ISSUES

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Thoughts on Ebersole's Allegations[1]

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WERE Japanese myths concocted? I entertain little doubt that the developments of the Taika Era (A.D. 645–650), and the goals of the Tenmu emperor (r. 673–686), influenced the decision to commission the assembling of mythic source materials into the Japanese universal chronicles (viz. the *Kojiki* and the *Nihonshoki*). And to at least some extent might have influenced the selection of their specific contents. But any claim that the myths in these texts were wantonly concocted I should toss into the pigeonhole labeled "Bungled Sophistry" (BS for short).

It certainly is true that the compiler of the *Kojiki*, Ō no Yasumaro, comments in the preface that Tenmu deplored various aristocratic house traditions having divagated from the "true" accounts honored by the imperial court. The comment does not imply, however, that at Tenmu's behest sacred history was in the modern Machiavellian sense "rewritten" or age-old mythic tradition broken to satisfy momentary political expediencies. In the first place, we have no knowledge regarding what the divagations might have been or whether they affected myths; if myths were involved, the divagations might be expected to represent normal variants, remaining within the constraints of general cultural norms. Genealogical falsifications might well have crept into house traditions, but they could not in any event have seriously affected the structures of myths. Japan, after all, was still a traditional society in the eighth century when the chronicles were completed; mythic assertions by any one clan, even the ruling one, perceived to be grossly false or unsettling by the majority of others could not hold. And in any event the universal chronicles base themselves on respected older histories, the *Teiki* and *Hongi*, and on orally transmitted material, all of which, though now lost, were extant at the time the chronicles were completed; they would not be lost from living memory for at least another generation, probably longer. We have in our own day experienced much wholesale "rewriting" and, alas, factional distortions of history, but we should be cautious about im-

puting the practice to traditional societies, as though they behaved as badly as we.

Another point to consider is that synoptic variants of myths were still rife in eighth-century Japan, as their abundance in the *Nihonshoki* proves. Such is to be expected of any oral-traditional culture. The *Kojiki*, for its part, eschews variants, obviously attempting to judiciously select and bring the mythic accounts together in their natural order for the sake of presenting them in a single continuous and coherent narrative—a brave, monumental task that we are forced to admit was completed in A.D. 712 with fair success.[2] Yet somehow the single-narrative approach must have been found less than entirely satisfying, for the *Nihonshoki* appeared eight years later stuffed with variants.

The *Kojiki* seems to have been compiled at least in part as a reconstructed replacement for other texts (*Tennōki*, *Kokki*, *Hongi*, all dating to 620) that had burned in the disturbances of 645. The effort of collecting the single, coherent narrative from many oft-overlapping, at times seemingly incompatible, synoptic variants surely caused the compiler to endure frustrations in his monumental task. It seems unavoidable, too, that his "hand" would affect the expression of the result. Nevertheless, when in the preface he writes "... discarding the mistaken and establishing the true, I desire to hand [the traditions] on to later generations" (PHILIPPI 1969, 41), he does not mean to say that he was "rewriting history," but that he had to *select* from what was available to him. Whatever the truth of the matter, I think it wrongheaded for academics to make a huge political issue out of the comment.

Gary Ebersole grossly overstates himself when he avers that the *Kojiki* "... is not a timeless sacred narrative but a factional account of the past" (9), or again that, "Far from being timeless, the myths of the *Kojiki* and *Nihonshoki* represent the eighth-century Court's recension of certain available paradigmatic narratives that are made to serve as interpretive frames in its [alleged] historiographic project" (11). In so saying, he himself is attempting to rewrite history to his own liking. He even goes so far as to impute a political dictum of George Orwell, who lived in an utterly different world, to the mental processes of the Tenmu emperor (8–9). My position: it is more reasonable to say that mythical materials were applied in the life of the court than to say that politics baldly dictated the contents of myths.

Ebersole is aware of legitimating functions, or charters, in Japanese myths, though precisely what he thinks the myths charter is debatable (e.g., p. 79). Yet he fails to fully appreciate that myths always have had standard legitimating functions in many cultures (MALINOWSKI

1971, 101 first identified them; see KIRK 1973, 20, 22, 254–57), and that the Japanese myth system appears to have already had just such legitimating functions between the years 581 and 600, when a Japanese "king" was represented to the startled Chinese emperor as a close relative of the sun that glows in the morning sky (WADA and ISHIHARA 1951, 88; TSUNODA 1951, 29; cf. WADA and ISHIHARA 1951, 90; TSUNODA 1951, 32). We have little evidence for assuming the Japanese myth system of the sixth century significantly differed from the recorded myth system we now have. Nor is it necessary to speculate, as Ebersole has gone and done, that schemers in the imperial court deliberately plotted to adapt the myth system into a political manifesto that would somehow legitimate new-wave seventh-century rulership; the imperial line had not recently been broken, and the myth system already functioned to legitimate that line. And consider this: although it was the Tenmu emperor who commissioned one Hieda no Are to gather material for the compilation, the work was suspended on Tenmu's death and not resumed by Ō no Yasumaro until Jitō (r. 686–697), Monmu (r. 697–707), Genmei (r. 707–715), and Genshō (r. 715–724) had acceded the throne and Japanese history had advanced into the Late Nara, or Tenpyō period (710–794). Pressing political matters in Tenmu's day as well as those in the period following his death would likely have lost their import by 712 or 720, likely rendering any literary "schemes" passé before they could get published.

Living myths are simply not children's stories that schemers can go around rewriting at whim or for factional convenience: the myths are bound up in the enduring beliefs and traditions of the entire culture. They who have the temerity to attempt grandiose tinkering with the traditional myth system actually *de*-legitimate themselves. Ebersole, though working with myths now dead, has allowed himself to fall squarely into this pitfall.

In connection with his discussion of legitimating functions, I further find it rather odd that Ebersole should go on about Japanese myths allegedly reflecting succession disputes in the imperial court without ever once mentioning (or for that matter even showing an awareness of) the "Kingship in Heaven" theme (GÜTERBOCK 1948; LITTLETON 1969, 1970a, 1970b). It is not an omission a mythologist would make. But had he attempted a comparison with, say, the Uranos-Chronos-Zeus succession, in which violence did indeed play a role in the transfer of the right to rule from one deity-generation to the next, Ebersole surely would have discovered the significant contrast in the *intra*-generational strife (and sororicide/uxoricide) of Japanese myths versus the *inter*-generational strife (and patricide) of traditions

in West Asia and Europe. The Japanese pattern of intragenerational strife is found from India to Indonesia to Japan; how could such a widespread pattern have been homespun by the Tenmu emperor's "followers," as Ebersole would have it?[3] Georges Dumézil's caveat is relevant here: "the critical mind is ever ready to manufacture 'history' out of very sparse raw material" (DUMÉZIL 1973, 151). Truly, we should hesitate to treat Japanese myths as blueprints of horsy invasions or mirrors of princely power struggles before we have looked at them and treated them as what they obviously are: myths. Start from there. And if historical matters crop up, then deal with them as they come. But for Heaven's sake do not start by pressing modern political molds onto old silk-paper leafs.

Finally, I must question the fullness of Ebersole's grasp on how myths interact with their transmitters' world view, particularly when he uses such expressions as "the production of specific myths and rituals" (6), as though myths were fabricated in isolation then spliced into the tradition like so many film strips in modern cinema production. *Living myths are never one minute isolated from the body of their tradition!* Rather, the individual myths in the Japanese chronicles should be understood as regions of an organic whole, as well-preserved subsets of a well-unified *system* of thought—a world view—expressing the transcendental principles underpinning the workings of the cosmos and the world in which men in early Japan lived, loved, and finally lost their lives.

NOTES

1. The following is not intended to be a review of Ebersole's book (EBERSOLE 1989), but a thematic discussion based on it. Ebersole's chief focus is on the burial customs and politics of the post-Tenmu era, not on mythology. For a proper review of the book, try J. Edward Kidder's review from the archaeologist's perspective in the *Japan Foundation Newsletter* (Tokyo) 17, 5–6 (May 1990): 18–19.

2. I should not deny that there are in the *Kojiki* places where we can detect seams between source materials left exposed by the compiler (e.g., PHILIPPI 1969, 222 n. 6). But I would not be one to confuse seams in compiled texts with seams in tradition.

3. For virtually every motif I have identified in the Japanese myth system in the course of my own research, for some lengthy sequences as a matter of fact, I have been able to find close correspondences in other cultures. How indeed could such widespread elements have been homespun in Japan?

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