A New Medium for an Old Message

The (Dis) Enchanting New Medium and the Importance of *Senkyō ibun*

The Japanese religious academician Hirata Atsutane (1776–1843) has been the subject of hundreds of scholarly studies undertaken by Japanese intellectuals of varying types beginning not long after his death and continuing into the twenty-first century. Atsutane’s prodigious output of written text and transcribed lectures still leaves room for, in fact begs for, new discoveries and fresh analyses in this new century of scholarship on Japanese religion. Western scholars of the last century, most notably Donald Keene and Carmen Blacker, have confirmed Atsutane’s importance to the Western academy by their recognition and inclusion of his idiosyncratic writings and interests in their own academic publications. Yet within the virtual forest of writings Atsutane left us, there are still too many “shady” areas in need of illumination. These “shady” areas, in my opinion, call for an attempt to cast light on topics ignored in the previous century of Atsutane scholarship.

In the early nineteenth century this nativist scholar proposed a vision for a new Japan, a vision inherited and refined from his intellectual inspiration, Motoori Norinaga (1730–1801), recognized then and now as the greatest of all nativist scholars. In this vision, Japan was second to none in all things and owed nothing except its shortcomings to the influence of foreign cultures. Atsutane writes:

All the world’s peoples refer to Japan as the Land of the Kami. In addition, they say that we are all noble descendants of the *kami*, and in fact, they are not wrong. Our noble country was born from *kami*, uniquely blessed by the Kami of Heaven. There is a world of difference between Japan and all other countries; in fact, there is no comparison. Japan is surpassingly blessed and clearly is the Land of the Kami. Even the humblest man and woman in Japan is an actual descendant of the *kami*. Given this certain
truth, I find it extremely regrettable that there are so many Japanese people who do not recognize the fundamental fact that this is the Land of the Kami, and that they are the descendants of the kami.⁴

In Atsutane’s mind, the reason so many Japanese people did not recognize this “fundamental fact” was that the proponents of Indian, Chinese, and Western cultures stood in the way of their realization of this elemental truth. He saw the common Japanese as guilty of championing these foreign cultures—in their guises of Buddhism, Chinese studies,⁵ and Dutch studies—in ways that flatly contradicted Atsutane’s nativist vision. Furthermore, unlike Atsutane’s nativist teachings, these other discourses were supported by the traditional and authoritative weight of great masses of historical, religious, and scientific text. Atsutane himself begrudgingly validated these non-nativist sources in his own lectures and writings by often quoting the Ming Buddhist canon, the Confucian and Neo-Confucian classics, and Western religious and scientific texts.

Atsutane was frustrated by this dependence on the very discourses he despised, and he knew that his alternative vision could not be credibly supported by the same methods used by his competitors, so he embarked on a lifelong project of discrediting, subverting, and even co-opting those “foreign” writings, claiming some of them to be of Japanese origin. But in the middle of his career he developed a new strategy. Fate and his own cunning delivered a new medium into his hands, an affirmative way to create a new counterdiscourse that supported his new vision of Japan. Atsutane himself chronicled the appearance of that new, carefully premeditated strategy and its implementation in his often misunderstood work Senkyō ibun, which Carmen Blacker translated in the 1960s as “Strange Tidings from the Realm of Immortals.”

Atsutane wrote Senkyō ibun in 1822. It is a voluminous work centered upon his interviews with the so-called tengu⁶ Kozō Torakichi. Deeply interested in supernatural⁷ experiences, Atsutane was captivated by Torakichi’s claim that supernatural experiences were part of his everyday life for several years of his early youth. In Senkyō ibun, Atsutane records approximately eight months of interaction with the Tengu Boy, who was to live in his house for the following several years.

Senkyō ibun has not been considered the most important or definitive work in Hirata Atsutane’s impressive corpus of writings. That distinction most often goes to The August Pillar of the Soul (Tama no mihashira). Although this study focuses on Senkyō ibun, it is not an attempt to displace The August Pillar of the Soul and claim that distinction for Senkyō ibun. My more modest aim is to present a deeper, more nuanced understanding of
the Senkyō ibun text and hence a fuller view of Atsutane’s religious convictions and aspirations. And even though Senkyō ibun may not displace The August Pillar of the Soul, there is no question in my mind that to undervalue Senkyō ibun is to completely misunderstand Hirata Atsutane.

From the genesis of Atsutane studies in nineteenth-century Japan, the undervaluing of this particular text because of its emphasis on the “superstitious” and “supernatural” helped enable scholars and students of Japanese religion to overlook Atsutane’s historical link to twentieth-century minzokugaku, Japanese folklore studies, as well as organized Japanese occult mysticism of the later nineteenth and twentieth centuries. For the longest time, Atsutane studies in Japan and the West were content to focus on his contribution to the construction of nationalist state religion in Japan. The unavoidable problem with that approach is that it shaped the conclusions of such studies by assuming a goal not yet imagined by Atsutane himself.

Any in-depth study of Atsutane’s life will certainly reveal that he was completely absorbed with the task of building a reputation for his academy, his new school of kokugaku, along with his controversial new theories within the Japanese intellectual milieu of the 1820s and 1830s. His largest contribution to religion in his day lay in his investigations of what we might today call folk religion/superstition and the occult, not imperial restoration. The voluminous record of common nineteenth-century Japanese religious belief and practice, which makes up most of the content of Senkyō ibun, thus becomes the strongest reason why it among all of Atsutane’s works deserves reconsideration and re-evaluation.

There was a time not so long ago when Atsutane was considered by scholars both Japanese and Western to be an unwanted detour on Japan’s road to modernity, mainly because of his mystical and spiritual biases, which caused him to value irrational religious experience over rational thought. There was also a postwar tendency on the Japanese side of scholarship to avoid serious consideration of Atsutane’s thought because of a prejudice in Western scholarship that aligned him with the forces of authoritarianism, militarism, and fascism. Atsutane was implicated after the fact in the reinstitution of premodern emperor worship and the production of a fascist and nationalist ideology of Japanese superiority.

In the latter half of the twentieth century there was a re-evaluation of Atsutane’s thought, a new wave of critical thinking about his work. Yet while Atsutane studies have been distanced from the Pacific War, Atsutane’s work has come to be seen as a precursor to the process of Japan’s modernization. To place Atsutane within the modernization process makes him a part of a master narrative that tends to ignore any historical
particulars that do not support that narrative. As a result, Atsutane once again becomes known for his contribution to a historical context that had not yet come into existence, or merely existed as a barely recognizable prototype, in his time.

In other words, those master narrative studies have anachronistically defined Atsutane’s role in history. For example, because Atsutane attempted to elevate the spiritual status of the Japanese common man and made a direct appeal to the Japanese peasant, he is credited with leading a movement for the democratization of religion. He is sometimes also credited as the creator of a set of beliefs that became the foundation for a Shinto-based folk religion focusing on guardian deities, a religion said to have resulted in reinforced feelings of community in the Japanese countryside. In addition, he is sometimes portrayed as an important force in the intellectual history of Japan who is thought to have helped develop a new model of Japanese identity required for effective adaptation to Japan’s role in the modern world. Finally, he is sometimes seen as the first to study spiritualism in an attempt to form a purely Shinto understanding of the soul and the afterlife. In short, Hirata Atsutane, the man and his work, has been comprehensively packaged and explained in terms of how he helps complete the modern scholar’s version of Japanese history.

In recent years in Japan, there has been scholarly work that once again reconsiders and re-evaluates Hirata Atsutane’s work, but this time focusing on his contribution to Tokugawa religion. Since Western scholarship has yet to respond adequately to this development, it is incumbent upon us to move in this new direction. Atsutane is still best-known to Western academe for his radical racist, nationalist ideas, and also as the founder of the Hirata School of Shinto that helped engineer the persecution of Buddhism and the establishment of a State Shinto in the early days of the Meiji Restoration. The problem with that reputation is that Atsutane, who died in 1843, was nowhere near the scene of the crime. Viewed through the lens of the Pacific War and the Meiji Restoration, Atsutane’s historical importance has been defined by those events. Unfortunately, those are definitions that not only distort his legacy but also divest it of its fascinating detail, diversity, and depth.

When Atsutane died in 1843, he had approximately 550 students registered in his academy, and many of his works had been printed, reprinted, and widely distributed. Within a generation after his death, the size of his academy had increased almost tenfold, as had the number of his publications. While he was alive, he was hired as an instructor of Shinto priests in both the Yoshida and Shirakawa shrine houses. He hobnobbed with many influential intellectuals and was patronized by wealthy and pow-
erful men. He was influential and controversial enough to be censored and sent into exile by the Tokugawa government. There is enough of an impressive résumé here to warrant attention for his role in the development of Japanese religion.

The simple fact that a figure so active in the world of religion had written a significant book detailing human contact with ghosts, demons, spirits, monsters, and gods in the world of the afterlife would, one would think, have attracted much interest and study. Yet this religiously rich aspect of this work, *Senkyō ibun*, has received little attention in the West. The religion in the text has received only cursory questioning and has been summarily relegated to the genre of folklore and superstition, and as such is ignored by scholars of religion.

On top of that, and in some ways equally important, continuing to pigeonhole Atsutane as merely a nationalist, thus undervaluing and overlooking this particular text as the ravings of a fascist crackpot, deprives us all of an astonishing true story that describes in great detail the intellectual salon society of early nineteenth-century Edo. *Senkyō ibun* tells the story of an impoverished but imaginative and talented waif from the slums of old Edo whose claim to have been raised by supernatural beings in the mountains of Japan caused him to be paraded through the salons of the intellectual elite of Edo society by a superstitious and ambitious leader of a rising religious and political movement. Those circumstances alone make the story interesting enough to warrant attention.

Yet the first and last time this fascinating text was the focal point of any lengthy consideration in English was in 1967, when Carmen Blacker published an article that translated several passages from the work and provided an overall description and assessment. Her coverage of the text took up the major part of her article, titled “Supernatural Abductions in Japanese Folklore.” Blacker, however, admitted in her piece that *Senkyō ibun* was not an entirely representative example of our theme [supernatural abduction]. It lacks also something of the visionary, fantastical quality of the earlier tales. There is something curiously matter of fact about Torakichi’s detailed description of the Other World on Mt. Iwama which will disappoint those accustomed to the enchantments of Celtic fairylands. . . . For this disenchantment we should blame Hirata, for whom the story in all its matter of factness was undoubtedly deeply satisfying. The very quality of familiarity, of closeness to the humans, was welcome to him as confirming his theory that the afterworld was not fraught with dark and fearful terrors, but a pleasant replica of our own.
Blacker used the story of Tengu Boy Torakichi as an example of a folklore pattern of the supernatural abduction of children, examples of which she believed could be seen throughout the world. As the vehicle and a reason for *Senkyō ibun* to be brought to light in English, the folklorist’s attention is welcome. However, this text has a more interesting story to tell if we background the folklore angle and feature the “disenchantment” that Blacker felt Hirata found so “deeply satisfying.” Although many of the elements of Torakichi’s stories are fantastic, they are his personal stories, not actually folk tales. Furthermore, although I agree with Blacker that Atsutane is to be blamed/credited for the disenchantment of the tales, his more serious offense was abducting Torakichi and his supernatural stories and using them not merely to confirm his theory of the pleasant afterworld, but, more importantly, to construct a supernatural identity for living Japanese people.

What Blacker seems to be disappointed in most is the “matter of factness” and the “disenchantment,” which she attributed to Atsutane’s influence. We can see that she thought these characteristics, in particular, were actually what made the stories welcome and satisfying to Atsutane. Therefore, she has also recognized just that point of incongruity that further distances Torakichi’s tales from any folklore paradigms and signals that Torakichi’s stories have another story to tell.

Torakichi was the informant, the named source of *Senkyō ibun*, but Atsutane wrote the book. Atsutane asked the questions, edited the answers, and provided the commentary. Besides that, he supported and educated Tengu Boy Torakichi, the alleged narrator, for years before, during, and after the drafting of this work. If these fantastic stories seem disenchanted and matter-of-fact, and if this situation appeared to please the writer, editor, and publisher, Atsutane, might he not have participated in the production of these stories to influence their outcome? If that is the case, then for what purpose did he make such an effort? Torakichi’s stories of personal involvement with *kami*, demons, spirits, and monsters are fascinating in and of themselves, but Atsutane’s involvement in disenchanting and factualizing the fantastic is an equally fascinating tale—the tale that will be told at length in the following pages.

Torakichi and Atsutane: Leading Conclusions of Recent Japanese Scholarship

Kamata Tōji published the most recent in-depth treatment of Atsutane and Torakichi in Japanese in 2002. In this work he envisioned Torakichi
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and Atsutane’s interactions and Atsutane’s subsequent writings about Torakichi as evidence of the depth of Atsutane’s spirituality. Kamata argued that Atsutane saw in Torakichi the means of verifying his own romantic and passionate belief in a pleasant afterlife, a motivation that was also suggested by Blacker in the 1960s. Moreover, Atsutane clearly indicated in the first pages of his most famous work, The August Pillar of the Soul, in 1812 that the establishment of a firm belief in a pleasant afterlife for the Japanese people was the essential goal of that work. Due to that, Kamata’s and Blacker’s answer has been a common and recurring theme in Atsutane studies for at least a hundred years.

Atsutane’s predecessor, Motoori Norinaga, had posited that according to the ancient Japanese histories, the afterlife was lived in an unpleasant and defiled world. This was the subterranean afterlife seen in the ancient stories of Izanagi’s attempt to bring his dead wife Izanami back to the world of the living. Norinaga insisted that as unpleasant as it was, it was the only afterlife available for the Japanese people. Furthermore, his methods of investigation into the nature of the world did not allow him to discover or uncover any other afterlife. Atsutane was not similarly constrained. He argued against his self-styled teacher, Norinaga, that there was a pleasant but usually unseen Other World, where the soul went when one died. In volumes of his published essays and lectures we can see Atsutane’s vigorous attempts to back up this opposing theory of the afterlife.

Kamata further argued that Atsutane had been searching for other ways to prove that the Other World of the afterlife existed, and that he especially wanted to make contact with that world. Kamata claimed that Atsutane desired a pleasant afterlife because his own personal life was filled with tragedy. As evidence, he gave Atsutane’s own statements about his childhood problems and insecurities, and he emphasized the devastation Atsutane displayed when he lost his beloved first wife and his only two sons. Kamata also analyzed the personal situation and even the personal appearance of Atsutane to produce a psychological profile of a person who needed to believe in a pleasant afterlife and therefore was particularly receptive to Torakichi’s stories and other stories like them.

Koyasu Nobukuni is the foremost living Atsutane scholar, and his latest contribution to the field that contains analysis and commentary on Atsutane and Torakichi was published in 2001. Koyasu also concluded that Atsutane was searching for a way to prove his theory of the destination of the soul after death. Koyasu argued that Atsutane questioned Torakichi to study this Other World and that Atsutane and his followers were only interested or convinced by Torakichi insofar as he told them what
they wanted to hear. Koyasu’s conclusion was that Atsutane met Torakichi while in the midst of creating a new worldview for late Tokugawa society, and his mystical or spiritual research was one means to that end.

Both of these recent analyses of Senkyō ibun agree that Atsutane was involved in a project that involved establishing a new cosmology, which would have an afterlife that provided comfort to all Japanese. Koyasu’s focus was on the discourse on the Other World and how Atsutane’s efforts took a theological and spiritual turn away from previous kokugaku philosophical endeavors. Kamata’s study also followed Atsutane’s spiritual developments, but Kamata’s interest lay in an attempt to reach a phenomenological understanding of that new discourse.

The difference in their approaches is that Koyasu was interested in the overall trajectory of Atsutane’s new discourse, the move to spiritual studies or theology, in which, according to Koyasu, lay the difference and therefore the importance of Atsutane’s textual compositions. Kamata was concerned with smaller spiritual elements of Atsutane’s text and, as a result, was inclined to devote greater effort to the description of the ascetic and spiritual exercises of Atsutane’s exalted occupant of the Other World, the sanjin, about whom much more will be written later. In addition, Kamata was also interested in understanding Torakichi’s spiritual experiences.

Koyasu’s reading of Senkyō ibun as a new discourse focusing on spiritual studies or a new theology for later religious developments provides a good start, but his approach leaves a wealth of interesting material unmined. Kamata started to flesh out the description of Torakichi and the sanjin, but he seemed only interested in what could be seen as spiritual qualities or exercises. Although much detail given in Senkyō ibun describes the ritual practices and ascetic ordeals of the sanjin, most of the detail is not intended as an explicitly spiritual or religious explanation.

Examining the discourse and ignoring the thick description of sanjin overlooks the multiple and important roles and functions Atsutane played in the development of new nativist discourse. He teased out the sanjin in his questions to Torakichi because the sanjin helped to fill in a hole in his cosmology. The sanjin was meant to help Atsutane’s discourse successfully compete with those discourses challenging his version of the truth about Japan. Examining the sanjin and focusing only on his spirituality depletes the many meanings Atsutane had infused in him. What is to be desired in the present scholarship and what is offered in this study is a thick description of the sanjin, arranged in a manner which will show off Atsutane’s new multifaceted religious hero as a Shinto holy man armed to the teeth with miraculous power, knowledge, and weaponry to defeat all of Japan’s enemies.
In addition, and related to the discovery of the ideological sanjin, this study contends that the results of Atsutane’s supernatural inquiries should be characterized as a pseudo-ethnographic account of Atsutane’s, rather than Torakichi’s, imagined world of the supernatural. Atsutane’s ethnography needs to be scrutinized to examine the implications of his method and to produce a better understanding of his motivations and intentions. Some Japanese scholars have suggested that Torakichi may have bewitched Atsutane with the promise of providing evidence of something in which Atsutane passionately believed. Others have suggested that Torakichi and Atsutane had areas of shared belief and that Atsutane exploited those areas by having his mystical medium speak for him on those points, and by having him do so, Torakichi gave credence and a kind of divine authority to Atsutane’s teachings.

What has been neglected is that there is enough evidence to strongly suggest that Atsutane used Torakichi as a medium to spread his own message. This study will show that Atsutane himself spirited away, coerced, and seduced Tengu Boy Torakichi. Torakichi, though, soon learned his role and participated actively in the joint creation of a public spectacle in Edo society that was to give birth, at least in Atsutane’s imagination, to the new Japanese superman and culture hero, the sanjin.

Overview of Atsutane Studies in the West

There have been a number of studies of Hirata Atsutane undertaken in the West in the 150 years or so since his death. Ernest Satow was first in 1875 when he came out with a study of the kokugaku scholars, with Atsutane getting the bulk of the attention.19 However, in 1905 William Aston, in his work entitled Shinto, commented that “the writings of the eighteenth and nineteenth century scholars amount to a voluminous literature, no part of which has been, or is likely to be translated.”20 One hundred years later, Aston’s prediction remains nearly accurate in Atsutane’s case.21

The Pacific War put an additional damper on any hope for Atsutane studies for a long time. In the 1950s, Donald Keene wrote about Atsutane and Western learning,22 and in the ensuing fifty years,23 Atsutane studies in the English language have been haphazard and erratic. The earlier studies, besides filling in biographical data, focused on his nationalistic teachings and his ethnocentric theory of Japanese superiority, and they even uncovered his “hypocritical appropriation” of Western sources.24 Later studies managed to find new directions and eventually leveled their focus on the development of his academy and the social milieu of late Edo Japan from whence he sprang and on which he had an undeniable influence.25
Recently, an American scholar of Atsutane devoted several pages to the story of Torakichi and Atsutane’s *Senkyō ibun* in two separate publications. They are not the focus of either publication, but in an academic drought such as this, they are an oasis of scholarship and only serve to emphasize the need for more work in this field, an assertion that this study intends to justify. In 1998, this scholar, Mark McNally, came out with a convincing dissertation on Atsutane and nativism that explains how Atsutane achieved his position and later reputation within the *kokugaku* movement. In his book *Proving the Way, Conflict and Practice in the History of Japanese Nativism*, published in 2005, McNally includes a short section devoted to Torakichi and *Senkyō ibun* in the chapter called “Forsaking Textualism: Ancient History and the Supernatural.” Torakichi is also briefly discussed in McNally’s chapter titled “The Proof Is Out There: Hirata Atsutane, Evidential Learning, and the Afterlife,” in *Practicing the Afterlife: Perspectives from Japan*, published in 2004.

In otherwise informative and enlightening studies of Atsutane, McNally gives too little attention to the *Senkyō ibun* text and, like the great Atsutane scholar Koyasu Nobukuni before him, overlooks the implications of the *tengu/sanjin* controversy, which is not overlooked by other Japanese scholars and which I contend is central to an understanding of *Senkyō ibun*. In fact, McNally avoids even using the term *sanjin*, which is used frequently in the actual *Senkyō ibun* text, and instead identifies Torakichi’s mountain master as “not a true *tengu*, but a member of a special group of mortals who had access to the spirit realm.” As a result, I believe McNally is predisposed to underestimate some important implications of the relationship between Torakichi and Atsutane, but on the positive side he generously left it up to this study to mine the long, tedious, and often repetitive *Senkyō ibun* text for the rich analyses and new insights to be presented in the following chapters. In fairness to McNally, his work was not devoted to the story of Torakichi and Atsutane, as this one is, thus the time needed to render what I consider justice to *Senkyō ibun* would not have been warranted for the purposes of his study.

**Summary of Chapters**

This book is composed of seven chapters. Chapter 1 locates Atsutane in the milieu of 1820s Edo Japan. A rough sketch of the complicated history of ideas and Atsutane’s position within that history provides the backdrop against which the drama of *Senkyō ibun* unfolds. Atsutane’s stance and attitude toward three powerful “enemy” discourses are articulated and put in context. These discourses originate from within Japan, but each of them
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concerns what Atsutane conceived as a foreign culture and a threat to the furtherance of his own ideological end. Atsutane’s ideological end is shown to be the construction of a unique Japanese cultural identity, one that was clearly separate, independent, and superior to those offered by the three foreign cultures. Atsutane’s technique is recognized as being in defiance of the accepted practice of history in his day, and his methodological move beyond the history and philology of his time is characterized as a move toward anthropology and ethnography.

Using examples from Western anthropology as well as East Asian trends that encouraged attempts at scientific explanation, Atsutane’s work is explained as an attempt at nineteenth-century armchair, or zabuton, ethnography. We may think that the world of the afterlife Atsutane wrote of is imaginary, but we must assume that he did not. The study of a new world and culture required Atsutane to make a methodological move toward ethnographic writing. Therefore, in chapter 1, recent critiques of ethnographic writing are used to analyze the writing of ethnographic narrative. The conclusion is that such writings actually begin to resemble fiction more than they resemble scientific observation. This line of argument is pursued to explain a reading and analysis of Senkyō ibun as a work of ethnographic fiction. The goal of the study is to clarify exactly what Atsutane has constructed in these pages, behind the veneer of ethnography, and just how his fiction was masked by what Blacker has called his attempts at “disenchantment” and his “matter of fact” style of storytelling.

Chapter 2 explains the relationship between the implied author and outside narrator: Atsutane the believer in the Ancient Way, and Tengu Boy Torakichi the informant and inside narrator. Their relationship as shown in the text is described, and Atsutane’s projections onto his inside narrator are scrutinized. One recurring theme is the portrayal of Torakichi as a believable and reliable narrator and a true witness and participant in fantastic events. One point of intense scrutiny is the meeting between the two main characters, which is portrayed in the book as both fated and fateful for Atsutane and the world. There is also an examination of the setting of the acts of narration and an analysis of how the setting of the action is intended to verify the action. Attention is also paid to Atsutane’s recognition of public doubts concerning the boy. These scenes add drama and pathos and ultimately are designed to direct the reader to an appreciation of the faith and courage exhibited by Atsutane when he championed the boy at such high social risk to himself.

Besides establishing the portrayal of the special quality and intimacy of the relationship between Atsutane and Torakichi, another issue of prime importance in this chapter is the questioning of Torakichi’s independence
as a narrator of the fantastic tales. The close relationship between the author and the narrator, or the ethnographer and the informant, gives rise to the question of whether and to what extent Atsutane has altered Torakichi’s stories. Torakichi’s dependency on Atsutane and Atsutane’s strong and unbending stance on most issues are enough to raise these doubts, if not to prove them. However, close analysis of the text concerning important issues of religious and political dogma for Atsutane will reveal manipulation of the informant by the ethnographer. Although manipulation can be shown at several junctures, this evidence is not meant to suggest that Atsutane merely employed a religious charlatan or that the two of them conspired to deceive educated Edo salon society. All evidence points to Atsutane’s believing, or at least wanting or even perhaps needing to believe, in the Other World, but his personality and his own convictions and intelligence would never allow Torakichi’s imagination to exert control over his own vision of that Other World.

Chapter 3 starts with a rough sketch of the Other World Atsutane helped Torakichi describe. That world was supposed to be in Japan, yet inaccessible to most people. A special medium was needed to penetrate it and bring back descriptions of it. In many ways the Other World was supposed to be the same as the revealed world, but it was important that Torakichi also showed it to be qualitatively different. The plants and animals of that world were mostly the same as this world, but on occasion certain fantastic examples were introduced. The most important aspect to report about the Other World was the intelligent life that inhabited it. Kami who inhabited that world were immediately placed beyond the pale; they were not the objects of Atsutane’s research. The quest for intelligent life in that world first came to focus on the tengu who resided there. However, the ultimate goal of the ethnography was to discover the practitioners of Atsutane’s Ancient Way who also resided there. The tengu mask these practitioners had previously hidden behind was taken away to introduce the new culture hero. The process by which Atsutane discovered the sanjin hiding among the tengu is a prime example of how an eager ethnographer can manipulate a willing native informant into telling him exactly what he wants to hear.

Chapter 4 shows how Atsutane’s nativist discourse concerning the newly discovered sanjin and his independent and superior Japanese cultural identity responded to the challenges from Chinese culture. Norinaga’s legacy of hatred for things Chinese and for Japanese sinophiles had been passed on to Atsutane, and the construction of the figure of the sanjin bore traces of that legacy. This chapter samples Atsutane’s pre–Senkyō ibun, anti-China arguments and shows the new moves that a Tengu Boy
medium and ethnographic fiction allowed him to make in his struggle to establish a believable independent Japanese culture, even one that boasted its own writing script, free from Chinese characters. At the same time, chapter 4 points out Atsutane’s and the sanjin’s own deep and continuing debt to Chinese culture.

Chapter 5 details Atsutane and Torakichi’s attitudes toward Buddhism. It starts by showing Atsutane’s disdain for the Buddhist religion and his genetic and environmentally deterministic beliefs about Japanese superiority to all other cultures and peoples of the world. This is followed by the description of a religious sanjin whose abilities and practices were defined in comparison and contrast with the abilities and practices of Buddhist heroes. The chapter contends that the sanjin described by Torakichi and recorded by Atsutane was in part defined by supernatural abilities similar to the traditional ones attributed to the Buddhist bodhisattva. A further contention is that while Buddhist practices were evaluated and usually found wanting, comparable sanjin practices proved effective and superior. The salvific role of the sanjin was established in a system that emphasized the ultimate importance of the native kami, and, likewise, the role of the bodhisattva was described as either ineffective or corrupt and the Buddha was labeled a charlatan. Nevertheless, as negative as Atsutane’s discourse on Buddhism was, he clearly relied on Buddhist models to create his sanjin culture hero and develop his own religious practices.

Chapter 6 contains the description of the sanjin as holders of secret and powerful technologies previously thought to have come from or to have been perfected in the West. Atsutane recognized the importance of Western knowledge in fields such as geography, astronomy, and military technology, but he denied its Western provenance. He attempted to de-emphasize the impact of Western technology by claiming it had come from Japan’s Other World. To further this end, he encouraged the medium, Torakichi, to testify to the everyday use of Western technology in the Other World.

This chapter shows in detail how Atsutane used Torakichi to make the claim that the West had nothing good to offer whose origin could not ultimately be traced back to Japan’s Other World. However, it also shows Atsutane continuing to encourage the adoption of Western scientific theory, a stance consistent with Atsutane’s earlier cosmological writings. Finally, chapter 6 reveals that Atsutane recognized a military threat from the West, but offered comfort to the Japanese people by claiming that the supernatural beings who inhabited Japan’s Other World were ready, willing, and able to adequately repel all invaders, no matter how destructive and powerful Western military technology was feared to be.
The conclusion makes clear that Atsutane, a would-be ethnographer of the imaginary, endeavored to craft a description of the supernatural inhabitants of the unseen Other World consistent with his pre-existing Ancient Way cosmology. The role of Senkyō ibun was to establish that those beings truly did exist and that they possessed wondrous abilities and performed special functions. If Atsutane’s stated goal of The August Pillar of the Soul was to provide comfort and confidence for the people of Japan in a pleasant afterlife, then the goal of Senkyō ibun was equally important. In Senkyō ibun he sought to establish a religious hero whose primary reason for existence was to render comfort, assistance, and protection to the people of Japan until they reached that Other World. Atsutane was not satisfied in having his followers and fellow believers in the Ancient Way longing for the good life in the next world; he also attempted to empower them with ways to ask the kami for wealth, health, and security in this world.

The development of the sanjin was a failed attempt to bring the Other World closer to the seen or revealed world. Had it succeeded, it would have brought the need for religious attention, mediation, and practice concerning that Other World into greater perspective. That is to say, the discovery of the religious importance of the sanjin was also meant to make Atsutane more important in his time. The sanjin was a theological development that would make the world a better place for believers in the Ancient Way, and it also had the potential of making the world a better place for Atsutane in particular.

In addition, this final chapter assesses the relationship between the ethnographer and the informant to assign liability for the content of the stories, and it evaluates the extent to which Atsutane and Torakichi believed in the truth of the narrated events. The conclusion finalizes the assessment of how and to what extent Atsutane manipulated the narrative.

Finally, the conclusion addresses Atsutane’s contribution to the construction of Japanese identity in the modern period. By Atsutane’s time, intellectuals uncomfortable with continued cultural dependence on China had grown vocal. In addition, the supporters of Neo-Confucian\(^{31}\) and Ancient Learning\(^{32}\) movements based on Chinese scholarship were at odds with one another and found themselves in competition politically, socially, and economically. The Buddhist establishment was under fire from positivistic historiographers that had begun to question the many contradictions found in Buddhist texts. While those traditional discourses were in increasing disarray, the Western discourse of science and technology was gaining public acceptance. The nativist Japanese cultural consciousness was finally in a situation where it was confident enough to challenge the more powerful “enemy” discourses.
In the midst of this intellectual upheaval, Atsutane started an appeal to a wide cross-section of people. For a variety of reasons, class did not limit Atsutane’s economic and social dealings, and as a result, his teachings did not place great importance on social class boundaries. He called for an ideological unity of all strata of society based on their common identity as Japanese people. Atsutane addressed international and universal issues, and he claimed to be frustrated by those who used foreign ideas for personal gain at the expense of their fellow Japanese, although this charge could well be leveled at him. The conclusion questions whether Atsutane’s xenophobia might be recognized as a unifying force or as a more democratic re-evaluation of the common Japanese folk. Previous Buddhist or Chinese-inspired discourses had supported certain privileged classes. Atsutane’s rhetoric attempted to unite the people of Japan into appreciating all members of the society as equally special because all were able to become kami. The foreigners, Indians, Chinese, and Westerners were the real bogeymen of Senkyō ibun; the demons and spirits of the Other World were the natural and welcome inhabitants of Atsutane’s vision of Japan.

In addition, his endless comparisons and the twisted analyses, which found in favor of Japanese superiority, revealed strained feelings of inferiority. For example, although Atsutane ostensibly denied the later development of Japanese culture, claiming Japan to be the first land created and the birthplace of the world’s culture, he also defended and praised late development when forced to admit to some examples of slow Japanese growth. He used biological examples, citing the intellectual superiority of late-developing primates over instantly self-reliant insects. He cited Lao zi, writing, “The Great Vessel is the last to be formed,” meaning of course that the Japanese were the great vessel, which would logically place them last.

In the end, Atsutane himself could be charged with attempting to orientalize the Japanese ethnic polity before any modern Western scholar had seriously begun to shoulder that grave undertaking. Part of the legacy of Atsutane’s teachings was the notion that the best inherent Japanese trait was an intellectual and spiritual ability to appropriate and customize material culture originally not its own and to somehow improve it by infusing it with Japanese spirit. Since it was his subconscious feeling that he had to excuse Japan for not having the material evidence to show its superiority over all others, in order to feel worthy he advocated that Japanese people be understood as mystical spiritual anomalies—an inscrutable people, yes, but incapable of individual creativity, an unfortunate but lasting label.