

LAW, JANE MARIE. *Puppets of Nostalgia: The Life, Death, and Rebirth of the Japanese Awaji Ningyō Tradition*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997. xiii + 322 pages. Maps, line drawings, photographs, bibliography, index. Cloth US\$35.00; ISBN 0-691-02894-X.

What is a puppet? Why are puppets or effigies used in ritual? What kinds of social and religious forces contribute to the creation and demise of a religious tradition? And, what different forces enable the revival of a dying tradition? Focusing on the Japanese puppet traditions from Awaji Island, Jane Marie Law answers these questions in a meticulously detailed study based on both historical research and contemporary fieldwork.

The study is divided into three rather different parts. The first two chapters deal with the first two questions listed above and with the liminal, or outsider status, of puppets, puppeteers, and the evoked deity from a history-of-religions perspective. In these chapters, a deft use of comparative material illuminates aspects of the Awaji material, which in turn serves as a valuable case for elaborating theoretical insights concerning ritual, alterity, and the religious mediation of chaos. Chapters 3 and 4 focus on the historical origins and the development of the puppet traditions in Nishinomiya and Awaji, using a sophisticated hermeneutics of suspicion to read the texts that constitute the evidence. Law discusses not only the content of key texts but also the politics and ideologies that likely contributed to their construction and later uses. The last two chapters, based on fieldwork spanning almost twenty years, take the reader up to the present day and show the continuing process of tradition formation of Awaji puppetry in its postwar revival. Law considers the roles of nostalgia, politics, tourism, and identity in the process of the reinvention of tradition. Her presence as foreign scholar studying the tradition felt throughout the text here becomes part of the story as she reflexively describes the way her scholarship was used by some of her informants to validate a tradition previously stigmatized for its associations with “outcastes.”

The symbolic center of the Awaji puppet tradition is the deity Ebisu. Now commonly portrayed as the jolly fish-carrying member of the Seven Lucky Gods, Ebisu has a darker side as well. Associated with the “Leech Child” (Hiruko), the first amorphous offspring of Izanami and Izanagi set adrift in a reed boat, Ebisu is sometimes depicted as a “lame, deaf, one-eyed, hermaphroditic, or very ugly” (114) being that floats in from the sea, not seasonally with the other *marebito*, but unpredictably, like a stranger, who may bring luck or disease. The Nishinomiya Shrine (Hyōgo) began using puppets in the worship of Ebisu to appease and entertain this deity (131), a querulous child-kami with the power to bring smallpox. Around the middle of the sixteenth century, when the Awaji puppet tradition broke off from the Nishinomiya Shrine, its founding myth extended this story in the following way. When the priest Dōkumbō, who had entertained the Leech Child with puppets, died, many natural disasters ensued. An imperial order commanded that a puppet in the likeness of this priest be crafted, and rituals using this puppet were successful in calming the deity. In this early reinvention of tradition, the puppet mediates the change: “The puppet has become the priest, a device which allows the Awaji tradition to reabsorb the ritual authority of the Nishinomiya center while deflecting the challenge this entailed” (160).

Itinerant puppeteers on Awaji traditionally presented two kinds of rites: a solemn performance using Sambasō and a more humorous rite with Ebisu. They performed these rituals at people’s gates (or kitchens) during the first two weeks of the New Year, and were also called upon to bless boat launchings, weddings, house buildings, and the start of the fishing season. They invoked rain and drove out noxious insects at three- or four-day-performance festivals during the slack agricultural seasons following planting and the harvest. Puppeteers

were outside mainstream society in several ways: they came from outside the community bringing blessings and removing pollutions; mediated between the human and the divine; lived in “Sanjo districts”—areas attached to ritual centers and later associated with blood pollution; and “embodied the power of the unknown” (52). By the Tokugawa period, all people working on the margins of society, including itinerant ritual performers, were identified with the negative aspects of an outsider and were heavily discriminated against. This stigma of being part of an outcaste tradition almost entirely destroyed the ritual puppet tradition after the war. Ironically, “less than forty years later, the very activities which were discouraged and even outlawed are now being reclaimed as part of an ‘authentic religious past’ and ‘folkways’” (88). The ritual tradition has become a stage performance for tourists, but there is also a one-man revival of the itinerant puppeteer—now touring the area in his car (253).

The above details give only a fragmentary picture of this complex and well-integrated study. In addition to the main arguments, the reader will find fascinating information on puppet funerals, other types of Japanese effigies (*haniwa*, *hitogata*, *kokeshi*), magical uses of language, and texts of the ritual performances. Complementing the written text are thirty photographs and seven illustrations that bring the visual aspects of the tradition to life.

Using three different lenses to examine Awaji ritual puppetry causes some repetitions, but the careful cross-referencing between sections makes a very complicated set of arguments clear and mutually reinforcing. Law’s painstaking scholarship is somewhat undermined by the (presumably editorial) decision not to use Japanese characters in the text, or even a character glossary: inexcusable in a work of this quality. The two maps of Awaji Island repeat virtually the same information, and inclusion of an overall map of Japan locating Awaji and some of the other sites mentioned in the text would have been useful. Two small errors are the spelling of Nishinomiya on p. 149 (1. 2) and referring to folklorist Richard M. Dorson as “Edward” (281, 305).

Puppets of Nostalgia shows us the value of extended fieldwork, for much of the fascinating material of the last chapter consists of events that Law herself witnessed between 1978 and 1997. This is balanced by careful historical and comparative research that gives us a work rare in its completeness—crafted from the fragments of a stigmatized tradition, about which many of Law’s informants were “embarrassed” before the current revival. Of particular interest to folklorists will be the discussion of the construction of the field of Japanese folklore studies that simply ignored the cases and peoples that did not fit its assumptions of homogeneous “folk.”

This study opens with a poignant account of the sale of a family’s valuable puppets during the war for food, and concludes with a brief epigraph noting that the epicenter of the 1995 Hanshin Earthquake was Awaji Island. The framing of this study in the vicissitudes of an enduring folk tradition by these tragedies emphasizes both the strength and vulnerability of this tradition that ritually deals with the forces of chaos.

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