Book Review

Akira Goto, Cultural Astronomy of the Japanese Archipelago: Exploring the Japanese Skyscape

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Since ancient times, people have found important signs in the stars and, accordingly, decided their course of action in politics, religious rituals, and livelihoods. Today, the practice of cultural astronomy can be found in literature, legends, archeological remains, and vernacular knowledge. However, only recently cultural astronomy has become a potential interdisciplinary field. Remarkable works have been written with methodological approaches from anthropology, archeology, archeoastronomy, and history in the field of cultural astronomy (Selin 2000; Ruggles 2015; Jarita 2016). In Japan, the most popular subfield of cultural astronomy is paleo-astronomy, the study of ancient observed astronomical phenomena by calculation and simulation. Another subfield is that of the study of Esoteric Buddhist religious beliefs originating from China. Many researchers have also studied popular folk customs concerning stars and observation of the moon in classical Japanese literature (Saito 1999; Hayashi 2006; Buhrman 2012). These subfields have been well documented independently. However, studies regarding literature, legends, archeological remains, and vernacular knowledge as cultural astronomy are not only scarce but also fragmented; there are dialect studies on the vernacular names of the stars in Japan (Uchida 1973;
Nojiri 1973, Kitao 2018). To date, there has been no comprehensive study on cultural astronomy in Japan.

In this book, Cultural Astronomy in the Japanese Archipelago: Exploring the Japanese Skyscape, Akira Goto discusses how people in the archipelago have observed and perceived the stars and the universe, and how they have used knowledge of stars for everyday activities. Goto uses the term “Japanese Archipelago” instead of “Japan,” since the latter is a political one that masks the nation’s cultural diversity. The term “Japanese Archipelago” reflects that it consists of a long chain of islands and that the geographical conditions create diverse ways of cultural astronomy. Therefore, Goto uses this term to emphasize the diverse traditions that exist in the region’s cultural astronomical practices.

Goto points out that the scope of research on cultural astronomy in Japan is limited, and there is an unawareness and lack of interest among researchers despite a rich tradition. His book aims to serve as a turning point for revitalizing and promoting interdisciplinary research for cultural astronomy among both Japanese and non-Japanese researchers. The final section of each chapter discusses the possibility of comparison with other areas worldwide to engage non-Japanese researchers.

The book comprises nine chapters, including an epilog. It introduces the cultural astronomy of the Japanese archipelago from two main aspects: anthropology and archeology. They are closely related to literature, history, and religion. The subject regions are the Ryukyu Islands, Hokkaido, and four regions collectively referred to as “Middle” Japan.

The first four chapters are an overview of the Japanese archipelago’s star lore from the perspective of anthropology related to literature, history, and religion. Chapters 1 and 2 pertain to Middle Japan.
Chapter 1 focuses on several conspicuous star lore’s and explains their vernacular names, relevant beliefs, and customs with the practical use of astronomical phenomena. The star lore of fishermen in Miyagi Prefecture is introduced for navigation purposes to identify the appropriate seasons and the time of the day for fishing. Chapter 2 deals with astronomical topics in ancient mythology and classical literature. By analyzing them, some astronomical motifs and symbols are introduced and considered in the connection between religion and history. Chapter 3 discusses the conspicuous stars in every four seasons by focusing on vernacular names and beliefs among the Ainu in Hokkaido. It demonstrates, from the numerous lore and literature, how people use stars to cope with seasonal variations in natural resources. Chapter 4 discusses the characteristics of vernacular star names in every season and the indigenous astronomy of Okinawan people with detailed records and pictures.

The next four chapters discuss specific issues in cultural astronomy in the Japanese archipelago, based on archeoastronomy and ethnohistory. Chapter 5 examines important issues related to archeoastronomy of the Japanese archipelago, such as the significance of the sun in the burial orientation and numerous archeological remains. Chapter 6 deals with the shrines and temples related to fallen star legends, found mainly in western Middle Japan, and discusses how heavenly phenomena have materialized on earth. It also discusses how complex Japanese star worship is syncretized with religions. Chapter 7 deals with the cosmology of dwelling and burial orientation among premodern Ainu. The analysis of dwelling structure and the Ainu language shows that they observe the seasonal movement of the sun. Chapter 8 analyzes the development of solar ideology in the Ryukyu Kingdom and folk beliefs among the Okinawans. While the rich star lore is introduced in Chapter 4, this
chapter shows how solar ideology is important for the kingdom.

Based on a collective survey of these case studies, Goto concluded two points about cultural astronomy in the Japanese archipelago: cultural diversity and traditionalism. First, cultural astronomy in terms of the syncretism of animism, Shinto, Buddhism, Confucianism, and other elements, can be said to be closely related to traditional elements such as religion. Conversely, as the second point, this syncretism also creates the cultural diversity. Additionally, the cases of the Hokkaido Ainu and Ryukyu Islanders add further variation to this richness of cultural astronomy in the archipelago.

The most important contribution of this book is that it is the first comprehensive work to introduce the diverse and multilayered sky lore and cultural astronomy of the people in the Japanese archipelago. Its chronological scope spans the Jomon, Yayoi, the Kofun periods, as well as contemporary ones. Through detailed research of historic documents, Goto presents the multilayered sky lore and cultural astronomy influenced by religion in each region. Although previous researchers recorded cultural astronomy in detail based on fieldwork, they were fragmented. In this book, the records are first analyzed with an evaluation of their true value.

Cultural astronomy in the Japanese archipelago demonstrates diversity in the concepts of the sky and the universe, particularly in the case of the Ainu in Hokkaido and Okinawan people in the Ryukyu Islands. The former developed a rich star lore with vernacular names and materials. For them, cosmology is a complex system influenced by geographical characteristics from prehistoric times (Chapters 3 and 7). The star lore inherited by the Okinawans differs from that found in Middle Japan. Some of them are briefly compared with those of Micronesians and Polynesians in Oceania for a more comprehensive study. Moreover, the formation of the cosmovision
can be found in the ethnohistorical approach of archeological remains (Chapters 4 and 8).

I would like to highlight the following points: I felt a certain incompatibility from this composition in that cultural astronomy in livelihood has been minimally discussed, although Goto notes how people have used knowledge of stars in everyday life. In Chapter 1, he introduces the star lore of the Japanese based on several previous studies. However, those tend to collect vernacular star names and rarely mention how these stars are used concretely in daily practice. Only a short report about the fishermen of Miyagi Prefecture reveals the importance of astronomical knowledge for navigational purposes, identifying the appropriate seasons, and the time of the day for fishing. It is insufficient as an introduction to the region’s cultural astronomy of livelihood in the Japanese archipelago. This is related to the following points. As Goto says, the report indicates the possibility of further exploration of the rich tradition of star lore in daily activities among the people of the archipelago. However, what is important is not only vernacular star names. It is necessary to explore how they are used as practical knowledge (Ikeda 2004) or ecological skills. In Japan, research that attempts to draw out astronomy in culture from the perspective of people’s everyday lives originated from the research of vernacular star names. Today, nobody can deny that cultural astronomy in Japan tends to focus on the dialect study of the vernacular names, unlike the study of star navigation in Oceania. However, star lore is an integral part of daily life, particularly for squid fishermen engaged in their night operations (Aikawachoshi-hensan-iinkai 1986; Nakano 2021). This is one of the characteristics of the Japanese archipelago, and thus leads to the possibility of comparing practical knowledge with that of other areas. It is a pity that there are no mentions and citations of the few valuable studies that record the
practical knowledge of astronomy in daily livelihood, in this comprehensive book of cultural astronomy in Japan.

Second, the book only focuses on the cases from Hokkaido Ainu and the Ryukyu Islands, despite the fact that these two areas have highly different cultural backgrounds. For example, in the case of Hokkaido Ainu, an indigenous hunter-gatherer group, their star lore is based mainly on animism and is similar to that of ethnic groups in northeast Asia. The Ryukyu Islanders’ lore is built upon a mixture of Chinese, Japanese, and indigenous traditions, which could include some Austronesian elements. The reports of these two areas should be included as independent chapters. Although there are many fragmented records of star lore all over Japan (e.g., Aikawachoshi-hensan-iinkai 1986; Nakano 2021), the explanations of other areas are occupied by legends and religious aspects. In my opinion, if Goto emphasizes the diverse traditions that exist in the region’s cultural astronomical practices, it is necessary to pay attention to the geographical features of each region. For example, the major or important stars for fishermen are mainly the same at various locations, including other areas reported in his previous work (Goto 2017). However, the exact meaning or function of each star is influenced by fishing time, method, and moving area in each geographical feature; thus, there are more varieties and localities. These elements are also influenced by the geographical features. Therefore, it is desirable to present more details of the various geographical features of the research regions and discuss how they are influenced by them to support their emphasis.

Finally, perhaps owing to Goto’s archeological career, the book is subject to archeological and mythological considerations. According to the introduction, how people “use” the knowledge of stars in everyday life is one of the main questions in this work. For this purpose, the studies are implicitly limited to cases that are useful for
ritual execution, preparation, or more efficient behavior for livelihoods. However, the astronomical knowledge which is seemingly “useless” is also reported as superstition or jinx. In the cases of Britain and the United States, these are diverse, including eclipses, moon, stars, and the sun. (Koizumi 2014). In the Japanese archipelago, people hand down the knowledge that is seemingly less practical directly for their ritual and livelihood. According to my previous research on collecting fragmentary records across the Japanese archipelago (Nakano 2017), there are rich proverbs and beliefs about shooting stars, comets, and stars beside the moon. They show the significance of star lore among local people, apart from politics and religion, as Goto describes. People considered them to be good or bad omens. Some felt the need to recite an incantation to protect their life, avoid danger in the case of a bad omen, and acquire skills and improve health or beauty in the case of a good one (Uchida 1973: 346-347). The belief, “if you wish upon a star three times before the it falls, your wish will come true,” (Uchida 1973: 345) is now common in the Japanese archipelago, although the shooting star did not have such an original meaning in the old literature. In addition to ritual ceremonies, archeological remains, and farming or fishing, people believe in the magic power of stars. Although this knowledge is not used for rituals and livelihoods, it is useful for invoking astronomical phenomena. In other words, there are also cultural astronomies in daily life.

As Goto says, it is necessary to collect fragmented records from across the Japanese archipelago and compare them to make a comparative study with other areas. The characteristics of the Ryukyu Islands and Hokkaido will then become clearer. For the future development of cultural astronomy in the archipelago, it is necessary to consider modern culture and life much more than in the current
studies.

Although there is some bias in setting research objectives, Goto’s book is the first to focus on cultural astronomy in the Japanese archipelago. For recent trends of cultural astronomy in the international context (Selin 2000; Ruggles 2015; Jarita 2016), this book contributes by attracting many interdisciplinary researchers and shedding light on the unreported role of heavenly bodies in Japan. It can be evaluated as the first attempt to explore the cultural astronomy of each region in the Japanese archipelago, as well as a heavenly body more deeply. These can include studies about stars, the relationship between the knowledge of stars and geographical characteristics of cities and regions, and knowledge of moon that is seemingly not “practical” and meaningless. For future works, Goto’s book will continue to be an important reference point.

References

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