. Miwa is called the sacred mountain, the mountain itself embodying kami (god), thus preserving the natural environment well since ancient time. Despite the contemporary Shintoist claim, Rots shows that Mt. Miwa went through historical transformations such as Buddhism and Shinto hybridization of the medieval period and the forced separation of them and exclusion of Buddhism elements from the mountain.

In chapter seven, ‘Forests for the Future’, Rots turns his attention to shrine-based-environmental activism after he critically examines political motives of environmental concern expressed by the Jinja Honcho, the Association of Shinto Shrines. Then, he shows the dynamic relationship between a priest and local people by referring to a case where a priest and local people can oppose each other regarding how to use the shrine’s land. In chapter eight, ‘Acorns for Tohoku’, Rots begins his study by referring to the Tohoku Great Earthquake of 2011, which revealed violent and destructive aspects of nature, posing questions of theodicy, but provided a rare opportunity to Shinto priests and related people to be engaged actively in helping local communities and shrines to recover. Additionally, in the social and political context, a decline of the natural environment is regarded as coinciding with the decline of Japanese tradition. In the last and ninth chapter entitled ‘Going Green, Going Global’, Rots returns to the Ise Jingu and takes up Shikinen Sengu ceremony, the ceremony to rebuild whole shrine buildings and to remanufacture all cultural treasures handed down from 1300 years ago, and argues how the Shintoist utilize it as a sort of traditional symbol for sustainable usage of a natural resource. He closes his book by discussing a new horizon for the indigenous Shinto to be globalized and how its environmental paradigm appeals to non-Japanese.

I share Rots’ critical perspective into the political and ideological dimensions of some scientists’, some Japanese scholars’ and Shintoists’ social discourse on Shinto’s claim of its ancientness and nature-friendly attitudes. In addition, I appreciate his warm and kind attitudes toward ordinary Japanese people and his respectful but critical views toward Shinto priests. Theoretically speaking, Rots’ exploration of the spirituality-science-mixed sacralization process of sacred nature in contemporary Japan’s historical and social context is persuasive. This book is an excellent contribution to the study of religion and nature.

At the same time, it is necessary to point out that Rots’ study demonstrates the limits of an empirical approach with a presumed theoretical assumption. There is undeniably a socio-linguistic dimension which constitutes an indispensable aspect of religion. Yet the socio-linguistic dimension is not everything about religious phenomenon. I wonder if Rots has any scholarly curiosity to investigate other dimensions of Shinto’s relationship between nature and religion.

I would like to draw on a few examples from my field research on nature and religion at Ise Jingu about 20 years ago in order to consider other directions of research after critical discourse analysis. I assume that Rots knows similar cases. For example, Shinto priests make salt for rituals, but this can be a painful process in bare feet in hot summer. They also purify themselves in cold water even during cold winter. At some shrines, sometimes a priest attends all alone at night even in cold winter. To look at the other side of the social discourse on Shinto and nature,
it is necessary to examine those Shinto priests’ bodily experience of kami-nature-human relationship, too. It is not only bodily but also volitional and conscious.

To conclude my review, I refer to two other points. One remarkable feature of Shinto shrines was revealed after the Great East Japan Earthquake regarding their locations. After the tsunami in 2011, many Shinto shrines were found to be safe since they were built on a hill too high for the tsunami to reach. The high location of the Shinto shrine suggests that people knew how far a tsunami could reach from the past experiences of disaster, signaling that the Shinto shrine embodies a knowledge of the people in the past who might have experienced natural disaster. In July of 2021, still in the middle of Covid-19 pandemic, a Shinto shrine in Chiba prefecture deified the Covid virus and offered prayer to it to pacify the Covid pandemic. These brief examples demonstrate that there are many more issues to explore regarding Shinto and Nature.

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