



Roald Knutsen, *Tengu: The Shamanic and Esoteric Origins of the Japanese Martial Arts*

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IN RECENT years some hardcore academic types might say that monsters from Japanese folktales have come to garner more than their share of serious scholarly attention. This reviewer certainly disagrees with those critics of the seriousness and inherent importance of the topic of *tengu* and other such frightening figments of the Japanese imagination. Roald Knutsen's latest book on *tengu*, for example, has been written to advance an important historical hypothesis on the roots of Japanese culture, particularly the religious origins of traditional Japanese martial arts. However, if studies on folkloric monsters have their critics and doubters in the academy, so too do studies that attempt to label the martial arts as something "essential" to the spirit of Japan, and maybe even more so. When both martial arts and monsters are put together, for example featuring talk of *tengu* as expert swordsmen as Knutsen's book does, the result might easily evoke the figure of *Star Wars*' Yoda, at least for the last couple of generations of moviegoers, an unfortunate association at best for such an academically oriented endeavour. On top of that, previous generations might find this association not so much like science fiction in quality, but more reminiscent of classic *chambara* in the sense of the Kurama *tengu* stories and pictures, perhaps only a slightly more academic adjustment. In other words, Knutsen's study starts out with obstacles to its serious scholarly acceptance.

Unfortunately, the obstacles to serious scholarly acceptance of Knutsen's book are not just limited to the prejudices that accompany the accidents of popular culture. The academic starting point of Knutsen's hypothesis and the touchstone for his speculation on indigenous Japanese religion are the speculations concerning *tengu* made by Marius W. de Visser in his publication for *Transactions of the Asiatic Society of Japan* in 1908. Knutsen himself is well aware of and even anticipates the perceived shortcomings of his method as he pronounces on page two:

It is the aim of the present study, knowing full-well that the roots lie outside *written history* and the aegis of the *support material normally demanded*, to try to suggest a rational development pathway that may explain the extraordinary importance given these *tengu* in underpinning much of the core martial inspiration of the medieval Japanese warrior.

The recognition upfront that Knutsen lacks evidence for his claim that should come from the sources I have italicized in his quote, that is, *written history* and *support material normally demanded*, then relieves this reviewer of the task of holding this book up to rigorous academic standards. There is no need to investigate

whether or not the author seems to have read all relevant extant primary sources, or was even competent to do so. There is no need to ask if the secondary sources upon which he relies are current and recognized as theoretically sound exercises in scholarly research by well known and trusted authorities on the topic of *tengu*, martial arts, or the history and culture of medieval Japanese warrior society. Once we accept the author's admission, we readers are freed to enjoy the book for what it is and what it succeeds in presenting us, of course with a critical eye to analyze the historical accuracy and theoretical soundness of an admittedly nonacademic treatment of *tengu* and Japanese martial arts.

After the clear caveat that the hypothesis lacks evidential support, the author strongly suggests that the *tengu* figure popular in Japan today may have had its roots in the shamanic practices of Central Asia. The basic idea is that the figure of the bird or birdman was important to shamanic practices in multiple cultures. The next step in Knutsen's argument states that from the late Heian period in Japan, *tengu* became associated with mastery of the martial arts, which the author argues is not to be taken lightly as it might be today, for in his opinion, warfare was considered to be a key element of political, social, and economic survival in warrior-dominated society. To support this argument the author puts considerable weight on his assertion that the writings of Sun Tzu dominated the Japanese military mind.

Knutsen also recognizes that *tengu* were portrayed as comic and demonic figures of folklore appearing often in Buddhist rhetoric as labels of criticism and derision applied to rival Buddhist sectarian leaders. Knutsen's stated reason for writing this book is to overturn the dominance of this prevalent understanding of *tengu*, which has the figure at its most recognizable in Japanese culture as a comic or malicious creature dependent on the political vicissitudes of sectarian Buddhist discourse, or at worse, has *tengu* featured in folktales about mischievous forest goblins. Instead, he wants to bring to the fore a hitherto esoteric understanding of *tengu* known primarily by the greatest martial artists and warrior-leader heroes of Japanese history, and today, only by what is left of the lamentably dying Japanese martial tradition, the masters of the Japanese fencing academies. For Knutsen and these few in the know, the *tengu* represents an esoteric and shamanic master of a spiritual martial arts tradition. The *tengu* image was essential to a core understanding of the primal essential quality of the Japanese warrior stereotype, which has given Japanese culture and civilization its brightest and grandest luster.

Knutsen's evidence of a tradition of *tengu* drawn as martial arts masters is indisputable. Moreover, his evidence that *tengu* were associated with spiritually-charged and often well-armed *yamabushi* is just as indisputable. On top of that, the stories of *tengu* martial arts masters in the late Heian period are available in most libraries. Still, unfortunately, these indisputable facts do not connect *tengu* to Central Asian shamanism. However, the parts of this book that discuss *tengu* connections to martial arts from the Muromachi period alone make Knutsen's contribution interesting enough for this reviewer to take note of the author's rare depth of knowledge concerning this topic. Furthermore, the information given concerning a warrior cult of Marishiten (which is not without connection to Buddhist practices and sensibilities) is also valuable to many fields of Japan Studies. There is much

in this work and certainly much more in the author's vast studies of Japan that is impressive and praiseworthy.

Reading this book literally takes one through a century of Japan studies, as well as the accompanying theories of comparative religion that occurred during that same time period. The author starts with the ideas of de Visser, and then puts them under an Eliadean lens as we are given Knutsen's view of the comparative history of shamanism from Central Asia to Siberia to Japan enhanced by further comparison to Native American shamanic belief and practice. The hypothesis then moves to include Carmen Blacker's work on *shugendō* from the fifties and sixties, after which it stands firmly in support of Ledyard's theory of the 1970s that has horse riders (whom I suppose would bring with them Central Asian shamanism) from the Korean peninsula inhabiting Japanese imperial tombs from the Kofun period. From this perspective of seeing the development of a century of Japan studies flash before our eyes, another dynamic becomes apparent, one of generational change and the unfortunate passing of a Japan that seemed nobler and more ideal.

Just over a century ago *bushido* was declared the flower of Japanese civilization. It was claimed that only by understanding the warrior and his spiritual practice of the martial arts could one appreciate the sublime beauty and spirituality of Japanese culture. One century later and kendo and other Japanese martial arts are Hollywood CG tricks performed by little green Yodas with bad Japanese accents. Today Japan's *tengu* are not known as the mystical and mysterious heroes that taught Ushiwakamaru to be an unbeatable samurai. The *tengu* of academics in contemporary religious studies are figures of sardonic sectarian rhetoric manipulated by self-interested Buddhists not very representative of a noble Japanese spirit. The *tengu* of Japanese folklorists are forest tricksters to be feared at best, but at their least dignified they make merriment in the woods and torment poor humans who happen to be more foolish than they. In other words, once Japan was popular to Westerners for its fierce warrior spirit, courage, and nobility, while now Japan is popular because of comic books and cartoon monsters. Perhaps Knutsen's main objective is to remind us of what once made Japan special.

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