

Sarah THAL: *Rearranging the Landscape of the Gods. The Politics of a Pilgrimage Site in Japan, 1573–1912*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press 2005; 409 pp.

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The entry “Konpira” in the voluminous *Nihon no shinbutsu no jiten* (“Dictionary of deities and buddhas in Japan,” Taishûkan Shoten, Tokyo 2001), is a good example of the kind of religious history that is ubiquitous in Japanese works of reference:

Konpira is an altered form of Kubira (Skt. Khumbîra), one of the twelve divine generals of Buddhism. This river deity is a deification of the crocodiles that live in the river Ganges in India. With Buddhism’s arrival in Japan, this deity came to be worshipped as a deity of the sea and of sea traffic. There are more than seven hundred Konpira shrines in Japan, led by the Konpira Gongen (Kotohira-gû) who is enshrined on Mount Zôzu in Kotohira, Sanuki province (Kagawa prefecture). Mount Zôzu is an ancient sacred mountain. Its deity has been both the protector of nearby villages and of seafarers. It developed into an important pilgrimage centre in the early modern period, and has thrived until this day as a popular deity of marine safety, fishing, and avoiding misfortune.

When one really attempts to understand this brief account of Konpira, it is little less than baffling. How on earth did a deified crocodile from the river Ganges end up in the countryside of Kagawa on Shikoku – in a Shinto shrine? Why did such a deity inspire so much devotion across Japan, and over so many centuries? One can only wonder.

Sarah Thal’s book traces the history of this mysterious cult on Mount Zôzu, from its traceable beginnings in the late 16th century until the end of Meiji. Her account is extremely effective in opening our eyes to the historical realities that remain hidden behind the standard description of Konpira I just quoted. Above all, the history she traces makes a nonsense of the fundamental continuity on which our reference entry is premised. Mount Zôzu’s fortune was not formed by the presence on this mountain of a deity called Konpira with a consistent identity. Rather, it was a site where an extraordinary succession of religious entrepreneurs managed to survive and, at times, thrive thanks to a dizzying display of creativity, political skill and economic sense.

Konpira's history began in earnest in 1573, when a Shingon priest called Yûga founded a hall enshrining Konpira on the mountain – which until that time had been dominated by Lotus practices, notably worship of the *sanjûbanjin*, the thirty deities who protect the thirty days of the month. In this period Konpira enjoyed some popularity as one of the less obvious, and therefore suitably exclusive and exotic protectors of Buddhism, not least in Lotus circles. Yûga's Konpira shrine, Thal argues, was designed to earn the sponsorship of a local lord who felt threatened by the mighty Chôsokabe warlords to the south. Soon this fear proved well founded, and Mount Zôzu was incorporated in the Tosa domain. With this, both Yûga and Konpira fell from favour, and the *sanjûbanjin* regained dominance on the mountain under the priestship of the Chôsokabe appointee Yûgon. Only two years later, however, Toyotomi Hideyoshi's forces expelled the Chôsokabe from the area, installing the Ikoma in their place. Yûgon restored the Konpira shrine and succeeded in winning the patronage of the Ikoma lords. His successor Yûsei expanded the site into a successful *shugendô* centre in the first decade of the Edo period, giving rise to a cult of Yûsei himself (under the name of Kongôbô) as a miracle-working *tengu* and an avatar of Fudô Myôô. When the Ikoma were replaced by the Matsudaira in 1642, this inspired a new spate of both construction and redefinition. It was at this juncture that the *sanjûbanjin* cult was dealt its final blow. The site's first *engi* (origin tale) presented the mountain's divinity as a "blend of Konpira, Kongôbô and Fudô Myôô" (p. 66).

From this point onwards, Konpira went on to develop its ties to the Matsudaira *daimyô*, and to establish new links with both the shogunate and the imperial court. In the wake of its success, the market town at its gates grew into a rapidly expanding pilgrimage destination. While the priests lobbied for patronage among the powerful, merchants and innkeepers adapted Konpira's image to the needs of the masses with such success that "by the early 1800s, pilgrimage to Konpira began to rival pilgrimage to Ise" (p. 102). The town offered a vibrant service industry with endless opportunities to "pray, pay and play" in style.

By this time, exposure to Confucian Shinto had already added new identities to the already composite figure of Konpira. In the early 1700s, the abbot of the day, Yûzan, adopted theories designed by Shinto scholars such as Yoshikawa Koretaru, who had argued that Konpira was a native kami rather than a Buddhist figure of foreign origin. In a radically new *engi* (1719) Konpira was identified with Ônamuchi, and Shinto elements such as the use of *mikoshi* were introduced into Konpira festivals (p. 91). A century later, Hirata Atsutane

built on these associations by arguing that Konpira combined the spirits of the kami Ômononushi (or Ôkuninushi) and the vengeful spirit of the twelfth-century emperor Sutoku. He added the final stroke to Konpira's "japanisation" by claiming that the name Konpira derived from an "original" Kotohira, and not from Sanskrit.

Atsutane's bold nativisation of Konpira proved worth its weight in gold when the Meiji restoration washed over Mount Zôzu. Atsutane's authority made it possible for the head priest of the time, Yûjô (who renounced his status as a monk and took on the secular name of Kotooka Hirotsune), to take the final step in transforming the combinatory deity Konpira into a Great Kami Kotohira with solid connections in the imperial classics. This was accompanied by an intense period of physical construction work: Buddhist buildings and symbols were torn down, sold off, or redefined as a new form of cultural capital: "Japanese art." Thal shows how the Meiji restoration not only changed the theological and ideological setting of Konpira, but also the priesthood's position within local society. While Yûjô's descendants managed to hold on to their office, they rapidly lost their secular power over Kotohira town, as well as most of their economic muscle; in fact, the shrine priests spent much of the Meiji years incurring debts or struggling to reduce them.

Two main themes run through Thal's book. The first is the chameleon-like ability of Konpira's deity to reflect changes in the political and economic situation on and around Mount Zôzu. Konpira's transformation into Kotohira was only one such change; equally radical identity shifts had occurred in previous centuries, and more were to follow in years to come – Thal mentions the recent addition of Konpira as a form of Daikoku (via Ôkuninushi) now displayed on signs at the shrine, and of the shrine's new mascot, the "Konpira dog" who can be seen in action on the Konpira website (www.konpira.or.jp). The second theme concerns the never-ending negotiation between political and economic considerations that have shaped Konpira's history. Thal shows how Konpira navigated between the conflicting exigencies of ever-changing political and ideological regimes, while depending on popular support for its survival.

The great value of Thal's approach lies in the fact that she exposes the limited power of "tradition" when faced with a new social reality. She stresses the agency of a great variety of groups who in some way or other depended on or had an interest in Konpira. Rather than being bound by tradition (or by some fixed identity of the deity associated with their site), they were engaged in a constant process of inventing and reinventing it – not for its own sake, but out of the bare necessity to find new relevance for Konpira in a world of

incessant change. In this tale, such apparently peripheral issues as, say, amulet designs, ferry routes or the construction of a public park acquire as much interest as the vagaries of Buddhist and Shinto theology or state ideology. That's bottom-up approach allows us a rare and precious glimpse at the historical meanings of such abstract concepts in a very real and fascinating place.