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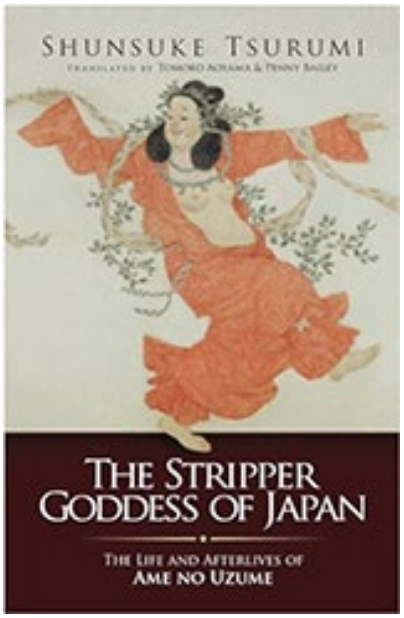

Tsurumi Shunsuke

The Stripper Goddess of Japan: The Life and Afterlives of Ame no Uzume

translated and with an introduction by
Tomoko Aoyama and Penny Bailey

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Stripping myths off

As one of the most prominent intellectuals from the post-war period, Tsurumi Shunsuke has influenced academic, activist and cultural circles for his critique of homogeneous thoughts that led to authoritarianism (x).[1] Although best known for his work on the intellectual and cultural history of World War II and its immediate aftermath, Tsurumi has also tackled myths in general. *The Stripper Goddess of Japan: The Life and Afterlives of Ame no Uzume*, translated into English by Tomoko Aoyama and Penny Bailey, represents one of his lifelong engagements about reappropriating—by subverting—the meaning of myths.

In the two decades between his first mention of this book and its actual publication, Tsurumi has let his thinking wander along the deity Ame no Uzume (2), finding her in ancient texts, movies, burlesque shows, homes, bathhouses, feminists, anarchists, etc. *The Stripper Goddess of Japan* intends to strip myths off through this eclectic relationality. This paradox—removing layers by adding layers—is the basis of Tsurumi's thinking. Somehow aligned with Roland Barthes's consideration of myths as semiotic apparatuses that have been 'naturalised' over time through reiteration and transfer in a way that has

[1] As mentioned in the book itself, the preface 'Voice of the Voiceless' by Sugimoto Yoshio to the English translation of Tsurumi's *The Stripper Goddess of Japan* is adapted from his article 'Shunsuke Tsurumi: Voice of the Voiceless,' *Overland* 187 (2007).

hidden their 'meaning,'[2] Tsurumi's reflection recognises both the cultural components of myths and the way '[a]uthorities like to summarise their ideologies … in a single hermetic system' (27). It asks for a conscious approach to myths.

Tsurumi's choice of Ame no Uzume is then not innocent. As a deity who has defied order and brought about an alternative order ('Chapter 1. The Power to Open the Cave,' 17–27), Ame no Uzume has deployed a strategy of dancing, laughing and stripping that functions as a resistance to dull patriotism in luring the Goddess Amaterasu out of the cave. In other words, the subversion of luring one with seemingly different forms of knowledge translates the awareness necessary to understand how myths have justified Japan's war with, colonisation of, and violence towards other countries.[3] Dancing appears as an act of defiance, which Tsurumi further analyses in relation to the immediate aftermath of World War II. For instance, in 'Chapter 8. The Day Japan Became Naked' (103–15), his portrayal of Kitamura Sayo, first a patriotic farmer and then the anti-nationalistic head of the 'dancing religion' *(odoru shūkyō)* movement, is linked to a conscious reflection on creating alternative belief systems that criticise superiority and domination.

While dancing strips myths off, I argue that the book itself is a dance embodying such a critique. In this sense, the translators' work is commendable. Their extensive footnotes and their inclusion of a summary at the beginning of each chapter contribute to Tsurumi's dance of reflections. They participate in the process of demythologising myths by providing alternative ways of accessing Tsurumi's thoughts, which are sometimes difficult to grasp. This rhythm reinforces the eclectic relationality of this book and invites us to ponder over other features of Ame no Uzume beyond her mythological aspect.

Stripping genders away

The Stripper Goddess of Japan is not only an account of the ideological and alternative productions of myths, but the book also draws on Ame no Uzume's power to elicit laughter. By linking this laughter to a symbolic form of resistance, Tsurumi challenges gender expectations, making his book a surprising case for Gender Studies. As Tomoko Aoyama and Penny Bailey argue in their introduction to the book, '[o]ne special significance of this book is its recognition of women's humour and its subversive power' (8). Humour functions as a strategy of resistance to subvert norms. The laughter that Ame no Uzume provokes by dancing and stripping 'her clothing to expose breasts and genitals … ease … tension' while she is 'not fear[ing] the authorities' (26). From this rebellious yet peaceful move, Tsurumi draws an analysis of the power of laughter that can allow and nourish criticism. In 'Chapter 4. Laughter and Politics' (55–65), Tsurumi notes that the disappearance of political laughter during the Meiji era was complicit in the acceptance

[2] See Roland Barthes, 'Le mythe, aujourd'hui,' in his *Mythologies*, (Seuil, 2010 [1956]), 224–47.

[3] I am referring to Plato's allegory of the cave, where what is real is only the imagination of some imposed on all (see *Republic*, Book VII, 514a–20a).

of imperialism and of its violence, while the resurgence of laughter during the wartime of the Showa era was suppressed by the authorities (62–63).

The resistance to rules through 'laughing out loud' finds also ground in women and allies who defy gendered social expectations. The power to amuse oneself and others operates as a political way of dealing with arguments that impact on gender norms. Indeed, in 'Chapter 10. Ame no Uzume in the Home' (133–45), Tsurumi presents the story of author Tanabe Seito, whose laughter is a much freer form of interaction with her husband by discussing sensible topics beyond what spouses should think and do. The critique of power dynamics can be summarised as 'state *vs* laughter' that is reminiscent of Tsurumi's phrase 'state *vs* sex,' with which Tsurumi expressed his struggle against the state's regulation of sexual desire during his conscription for war (3–4).[4]

Expanding on Ame no Uzume's striptease at the cave, Tsurumi approaches gender, state and laughter by considering nakedness as a metaphor for peace against all forms of violence. Both 'Chapter 5. The Naked Body as Metaphor' (67–77) and 'Chapter 7. Various Forms of Appeasing Violence' (93–102) discuss the arrogance of ideologies (clothing, sexual violence, gender roles) that conceal and impose themselves on bodies for the sake of power. The political resistance of stripping clothes off to allow stripping genders away thus means regaining agency beyond the shame of nudity, for getting naked becomes becoming aware of reality.

The intertwining of gender, state and laughter reaches its climax in the middle of *The Stripper Goddess of Japan*. Building on the power of humour, Tsurumi recounts the history of Japanese striptease and burlesque, focusing in particular on stripper Ichijō Sayuri. 'Chapter 6. Burlesque and Striptease' (79–91) discusses representations of heterosexual love in striptease, of gender parody in burlesque, and of agential empowerment through resilience in both. More precisely, it is incoherence that helps disturbing norms through the questioning it raises. Chapter 6 then builds on 'Chapter 2. A Genealogy of Likening' (29–39) in that if nicknaming serves critical thinking (33), the stripping in a burlesque way deconstructs illusory genders.

Stripping writing down

The performance of such burlesque and striptease shows resonates with Tsurumi's own genre performance—in other words: writing, which he himself describes as 'rather like burlesque' because it is 'stringing together various materials' (86). *The Stripper Goddess of Japan* embodies a hybridity that defies scholarly rules and pays tribute to the free spirit

[4] Tsurumi refers to the system of sexual slavery developed by and for the Japanese military during World War II. On the topic of 'comfort women' *(ianfu)* in history books, see Vera Mackie, 'Whispering, writing and working across borders: Practising transnational history in East Asia,' in *Rethinking Japanese Studies: Eurocentrism and The Asia-Pacific Region*, ed. Kaori Okano and Yoshio Sugimoto (Routledge, 2018), 162–64, https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315157894-9; and from a socio-political perspective in recent debates, see Tomomi Yamaguchi, 'Revisionism, Ultranationalism, Sexism: Relations Between the Far Right and the Establishment Over the 'Comfort Women' Issue,' *Social Science Japan* 21, no. 2 (2018): 219–38, https://doi.org/10.1093/ssjj/jyy014.

of Ame no Uzume. As Aoyama and Bailey observe, Tsurumi makes use of the technique of '*frottage*,' which assembles and gives meaning to 'a massive array of historical, literary and scholarly texts as well as performing arts, artefacts, festivals, folksongs and other cultural products and practices' in order to understand Ame no Uzume as being against conventions (5). One cannot help but agree with Tsurumi himself that he has 'achieved his ideal of an open-ended book that was liberated from narrow, rigid or cliquish interpretations' (3).

I would venture that this hybrid form encourages Tsurumi's critique of gender stereotypes and his own evolution towards gender. 'Chapter 9. Painting the Body in Two Colours' (117–31) depicts the life of feminist and Buddhist nun Setouchi Jakuchō and her consideration of sexual emancipation as the key to deviating from binarism of up/down into left/right. This change of perspective is implemented by Tsurumi himself, as he blends academic reports, anecdotes, biographies, political events, and others in a mix that disregards lower and upper and embraces relationality as the core of writing. In a way, he seems to critique the dichotomies (mind/body, reason/emotion, man/woman, etc.) that have necrotised society and thought.

Tsurumi also traces his own growing in 'Chapter 12. Past and Present' (161–76). Highlighting the gender binarism that perpetuates the choice of life models, Tsurumi asks: 'But why could my ideal person not have been a woman? Thinking about it now, it is strange. I think I must have been influenced by the narrowly defined Taishō era customs of gender division' (162). The awareness that is necessary to decipher the authorities' reading of myths appears here as an awareness towards one's own reading of one's identity. This sign of evolution culminates in Tsurumi admitting that 'I have been writing about one form of the ideal that men seek in women' (174). Self-criticism allows Tsurumi to give presence to the hybrid form of his book, inviting us to greater curiosity and boldness.

And while *The Stripper Goddess of Japan* is on occasion confusing and repetitive, at times lacking in direct political confrontation, it remains a valuable start to demythologise thought itself by stripping writing down.

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