When Tengu Talk: Hirata Atsutane's Ethnography of the Other World

Wilburn N. Hansen
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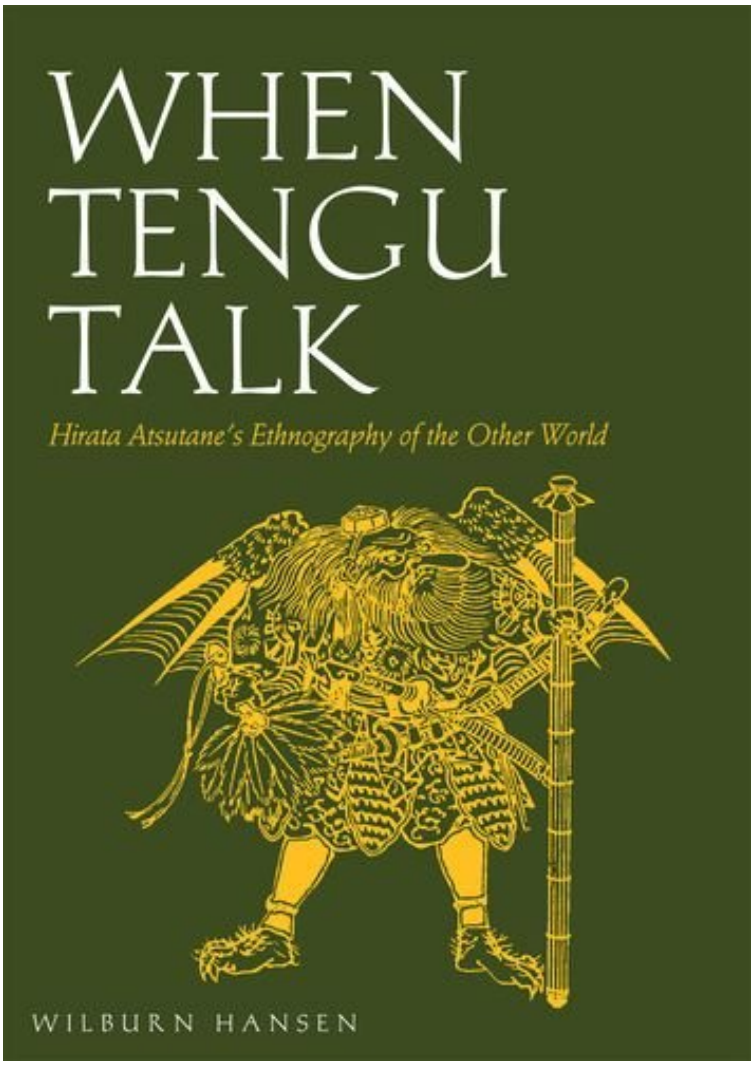

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Wilburn N. Hansen : When Tengu Talk: Hirata Atsutane's Ethnography of the Other World before purchasing it in order to gage whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised When Tengu Talk: Hirata Atsutane's Ethnography of the Other World:

1 of 1 people found the following review helpful. extremely interestingBy gary grosethis helps explain the longer than I imagined path between development of the "expel all things foreign" desire in the mid 19th century and the need to to construct a rational reason behind it . its hard for an outsider to understand the spider web of interaction between buddhism , shinto , neo confucist thought , and folk religions that Japanese participated in to some degree or another in

their everyday life in the 19th and into the 20th century.5 of 8 people found the following review helpful. "I don't know about books; I speak from seeing it up close."By Crazy FoxCertain personalities in Japanese cultural history go unfairly understudied and one can only wonder why. There's no mystery in the case of Hirata Atsutane, though. The man is unlikeable, almost unbearably so. Even among his fellow Nativists he stands out for the harshness and crudity of his hidebound xenophobia. As such, investigating and analyzing his texts and teachings is a singularly unrewarding task, to say the least. Unfortunately for us, he was also immensely influential in his own time and later in a number of ways, and taking a deep breath and dealing with him is, like it or not, indispensable to our overall understanding of the subject at hand. So Wilburn Hansen is to be thanked for enduring the unendurable and contributing his significant, insightful and sometimes affably witty study "When Tengu Talk" to the discussion--not to mention demonstrating that if we set aside Atsutane's often obnoxious prose as a given for the moment, the guy can even be interesting.The book's focus is quite specific, a single text from 1822 by Atsutane called "Senkyo Ibun" ("Strange Tidings from the Realm of Immortals" as Carmen Blacker once translated it), an oddity that rather lives up to its title as it consists of interviews between Atsutane (along with a number of his Nativist associates) and a teenage boy who claimed to be a Tengu in training possessing firsthand familiarity with the other unseen world and its denizens. While chiefly historical in approach, Hansen brings a keen literary sensibility to his analysis of this format and the vague suspicion of mutual manipulation its contents tend to inspire, paying due attention to narrative construction and voice so as to probe the dynamics between what we might call our ethnographer of the supernatural and his informant (and yes, the clear link to Yanagita Kunio's work in the twentieth century is given a good glance). In most considerations of Atsutane he gets lumped as a proto-nationalist ideologue, an obvious if dull conclusion, and while nobody's saying he's not that here, exploring the narratological aspects of this specific text and discussing the ideas and arguments therein from the perspective of Japanese religious history (rather than political history or intellectual history as usual) allows us to see Atsutane in a new and intriguing light, with more shades of gray perhaps than the usual stark light and shadow. On another level, too, many of the Tengu Boy's descriptions of the other world are delightfully surreal and bizarre, an uncanny mix of the extraordinary and the mundane, and Hansen's extended translations of these passages make for enjoyable if quizzical reading."Tengu That Talk" then is a scholarly book in the better sense of that term, adding something important to our knowledge and understanding of a specialized subject in a manner that is careful and methodologically sensitive without being forbiddingly obscure and tiresome. Hansen's contextualization of Atsutane and "Senkyo Ibun", informative in its own right, also affords a pricelessly vivid portrait of the energetic and occasionally contentious social aspect of Tokugawa thought, while his analysis of this text's explicit but sometimes unexpectedly ambivalent critique of Chinese thought, Buddhist religiosity, and Western technology is lucid while alert to easily overlooked complexities. Besides all that, though, this is one of the only academic titles I know of that has a surprise ending.2 of 3 people found the following review helpful. Useful, although less than perfectBy AveryWay back in 1967, the ethnologist Carmen Blacker wrote an article, "Supernatural Abductions in Japanese Folklore", in Asian Folklore Studies 26.2. This article, which is easy to acquire, is a decent summary of Hirata's Senkyo Ibun. When Tengu Talk is a necessary supplement to Blacker's article which gives us much more depth about Hirata and his world. For example, Blacker doubts the accuracy of Hirata's transcriptions, while Hansen unintentionally makes it clear that Hirata accurately transcribed even what he disapproved of. (c.f. 78-80, 82 on kami) We also learn from Hansen that Hirata had more of an active role in raising and promoting Torakichi than Blacker's account makes clear.When the book describes Hirata's beliefs, it is good, and the conclusion is basically solid. (196) But when we move into the realm of Torakichi things always seem to get a little muddled. Hansen would have us believe that Torakichi was a "novelty", an "entertainment", or an "attraction" for Hirata. This does not seem to accord with Hirata's own earnest accounts of belief in the truth of the boy's words and prayers to keep him from trouble. (70) We learn his first master, Yamazaki Yoshishige, wrote his own account of Torakichi called Heiji daitou, but for whatever reason the author does not explain the contents of this book in detail. I felt like the author's thesis was leaving some things out. The texts offered pushed me to conclude that Hirata, who was not very wealthy, took in Torakichi as a disciple for free, teaching him rhetoric that excited intellectuals of the period and encouraging him to merge it with whatever odd experiences he had in his youth. (c.f. 141, 150, 161) Sometimes when Torakichi speaks of his "master" it is hard to tell whether he is talking about the tengu, or Hirata. (181) One passage is particularly enlightening: "He invited his expert on modern ballistic weapons, Kunitomo Yoshimasa, to interview Torakichi, which resulted in the sanjin being armed with heavy cannon and smaller firearms. He invited his expert on astronomy, Satou Nobuhirou, to interview Torakichi, which resulted in the sanjin becoming recognized as the first space travelers." (193) The one thing I am really grateful for in the account of Torakichi is the postscript about what happened to him after he finished touring the Edo lecture circuit. This reminds me of George Psalmanazar.In general, there is much competent historical background, good translations, and sufficient information to help improve the reader's portrait of the rather unusual character of Hirata Atsutane. Opinions set aside, I found the facts of the book to be reliable and well-researched.

Hirata Atsutane (17761843) has been the subject of numerous studies that focus on his importance to nationalist politics and Japanese intellectual and social history. Although well known as an ideologue of Japanese National

Learning (Kokugaku), Atsutanes significance as a religious thinker has been largely overlooked. His prolific writings on supernatural subjects have never been thoroughly analyzed in English until now. In When Tengu Talk, Wilburn Hansen focuses on Senkyo ibun (1822), a voluminous work centering on Atsutanes interviews with a fourteen-year-old Edo street urchin named Kozo Torakichi who claimed to be an apprentice tengu, a supernatural creature of Japanese folklore. Hansen uncovers in detail how Atsutane employed a deliberate method of ethnographic inquiry that worked to manipulate and stimulate Torakichis surreal descriptions of everyday existence in a supernatural realm, what Atsutane termed the Other World. Hansens investigation and analysis of the process begins with the hypothesis that Atsutanes project was an early attempt at ethnographic research, a new methodological approach in nineteenth-century Japan. Hansen posits that this "scientific" analysis was tainted by Atsutanes desire to establish a discourse on Japan not limited by what he considered to be the unsatisfactory results of established Japanese philological methods. A rough sketch of the milieu of 1820s Edo Japan and Atsutanes position within it provides the backdrop against which the drama of Senkyo ibun unfolds. There follow chapters explaining the relationship between the implied author and the outside narrator, the Other World that Atsutane helped Torakichi describe, and Atsutanes nativist discourse concerning Torakichis fantastic claims of a newly discovered Shinto holy man called the sanjin. Sanjin were partly defined by supernatural abilities similar (but ultimately more effective and thus superior) to those of the Buddhist bodhisattva and the Daoist immortal. They were seen as holders of secret and powerful technologies previously thought to have come from or been perfected in the West, such as geography, astronomy, and military technology. Atsutane sought to deemphasize the impact of Western technology by claiming these powers had come from Japans Other World. In doing so, he creates a new Shinto hero and, by association, asserts the superiority of native Japanese tradition. In the final portion of his book, Hansen addresses Atsutanes contribution to the construction of modern Japanese identity. By the late Tokugawa, many intellectuals had grown uncomfortable with continued cultural dependence on Neo-Confucianism, and the Buddhist establishment was under fire from positivist historiographers who had begun to question the many contradictions found in Buddhist texts. With these traditional discourses in disarray and Western rationalism and materialism gaining public acceptance, Hansen depicts Atsutanes creation of a new spiritual identity for the Japanese people as one creative response to the pressures of modernity.When Tengu Talk adds to the small body of work in English on National Learning. It moreover fills a void in the area of historical religious studies, which is dominated by studies of Buddhist monks and priests, by offering a glimpse of a Shinto religious figure. Finally, it counters the image of Atsutane as a forerunner of the ultra-nationalism that ultimately was deployed in the service of empire. Lucid and accessible, it will find an appreciative audience among scholars of Shinto and Japanese and world religion. In addition to religion specialists, it will be of considerable interest to anthropologists and historians of Japan.

About the AuthorWilburn Hansen is assistant professor of Japanese religions at San Diego State University.