On September 5, 2001, one hundred shrine priests headed straight from Seoul Airport to the city of Ch’unch’ŏn. They were members of the Zenkoku Seiseikai (National Purity Association), an organization of Susanoo-related shrines that was celebrating its fiftieth anniversary. On the outskirts of Ch’unch’ŏn is a modest hill, just over one hundred meters high, called Udusan, Ox-Head Mountain. The priests walked from the parking lot to a sandy patch on Udusan’s top, where they saw a small and unremarkable grave mound. There was nothing much to look at; nevertheless, this site was of great symbolic significance to them. They were convinced that the kami of their shrines had once resided in this very spot.[1]

In 1868, all Gionsha-type shrines changed their deities from the Buddhist-sounding Gozu Tennō (Ox-Head Deva King) to the Shinto kami Susanoo. According to one variant in the Nihon shoki, Susanoo and his son Itakeru “descended to the land of Silla and lived at the place Soshimori” (p. 87).[2] In 1863, Matsuura Michisuke (a Kyoto student of Hirata Atsutane) proposed that “Soshimori” was an ancient Korean word meaning “ox-head.” The head priest of the Gionsha (today’s Yasaka Shrine in Kyoto) adopted this theory in the turmoil of early Meiji to cleanse Gozu Tennō from Buddhist stains. Some decades later, when Japanese influence in Korea was growing, various mountains called Udusan were proposed as the ancient dwelling place of Susanoo and his son. The first to point at the hill in Ch’unch’ŏn was the historian Hoshino Hisashi, in an 1890 article. After the annexation of Korea, Hoshino’s theory inspired initiatives to build a Susanoo shrine on Ch’unch’ŏn’s Udusan. Kögen (Kangwŏn) Shrine had been founded there already in 1918, initially as a settler shrine for Japanese migrants.[3] In the 1930s and ’40s, there were efforts to enlarge this shrine for the purpose of Japanese-Korean assimilation. Kögen Shrine was the first to adopt a Korean design for the exterior, even while the in-
terior was kept in a purely Japanese Shinto style; this architectural format was later used for multiple large shrine-building projects in the country.

[4] As the Zenkoku Seiseikai’s tour report notes, however, no trace is left of Kōgen Shrine today.

The book under review here traces Susanoo’s association with Korea (or, more broadly, with foreign realms) from the age of the Nihon shoki until the end of the colonial period. As the title indicates, its main focus is on the modern era, when there were various proposals (by both Japanese and pro-Japanese Koreans) to make use of Susanoo’s Korean connections as a way to support the policy of Japanese-Korean assimilation. Speculative interpretations of a few ambiguous names and phrases in Nihon shoki and other classical texts had already in the Edo period led some to draw the conclusion that Japan’s Susanoo and Korea’s Tan’gun (the mythical founder of Korean states) were in fact the same deity, known under different names in different places. From the 1890s onward, this idea was taken up again to add spice to the theory that the races of Japan and Korea share a common ancestry. After 1910, this theory served to naturalize Japan’s recent annexation of Korea as a predestined reunification, rooted in a distant age of origins. Staging Japan as the land of Amaterasu and Korea as the realm of Susanoo/Tan’gun tickled the imagination. To many, it felt apt: the wise and patient Amaterasu/Japan was now once again taking care of her immature and sometimes violently unpredictable younger brother Susanoo/Korea.

This scheme, however, was never officially adopted. The theory that Susanoo is Tan’gun remained a private hypothesis. Already in 1906 Itō Hirobumi rejected proposals to consider enshrining Susanoo in Korea’s first state shrine, the 1919 Chōsen Jingū, which was a topic of discussion at that time. Throughout the colonial period, the Government-General preferred Amaterasu, the Meiji emperor, and Kunitama as the standard set of kami for official shrines in Korea. In Ch’unch’ŏn, too, the group of settlers who sought to develop Kōgen Shrine into a national sanctuary dedicated to Susanoo “as the great god of Japanese-Korean assimilation” failed to gain approval from the Government-General (pp. 42-43). Still, enshrinement of Susanoo was eventually approved by the Shrine Bureau, and the shrine was ranked as a national shrine in 1941.

Why was the notion of Korea as the land of Susanoo not embraced by the colonial authorities? Weiss offers a convincing analysis of the dilemmas of the theory of common ancestry. The idea of a shared Japanese-Korean origin had the potential of undermining the status of Koreans as subordinate colonials within the empire. Assimilation was not meant to lead to equality. Some objected that the Tan’gun myth was a medieval fabrication; for that reason, it should not be mixed into the pure realm of truly ancient Japanese imperial mythology. The logic of superior elder sister versus inferior younger brother did not cut wood with most Koreans, who anyway held that the legacy of Tan’gun predated that of the Japanese gods and emperors by many centuries. Moreover, embracing Tan’gun came with the danger of strengthening notions of Korean national identity. Finally, the evidence for the connection remained dubious and contested. All in all, although Susanoo was added in a number of Korean shrines, it was considered safer to stick to Amaterasu and Emperor Meiji.

Weiss points out that similar theories of common ancestry, or shared roots in the Age of the Gods, did not emerge in the context of other parts of the empire, notably Taiwan. He attributes this to the lack of mythological material to draw on. Such material, he argues, constituted a cache of “storage memory” that could be reenergized as “functional memory,” in the terminology of Aleida Assmann (pp. 10, 171). I would argue that the limited success of Susanoo worship in Korea, even among the Japanese, makes it a less than optimal example of the potency of the classical court.
chronicles as national “storage memory.” As for the absence of parallels in other colonies, it strikes me that the theory of shared Japanese-Korean origins had obvious parallels with similar theories about Okinawa. Here, too, scholars and government officials alike drew on mythological narratives, while their arguments were strengthened further by Orikuchi Shinobu’s concept of contemporary “Ryūkyū Shinto” (Ryūkyū no shūkyō [1923]). While both the political setting and the evidence were clearly different, the reasoning was at least comparable.

Weiss points out that “new mythology must always move within the constraints of previous mythological traditions” to retain its “power” (p. 11). To explain how the myth of Susanoo’s Korean roots could arise, he takes us back to the ancient period, via medieval and early modern exegeses, to the developments in modern times that are more directly relevant to his argument about colonial Korea. In the classical texts, hints at Susanoo’s Korean connections are few, ambiguous, and marginal, but Weiss makes it clear that by late medieval times, Susanoo was widely regarded as a deity of foreign lands. In a range of different contexts, he was associated with the Indian Gozu Tennō, Matarajin, Sekizan Myōjin, Shinra Myōjin, and even Konpira. The association with Tan’gun emerged first in the context of euhemeristic interpretations of Japanese and Korean myths in the late eighteenth century. There was never any consensus, however; the meager evidence was simply too cryptic and contradictory.

Weiss ends his book with an epilogue on developments after the end of the Second World War. Here he proposes that Egami Namio’s famous (and infamous) horserider theory drew directly on the prewar idea of shared Japanese-Korean ancestry, even though Egami’s methods and conclusions were very different. Egami used primarily archaeological evidence and had little use for mythological snippets like “Soshimori.” Also, he concluded that the people who founded the Japanese imperial state were invaders with roots in Manchurian Puyŏ—a notion that no pre-1945 scholar could have voiced. His thinking has inspired Korean nationalist historians, whose more fanciful theories about Tan’gun, Puyŏ horseriders, and much else have been dissected by Hyung Il Pai (Constructing “Korean” Origins: A Critical Review of Archaeology, Historiography, and Racial Myth in Korean State-Formation Theories [2000]).

In 2001, the priests of the Zenkoku Seiseikai did not harbor any colonialist designs. Neither did their leader, the chief priest of Yasaka Shrine in Kyoto, Mayumi Tsunetada (1924-2019). In his 2000 book on “Gion faith,” Mayumi describes an earlier research trip to Udusan. He highlights a passage in Shinsen shōjiroku, the 814 genealogical record, stating that the Yasaka lineage descends from an immigrant from the land of Koma, whose ancient capital was (possibly) located in Ch’unch’ŏn. To him, this implies that the deity of Yasaka Shrine, Susanoo, was brought to Kyoto by refugees from this statelet. It is perhaps typical for this genre of myth exegesis that Mayumi’s reading is riddled with contradictions; for example, he rejects the interpretation of Soshimori as “ox-head” while retaining the word’s link to Udusan and Ch’unch’ŏn. [5]

Mayumi and the Zenkoku Seiseikai priests are not the only ones who remain fascinated by Susanoo’s mysterious foreign connections. A quick internet search reveals a great variety of interpretations and proposed locations; the site kamnavi.jp/it/sosimori.htm, for example, lists ten different theories. This, perhaps, testifies to the “power of myth,” adduced by Weiss: even if we are skeptical about the interpretations of others, the myths retain their sacred aura and we struggle to escape their spell (p. 11).

Notes

[1]. The Zenkoku Seiseikai report about this trip can be found at the website Soshimori, Kumanari o tazunete, Heisei 13nen 9gatsu, accessed April 20, 2023, http://kamnavi.jp/it/sosimori2.htm.


If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at https://networks.h-net.org/h-buddhism


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