

*Assembling Shinto: Buddhist Approaches to Kami Worship in Medieval Japan.* By Anna Andreeva. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Asia Center, 2017. xxi + 397 pages. Hardcover: ISBN 978-0-674-97057-1.

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One might wonder why it is appropriate to review a book entitled *Assembling Shinto* in the pages of *The Eastern Buddhist*. The short answer lies in the subtitle: *Buddhist Approaches to Kami Worship in Medieval Japan*. This combination arises because in recent years there has been a strong surge in the view that “Shinto” was progressively created, or as Anna Andreeva suggestively puts it, assembled, until such time as it could be claimed by modern apologists to have somehow been there all along. The thesis presented here is that the Buddhist contribution to the creation of this “Shinto”—as it later came to be known—was quite massive, being driven along by the medieval fascination with supernatural powers of all kinds that were harnessed in the esoteric schools. Indeed, in some parts of the book it seems to be fascination with the latter which becomes the main subject of interest, notably in chapter 4 on Saidaiji 西大寺 and the cult of the Buddhist figure of Aizen Myōō 愛染明王. This “wonderful king” (*myōō*) is only a *kami* 神 in the sense that any supernatural being is one, but not in any recognizably “Shinto” sense. Given the intense cultivation of symbolism and ritual during the heyday of Tendai 天台 and Shingon 真言 *mikkyō* 密教 in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, during which local Japanese traditions were, so to speak, harvested in the service of Buddhism, it might have been prudent to concentrate on that period alone. Indeed, judging from the selection of subject matter in several fine plates, it seems that the prime focus of the author’s interest did indeed lie in the flowering of the esoteric turn. On the other hand, the role of monks at Saidaiji in the incorporation of the religious powers of Mt. Miwa (Miwayama 三輪山) must be appreciated and is studied here in highly instructive detail.

But we have been starting in the middle. It is only fair to clarify that, after a wide-ranging introduction in which postmodernist credentials are quite adequately developed, the work is divided into three approximately equal sections. In the first, we are guided through the religious occupation of the Yamato 大和 plain during the early centuries before *mikkyō* took off. Chapter 1 considers “the ancient cultic site” of Miwa itself. The geography was significant in that Miwa lies on the way from Nara to Yoshino and Kumano, which practically became a religious trade route in medieval times. First,

however, we find that the divinity of the Miwa clan was brought into the fold of the Yamato narrative which was consolidating its preeminence in central Japan. Not only that, but the divinities and festivals of Miwa, or Ōmiwa 大神, were distinctly documented in the *Engishiki* 延喜式.

The beginnings of a Buddhist presence, on the other hand, were tentative and are less clearly documented. It seems therefore that the assembling of the indigenous divinities, and their mutual correlation within the Yamato power structure, was already taking place without reference to Buddhism. Nevertheless, it was evident precisely because Mt. Miwa was the location of one of the country's most significant ancient shrines that Buddhist symbolism and practices were brought to bear on it, especially by wandering ascetics. The increasing influence of the major temple foundations of the Nara period, treated already in chapter 2 (still in part one), cannot be gainsaid. The relationship between Kasuga Taisha 春日大社 (on its own modest mountain behind Nara) and the Buddhist temple Kōfukuji 興福寺 was no doubt exemplary, cemented by the proprietary Fujiwara 藤原 clan. Kōfukuji and its subsidiary, Hasedera 長谷寺, were centers of influence from which connections were extended to several religiously attractive mountains, notably Mt. Miwa and Mt. Murō 室生. The subsequent medieval entanglements were indeed far-reaching, complex, and subtle.

In the long run, as set out in detail in part two, this process merged with the increasing popularity of mountain asceticism, in which any kind of supernatural power was treated with the greatest respect. Andreeva investigates the activities of various holy men, or *hijiri* 聖, notably Kyōen 慶円 (1143–1223). Buddhist bases were set up in the region, of which the Miwa Bessho 三輪別所 was one, but by this time the influence of Shingon Buddhism on the *hijiri* or *yamabushi* 山伏 was becoming crucial; it is at this point in the narrative that the author warms significantly to her central theme. The Shingon *nenbutsu* 念仏 activist Kakuban 覚鑿 (1095–1143) was involved. Eventually the *bessho* developed into a fully-grown temple named Byōdōji 平等寺. An important role was played by Saidaiji, especially under the influence of Eizon 叡尊 (1201–1290), whose formative years were spent at Daigoji 醍醐寺. Together with Ninshō 忍性 (1217–1303), he promoted “a newly reformed branch of Buddhism” (p. 154) and restored the fortunes of the *jingūji* 神宮寺 (shrine-temple) at Ōmiwa. This process, argues Andreeva, led to a radical transformation of ideas about *kami* (p. 160), which incidentally implies that there had previously been some ideas about *kami* that were available to be transformed. But the investigation is carried forward to Ise 伊勢 and the complex, and oft-noted ways in which

Amaterasu 天照 and the other Ise divinities were incorporated into Shingon iconography and ritual. Ise, to borrow her own colorful phrase, was saturated with esoteric clergy. In the meantime, the *Miwa daimyōjin engi* 三輪大明神縁起 had been composed (p. 190 onwards), which asserted that the great divinity of Miwa had been, together with the Kōtaijin 皇大神 (Amaterasu), an earthly manifestation of Dainichi Nyorai 大日如来. As we study the details, it may be remarked that the process was less a matter of assembling Shinto, than of Shingon Buddhism systematically taking over Shinto, and indeed this is effectively what is concluded on page 213. What also becomes clear is that syncretizing rituals such as the Ise kanjō 伊勢灌頂 and the use of the well-known Shingon hand symbols in shrine situations were as important as correlations at the ideational and iconographic level. Also prominent in the continuing treatment is the many-faceted fluidity of serpent symbolism. Where was all this leading? On page 308 we learn that the *kami*, having once been protectors of the Buddhadharmā, a traditional role for any local divinities, were becoming “agents of esoteric Buddhist discourse.” At the same time, the Shinto priest Urabe no Kanetomo 卜部兼俱 (1435–1511) was able in the late fifteenth century to refer to the strands of Shinto, in Andreeva’s words, as “a self-defined sphere” (p. 310), and she concludes that it was thanks to “Buddhist approaches to kami worship” that this came about.

This book is the result of many years of painstaking research, and it must be said that Anna Andreeva has mastered wide-ranging materials of astonishing complexity. There must be few who cannot learn from her work. The overall thesis is the backdrop for her rejection of the Japanese modernist narrative of a single coherent stream of Shinto identity running from mythical origins right up to the ideologized versions of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Not that many observers swallow these versions nowadays, but if they are rejected as history, how then did any kind of “Shinto” come about? Others have written on the emergence of Yoshida Shinto 吉田神道, Ise Shinto, and so on, but Andreeva’s work contributes substantially to the answer from an earlier perspective. Miwa-ryū Shinto 三輪流神道, acknowledged as such by the Urabe clergy, was evidently held in noticeable regard from the time when it became usual to speak of different strands or currents (*ryū*) of Shinto.

In conclusion, a further question may be posed. Although this book is about “assembling Shinto,” a lot of it is a contribution to the history of Buddhism in Japan. Is there not a hidden challenge here? What, after all, is “Buddhism”? The term is frequently used with easygoing essentialist

implications. The construction of “Shinto” is once again being critically assessed. But could we perhaps imagine an alternative version of this same research, even if with a slightly different balance, in which the Shinto *kami* are presented as contributory agents in the “assembly” of a particular form of Japanese Buddhism, and indeed of a Buddhism which is rather distinct from other Buddhisms of East Asia?