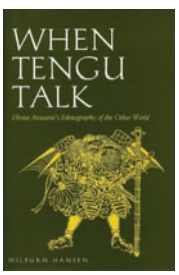

Wilburn Hansen, *When Tengu Talk: Hirata Atsutane's Ethnography of the Other World*

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In *When Tengu Talk: Hirata Atsutane's Ethnography of the Other World*, Wilburn Hansen makes a significant contribution to a small but growing body of English-language literature on nativist (*kokugaku*) scholar Hirata Atsutane (1776–1843). The particular value of Hansen's monograph is its tight focus on a fantastic (in all senses of the word) text called *Senkyō ibun*, or in Carmen Blacker's translation of the title, *Strange Tidings from the Realm of Immortals.* Hansen points out that other than Blacker's 1967 article and several recent mentions, *Senkyō ibun* has been all but overlooked in English-language analysis, especially by scholars of religion. Hansen's own objective is "to present a deeper, more nuanced understanding of the *Senkyō ibun* text and hence a fuller understanding of Atsutane's religious convictions and aspirations" (2–3). He proceeds to unpack this complex work, exploring its history and influence, and framing it within the broader context of Atsutane's religious and nativist project.

Written in 1822, *Senkyō ibun* documents Atsutane's interviews and interactions over an eight-month period with the so-called Tengu Boy, a fourteen-year-old named Torakichi who claimed to have spent several years visiting a supernatural Other World. There he received training from a *sanjin*, a religious virtuoso that would become, for Atsutane, a culture hero through which to promote his own anti-Chinese, anti-Buddhist religious ideology. Torakichi's stories are both mundane and fantastic, detailing everything from culinary and medicinal practices to journeys to the moon, providing a view of an Other World overlaid on the known world of Japan. Through a careful reading of *Senkyō ibun* and the context of its production, Hansen makes this Other World more comprehensible to the reader and also demonstrates how Atsutane purposefully used Torakichi's descriptions to promote his own theological visions.

The first chapter establishes the conceit that will inform Hansen's analysis throughout: namely that *Senkyō ibun* can be considered an *ethnography* whereby Atsutane abandons philological methods and instead documents, through interviews and discussions, a firsthand report of the culture in question. Atsutane's strategic presentation of the data Torakichi provides is "part of a scholarly endeavor to educate and inform other scholars and students about a new source of vital information concerning the true nature of Japan" (18). Not surprisingly, that "true nature," Hansen points out, happens to correspond neatly with Atsutane's own understanding of Japanese identity.

Chapter 2 focuses on the complex relationship between Atsutane and Torakichi, including the story of how Torakichi came to join Atsutane's household. We get a glimpse into the salon world of Edo-period intellectuals, where the uneducated, spiritually precocious Torakichi is treated as a fascinating plaything. The this-worldly concerns of literati society provide an intriguing contrast to Torakichi's otherworldly tales.

Chapter 3 draws us into Torakichi's other world itself, describing its various inhabitants, including animals (both real and legendary) and demons of various sorts. The particular focus here is the *sanjin*, as Torakichi explains the quotidian details of the lives of these supernatural heroes. Through close readings of the dialogue between Atsutane and Torakichi, Hansen makes clear the distinction between the native Japanese *sanjin* and the Buddhist-inflected *tengu* mountain goblin. He also explores the way in which Atsutane, with leading questions and pointed interpretations, manipulates Torakichi into acting as a "mouthpiece" (91) for his own theology.

Atsutane's "overall objective in his research was to rediscover what was originally Japanese and to rid Japanese culture of all foreign influences so that native culture could be revalued and understood as superior to other cultures" (103). This process was not always straightforward: in chapter 4, Hansen suggests that Atsutane ironically appropriated much from Chinese culture—the very culture he was most adamant about eliding. Hansen demonstrates aspects of this borrowing, and more importantly, elucidates the strategies and rationale Atsutane deployed in order to justify it.

Chapter 5 takes up Atsutane's broad anti-Buddhist stance, arguing that *Senkyō ibun* provided a "new method of attacking Buddhism" by developing the *sanjin* figure as "an alternative religious virtuoso that equaled or surpassed the champions

of Buddhism" (140). Again, however, Atsutane's relationship to the ideology he is rejecting is complex. He promotes, for example, the *sanjin*'s magical powers—such as flight, invisibility, and the ability to make duplicates of himself—but, as Hansen demonstrates, these skills are already possessed by various Buddhist figures. In short, through the medium of Torakichi, Atsutane negotiates a "difficult and embarrassing relationship with Buddhism" (167), at once denying its importance to Japanese religious culture, and at the same time drawing on its philosophy, rituals, and figures to promote the superiority of his own native religious stance. Chapter 6 moves on to Atsutane's similarly complex attitude toward Western scientific knowledge. While apparently despising Westerners, Atsutane also praises their technological prowess. By strategically redefining advanced Western technology as *sanjin* technology, he is able to advocate the superiority of his own Ancient Way theology.

When Tengu Talk is a well-researched and thoughtful book about a fascinating text. To be sure, *Senkyō ibun* is a challenging work, and difficult to neatly unpack, so perhaps it is not surprising that at times Hansen's writing feels repetitive and the book's organization could be more effective. This is particularly true in the beginning; not until page sixty-three, for example, do we get some basic biographical information about Atsutane. There is also a great deal of analysis of *Senkyō ibun* and its context before we actually read passages from it—frustrating because Hansen's translations, when we get them, are evocative and skillfully rendered. A little more editing and shaping in the early chapters would have helped bring both the text and Hansen's analytical insights into sharper focus from the beginning.

Similarly, although Hansen's invocation of ethnography as an interpretive trope is provocative, shedding light on both method and textual construction, it would benefit from greater elucidation. He argues that instead of relying on written evidence to learn about other cultures/worlds, Atsutane adopts the more ethnographic method of interviewing an informant; as with contemporary ethnographic writing, inevitably "the ethnographer shapes the stories of the informants" (199). Hansen's contentions are convincing, but presented in a somewhat inexact fashion that makes Atsutane seem as if he is consciously drawing on modern anthropological methods; by not developing the ethnographic trope more carefully, Hansen runs the risk of being misinterpreted. He also sells his own theory short: more development here might have led to further insights regarding Atsutane's work, and also to a deeper sense of the historical and methodological connections between Atsutane and the later emergence of Japanese folkloristics (*minzokugaku*).

With this caveat, however, Hansen perceptively places *Senkyō ibun* within the context of Atsutane's religious ideology and the broader milieu of nativist discourse. As the book goes on we are drawn deeper into the Other World according to Torakichi, a world enlivened by Hansen's lucid and well-selected translations. These provide the reader not only with insight into Atsutane's complex strategies for promoting his own theology, but also with wonderful details. We hear, for example, about various medical cures Torakichi has learned through his sojourns with the *sanjin*. And his description of his lunar travels is remarkably vivid: "As you approach the moon it gets bigger and bigger; and the cold air really cuts into you …. In the place where there is commonly thought to be a rabbit pounding *mochi*,

there are two or three open holes" (174). I would note that from a folklorist's perspective the text is bursting with material—there is much to think about with regard to narrative strategies, vernacular knowledge, notions of the supernatural, and personal experience narrative. It would be wonderful if Hansen, in a future project, would undertake an annotated translation of the entire text.

With its focus on the richly nuanced *Senkyō ibun* and Hirata Atsutane's complex religious ideology, *When Tengu Talk* represents a valuable addition to Atsutane scholarship and should be of great interest to scholars of religion, literature, history, folklore, and anybody studying constructions of the supernatural in Japan and elsewhere.

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