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Shinto. Insight Media.

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A Cautionary Tale and Subjective Review: Good Intentions vs. Economic Realities in Educational Filmmaking

In order to set the stage for the following (admittedly biased) review, please imagine first the following scenario: one day from out of the blue you are presented with the opportunity to participate in the making of a film on your area of scholarly interest and expertise. Initial suspicions are overcome when you learn that other scholars you know are involved in the project as well as an Academy-award winning actor doing the narration for the film. Once completed, the film will be shown on PBS in the U.S. as part of a thirteen-part series on "The World's Religions," as well as in Western Europe and Australia, where rights have already been signed. Sound good? Wait, there's more ... <p> To ensure your participation, the filmmaker not only wants to interview you on camera but is anxious to use whatever film footage you may have accumulated to illustrate the subject at hand. Finally, he assures you that you will be able to see an advance copy and have editorial input before the final version is released for sale and distribution. You won't receive any money but just think of the service you're providing to the field, to advancing understanding about the topic as well as recognition of your scholarly expertise, and, of course, your name in lights, or at least in the credits whizzing by at the end of the film. <p> You've probably surmised that what is to follow is a kind of country-boy-meets-city-slicker confessional. Head lowered and hat in hand, I will be playing the role of that well-intentioned yet naive bumpkin who never signed a contract, never for an instant doubted that the filmmaker would not live up to his word, and who hoped that the film would eliminate the critical need for an intelligent, visually-interesting, and accurate documentary on one of Japan's most long-lived and pervasive religious-political traditions, Shinto. <p> Well, it didn't happen. If you can spend another three to four minutes reading this subjective account, I'll tell you what went wrong and why this film should stay off your purchase list. <p> Back in the late 1970s, the respected scholar of Japanese religions, H. Byron Earhart, composed a narrative for an audio tape on Japanese and world religions, which was then recorded by the actor Ben Kingsley (before his fame in portraying Gandhi). One of these tapes was titled "Shinto," the narration for which both reads well and conveys a great deal of complex information in a few short pages. <p> Apparently, both Professor Earhart and Mr. Kinglsey signed waivers that permitted the production company to license and resell the material if an opportunity arose in the future. With a narrative already recorded and a text at hand, Greenstar Television and Liberty International Entertainment Incorporation secured the rights to this material. All that was needed was a filmmaker to "illustrate" the narrative, add a few extra minutes of interviews or filler material, and presto!–a thirteen-part series, each around 52 minutes, could be produced, broadcasting rights sold, and advertisers procured for a total cost of $600,000–a bargain compared with the $60,000 to $80,000 usually required for an hour's worth of quality broadcasting. <p> I always tell my students to say something positive first when offering a critique and so I'll follow this advice first in praising the text upon which the film Shinto is based. Anyone familiar with Dr. Earhart's scholarly articles and introductory textbooks on Japanese religions knows he is a careful and thorough researcher. Mr. Kingsley's resonant voice amplifies the text to a dramatic level and, despite some inadvertent stumbles regarding Japanese terms, he articulates well the various themes and issues of the text. I'm sure it was a very helpful audiocassette to many students when first distributed twenty years ago. <p> As a film, however, I find myself challenged to find charitable things to say. If one sets aside its educational intent, parts of it are pretty and interesting to watch because of the art,

landscapes, and editing professionalism. Its pace is unrelenting and, for this viewer, exhausting because each key word in the text is illustrated on screen. After the first fifteen minutes, I felt pummeled by information and images, not all of which complemented each other. <p> In fact, there are so many glaring discrepancies between the text and the attempt to illustrate it by a nonspecialist (who, for reasons only he and the production company knows, consulted neither with scholars nor individuals familiar with Japanese culture and history) that it would be perhaps most useful in a graduate seminar as an exercise in analysis and critique: like a variation on a children's game, one could ask one's students whether they could find the ten mistakes in this picture. <p> As the narration begins, we learn that Shinto is part of the life and culture and landscape of the Japanese people. To illustrate this, the director has chosen black and white footage from the early Showa period of one of Japan's famous landscapes at Miyajima; men and women struggling with ropes on a sandy beach are hauling in fishing nets while a folksong provides background music. The Japanese I've shown the film to all laugh with incredulity at this juxtaposition of old footage, folksong, and scholarly subject matter. Hardly a propitious start to a complex and challenging topic. <p> Further attempts to illustrate the central topic leads to Chinese ceramics meant to depict Japanese courtly and rural life, a folding screen showing Europeans in Nagasaki illustrates a discussion about aspects of Chinese culture that influenced Japanese society, Buddhist guardian statues depict "evil kami," current-day Eastern Orthodox priests are shown as Christian missionaries of the 17th century, Itsukushima's famous torii-gateway in the water is shown while the narrative discusses how shrines were built overseas during Japan's occupation of surrounding countries–and so on. <p> To highlight only a couple examples, in a long passage on Christianity in Japan (far longer than the film's contextualization of Buddhism's history and influence), the narration is discussing the persecution of missionaries. But what we see on the screen is a group of women dancing the awa-odori of Awaji island, then a group of smiling women who work in teahouses, both footage from the 1930s. Mr. Kingsley's voice is grave and somber at this point, yet the images are frivolous and disconnected with the topic of religious persecution. <p> For examples of Shinto shrines, we first see the concrete pagoda of San Francisco's Japantown, then Kiyomizu temple, Yasukuni shrine, and finally the Ise grand shrines, none of which are particularly representative of the kind of "Shinto" which the film takes as its subject matter. While the first two sites are obviously not "Shinto," both Yasukuni shrine and the Ise shrines represent elite, politico-religious institutions closely linked to both historical and ongoing nationalistic and imperial agendas. <p> Attempting to illustrate one widespread cultural and social practice having Shinto trappings–New Year's–leads to perhaps the biggest faux pas of all. As Mr. Kingsley informs us dramatically that the "single most important Japanese festival is the celebration of the new year" we see nothing of shrine visitations at the end of the year (hatsumode) but instead plunge into a variety of summer festivals! First is the Tenjin matsuri in Osaka (August), then the Awa-odori of Awajishima (July/August), then a brief interview with yours truly which, sandwiched between these comically inappropriate examples of new year festivals, makes it seem as if the "talking head" is also part of the problem. <p> Progressing through various historical periods, the film eventually turns to the war years. Using American-made newsreel footage of late 1945, the director chooses to present the narration of this newsreel without any mention of its historical context. The viewer hears that Japan's "fanatical suicide corps" was "no match for the Allies" (images of kamikaze being shot down) that "Japanese cruelty in Asia" was unsurpassed (Chinese bodies in the street), that Japanese diplomats were double-crossing cowards, and so forth. The war footage is visually arresting, but coupled with the propagandistic tone of the newsreel narrative and without any effort to problematize or historicize the presentation , one wonders if the filmmaker believes these stereotypical assertions, and wants the viewing audience to do the same. <p> When the narrative returns, the topic is new religions. While watching a procession from the jidai matsuri in Kyoto, a yearly event intended to show famous personages and costumes from Kyoto's many historical periods, the narrative discusses rapidly changing social settings, charismatic religious leaders, and folk religious practices. The idea of "living kami" brings the filmmaker to Konko-kyo and an interview with the head priest of San Francisco's "church." This is followed by a long ritual performance staged for the filmmaker's benefit, presented in far more detail and at greater length than any "Shinto" ritual shown in the film. <p> The closing comment about Shinto is that it "lives on in strange ways–even when denied or neglected, it lives on." The film is proof that denial and neglect do not compromise the topic at hand, but this is not to say that a class full of students forced to watch this film will fare the same. Both they, and the subject matter, deserve better.

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