

(共同研究：災異に関する学際的研究)

# Abducted by an Alien *Tengu* master: Witness to the Unseen in Hirata Atsutane's *Amazing Tales of the Hermit World* (*Senkyō Ibun* 仙境異聞 1822)

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The *Otherworld* (*Ikai* 異界) is a realm of beings of different kinds, encompassing a qualitative spectrum from the sacred to the demonic. Yet people of this world can only represent the *Otherworld* with fear and dread. They cannot let their imagination soar into the extraordinary world alongside the flying power of that of *tengu*.

Koyasu, 2000, Commentary to *Senkyō Ibun*<sup>1)</sup>

## I Introduction

The Edo period witnessed a proliferation of accounts describing mysterious adventures and “strange stories” (*kibun* 奇聞), ranging from interviews with sailors who survived overseas drift voyages (*hyōryūtan* 漂流譚) to compilations of curious anecdotes such as the well-known *Mimibukuro* (耳袋, “Bag of Ears”). These narratives appeared in various forms—commoner hearsay, samurai diaries, and direct interviews with individuals who claimed to have encountered anomalous or extraordinary events. Their themes encompassed urban legends, magical remedies, ghost stories, and reports of exotic or uncanny experiences

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Keywords : *Tengu* Boy, perception, empiricism, *Senkyō Ibun*, Hirata Atsutane

1) 「異界とは聖性から魔性にいたる質的等差を含んだ異類的存在者たちの世界である。だが此の世の人々は異界をこわごわとしか表象しない。あの天狗の飛翔力とともに一気に非日常の世界に己れの想像力を飛ばすことができない。」子安, 2000, 418 頁

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abroad. Such stories circulated widely across social classes and genres, sustained by a popular imagination marked by intense curiosity toward the unusual and the uncanny.

Despite this breadth, the question of how late Edo-period science, technology, and *Shintō* belief—bolstered by influential anti-Buddhist currents—shaped popular imaginaries of strange worlds remains underexplored. As a representative case study, this paper examines *Senkyō Ibum* (仙境異聞, 1821), *Amazing Tales of the Hermit World*, by Hirata Atsutane's (1776-1843) a work based on with the so-called *Tengu Boy* (*Tengu Kozō* 天狗小僧), who allegedly experienced an “abduction” by a hermitic *tengu* master.

Hirata is widely regarded as one of the most important *Kokugaku* (国学, nativist) scholars of the late Edo period and one of the most influential *Shintō* theologians of the nineteenth century. His writings—especially those articulating a vision of national essence and divine ancestry—exerted considerable influence on loyalist intellectuals associated with the *Sonnō Jōi* (尊王攘夷, “Revere the Emperor, Expel the Barbarians”) movement, which ultimately contributed to the dismantling of the Tokugawa Shogunate.

Yet precisely because of these associations with fervent nationalism and with ideological currents later appropriated by extreme patriotic discourses, Hirata's works were long marginalized within Japanese intellectual history, especially in the decades following the Second World War. His thought became a kind of scholarly taboo, limiting critical engagement and contributing to a persistent underestimation of his intellectual significance. In recent years, however, his major works have begun to receive renewed attention, prompting a reassessment of his methodological innovations and broader cultural impact.<sup>2)</sup> Within this context, *Senkyō Ibum* remains one of his comparatively underexamined works.<sup>3)</sup>

This paper investigates how Hirata and his late Edo-period associates transformed the purported “abduction” of the *Tengu Boy*, Torakichi, into a widely circulated cultural phenomenon. It argues that Hirata's compilation and interpretation of the boy's testimony served as a medium through which he articulated and legitimized both his distinctive empiricism and his religious philosophy. As Koyasu observes in his commentary to *Senkyō Ibum*, one of the most striking features of the text is the extraordinary imaginative force projected onto the figure of the *tengu*. *Senkyō Ibum* consists largely of a sustained dialogic exchange, cast in a question-and-answer format, between Hirata and his circle of intellectual associates on the one hand and the *Tengu Boy* on the other. The boy's responses consistently reflect the philosophical commitments and knowledge base of Hirata's circle—

2) Major research has been done by Koyasu Nobukuni. See works cited.

3) Most recent important research in English is: Hansen, Wilburn N. *When Tengu Talk: Hirata Atsutane's Ethnography of the Other World*. University of Hawaii Press, 2008

shaped, perhaps, by leading questions that no longer survive in the extant text. In this sense, the *Tengu Boy* functions as an oracular voice that gives narrative expression to the imaginative world shared by Hirata and his companions.

## II Headline in 1820

### The headline ‘The abducted boy has returned!’ 1820

In 1820, the case of the *Tengu Kozō* Torakichi became a sensational topic within Edo society. Initially, the chemist and essayist Yamazaki Yoshishige (1796–1856) brought him into his household and conducted interviews regarding the *Otherworld* and the *Tengu Sanjin*.



Fig. 1 Torakichi



Fig. 2 His Master (Sugiyama Sanjin)

### Short Biography of Torakichi, the “*Tengu Boy*”

Torakichi (寅吉, c.1805–?), known as the “*Tengu Boy*” (天狗小僧), was a youth whose alleged abduction by *tengu* and subsequent supernatural training became a major intellectual event in the late Edo period. Around 1820, Hirata encountered Torakichi and brought him into his Edo household, interviewing him extensively. Hirata compiled these accounts in the *Senkyō Ibun*, in which Torakichi describes being carried to hidden mountain realms, instructed by elder *tengu*, and taught healing techniques, esoteric meteorology, and knowledge of spirits. Hirata used the boy to support his *Shintō* cosmology and challenge Neo-Confucian rationalism and emerging Western science. The episode generated considerable urban fascination; visitors sought to meet Torakichi, and manuscript copies circulated widely.

Modern scholarship sees Torakichi both as a product of late-Edo supernatural culture

and as a constructed figure shaped by Hirata's ideological aims. Historians emphasize the ways Hirata edited and reframed the narratives to legitimize his thought. Torakichi's later life remains unknown, but this paper argues that his testimony continues to illuminate Edo-period epistemology, popular belief, and the politics of "evidence" in early modern Japan.

### Hirata Brought the Boy Home

News of these extraordinary accounts quickly circulated among Edo's intellectual circles, reaching Hirata, who subsequently visited Yamazaki accompanied by Ban Nobutomo (1773-1846), a fellow *Kokugaku* scholar.

After Hirata brought Torakichi to his own residence, where he conducted careful and systematic interviews to elicit more detailed information. Hirata's intellectual circle encompassed both his philosophical, religious, and scientific associates. Within this network, the alleged *Tengu Kozō* was placed at the center of intense scrutiny, fielding questions on a wide array of subjects. Demonstrating remarkable acuity, Torakichi responded with insights that consistently exceeded the expectations of his interlocutors, thereby establishing his reputation as a genuine prodigy. His extraordinary abilities garnered widespread attention, ultimately leading to audiences with feudal lords (*daimyō*) and other prominent figures in Edo society.

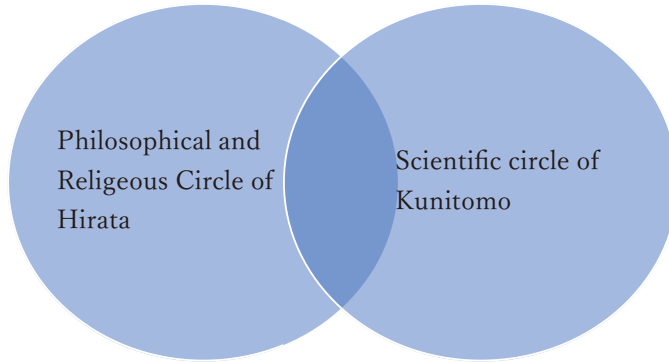
### Hirata and His Intellectual Circle

When Hirata visited Yamazaki and was instructed to pose numerous questions and record the responses, he reflected:

I shall do as requested. What I have in mind are those previously hidden writings and phenomena in this world that are now gradually becoming public, including matters once difficult to apprehend, such as divine affairs. Objects and tools from overseas, too, are increasingly entering public knowledge year by year. Surely this is a blessing from the *kami*, allowing us to perceive the *Unseen World*; this must be what is meant when we say, "the time has come."

*Senkyō Ibun*, p.10.

Among the interviewers present at Hirata's residence, in addition to Yamazaki, were the political thinker and polymath Satō Nobuhiro (1769-1850) and the gunsmith and scientist Kunitomo Tōbei (1778-1840). Hirata's intellectual circle encompassed both his philosophical and religious associates and scientific members.



Torakichi's interview brought these divergent conceptual models and methodologies together.

### Hirata and Western Scientific Texts

Although Hirata was not a trained *rangakusha* (蘭学者) and possessed little direct knowledge of Dutch, he nonetheless assembled an extensive collection of Western scientific materials and made frequent use of them in his intellectual projects. His library included canonical medical translations such as *Kaitai Shinsho* (解体新書), manuscript digests of Dutch physiology and pharmacology, and several popularized compendia of Western astronomy, and diagrammatic manuscripts derived from Blaeu and Cellarius. Hirata also owned or consulted a range of texts on optics, mechanics, and natural philosophy, together with gunnery manuals transmitted through Kunitomo. World-geographical digests such as *Seiyō Kibun* (西洋紀聞) and imported Dutch maps, further shaped his understanding of a global spatial order within which Japan's divine centrality could be argued. Because he lacked proficiency in Dutch, Hirata relied heavily on lexical tools, interpreters' glossaries, and oral explanations supplied by scientifically inclined contemporaries, including Satō Nobuhiro. These mediated encounters with Western science served as resources through which he reformulated his nativist cosmology and expanded the ontological scope of his theories of spirits, otherworldly beings, and the structure of the cosmos.

### Torakichi, the *Tengu* Boy

In *Senkyō Ibun*, Torakichi is consistently portrayed as a child prodigy, whose extraordinary abilities were cultivated under the guidance of his master, Sugiyama Sanjin, and within his surrounding environment during several years at Mt. Iwama. Torakichi was the second son of Edo merchant family. In 1807, age seven, he was “abducted”. He was first taken to a *tengu* training site near Mt. Tsukuba and subsequently to Mt. Iwama, where he

underwent austere practices such as a one-hundred-day fast. As he was unable to fly at the time of his abduction, so was reportedly transported in a flying vessel, and later learned to fly under his master's instruction.

When Hirata first encountered Torakichi, he recorded his impressions as follows:

Although the boy was said to be fifteen, he appeared no older than thirteen, with sharp, glittering eyes. His penetrating gaze seemed to pierce those around him, and every feature of his face was peculiar and grotesque, with large, upturned eyes.

*Senkyō Ibum*, p.11

Under Sugiyama's tutelage, Torakichi acquired knowledge and skills spanning martial arts, calligraphy, *Shintō* teachings and ritual practice, medicinal compounds, and weapons manufacturing. Through the boy's narrations, Hirata emphasizes *Shintō* as the supreme form of belief while simultaneously denying the presence of Buddhist practices in the hermit's world. Numerous members of the philosophical, religious, and scientific community interviewed Torakichi, each bringing their own appraisals of the boy in line with Hirata's thinking.

### **Yamazaki Yoshishige:**

He was one of the major figures of late-Edo *Kokugaku* (National Learning), a prominent disciple and supporter of Hirata. As Hirata's best-known students, he followed Hirata's teachings on *Shintō*, Japanese antiquity, and philology. He also helped disseminate Hirata's ideas, contributing significantly to the popularization of the Hirata school (Hirata-ha 平田派) in the late Edo period. He produced scholarship—particularly in folklore, customs, and ethnography—aligned with Hirata's approach and helped extend its influence.

### **Ban Nobutomo:**

A prominent *Kokugaku* scholar and disciple of the nativist tradition, Ban was deeply engaged in the study of Japanese classical texts and ritual practices. He contributed to the intellectual discourse surrounding *Kokugaku* and was active in Hirata's scholarly circle.

### **Satō Nobuhiro:**

A political thinker and polymath, Satō combined interests in philosophy, historiography, and practical governance. He was noted for his analytical approach to contemporary social and political issues and participated in Edo intellectual salons that bridged philosophical and

scientific inquiry.

### **Kunitomo Tōbei:**

An inventor and gunsmith, Kunitomo was recognized for innovations in reflective telescopes and air gun technology. His practical expertise in mechanical engineering and applied science made him a key figure in the dissemination of empirical knowledge within Hirata's scientific and philosophical networks.

### **What Is a *Tengu*?**

Although the Sino-Japanese *tengu* (天狗) was imported from China, previous scholarship has demonstrated that the Japanese *tengu* possesses a distinctly indigenous origin.<sup>4)</sup> Early usages of the term indicate that *tengu* originally denoted *unidentified or inexplicable phenomena*, particularly mysterious sounds echoing through deep mountain valleys. These auditory anomalies—presumed to be produced by unseen beings—formed the core of early *tengu* belief. Examples from medieval and early modern sources include:

- *tengu-daoshi* (天狗倒し): inexplicable crashes in the mountains, interpreted as the toppling of enormous trees
- *tengu-warai* (天狗笑い): bursts of loud, disembodied laughter attributed to an unseen multitude
- *tengu-tsubute* (天狗つぶて): the sudden flight of countless pebbles from no identifiable source

Over time, the term expanded semantically to encompass a wider range of anomalous events. *Tengu-kakushi* (天狗隠し) —the mysterious disappearance of individuals, especially children—was understood as an instance of abduction into another realm by *tengu*. In this sense, “*tengu*” functioned as a culturally available explanation for events that defied ordinary understanding, marking the border between the known world and an ambiguous, often threatening beyond.

## **III Empirical Prestige of “Having Seen”**

### **Hirata's theory of the Two Worlds**

In Hirata's conceptualization of the *Other World*, the present, visible realm is designated as the “*Apparent World*” (顕事, *arawa goto*), whereas the other, unseen realm is termed

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4) 『天狗の研究』 Harashobo Publishing, Tokyo, 2004. Komatsu, Kazuhiko, et. al. eds. Baba, Akiko. 『天狗と山姥 (怪異の民俗学 5 卷)』

the “*Hidden World*” (幽事, *kakuri goto*). While common belief often treated the *Unseen World* as a sanctuary separate from the visible one, in *Senkyō Iibun* Hirata presents it as a domain possessing greater empirical authority. Those who returned from the *Hidden Realm* acquired a distinctive prestige as eyewitnesses to the *Unseen*; similarly, shipwrecked sailors who survived against the odds—through extraordinary fortune and vital energy—gained recognition for having directly encountered foreign rescuers.

This empirical orientation was broadly shared within Hirata’s intellectual salon, which encompassed interlocutors from both philosophical and scientific circles. Under their influence, the *Tengu Boy* repeatedly asserted his own experiential authority, frequently remarking, “*You speak thus because you have only learned from books, but I have seen these things with my own eyes*” (emphasis added).

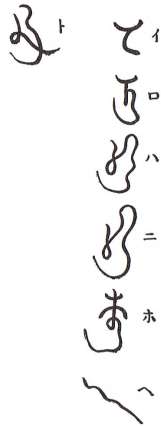


Fig. 3 Japanese Alphabet by Torakichi

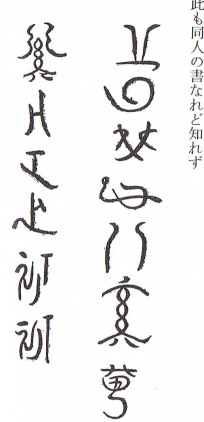


Fig. 4 Unknown Scripts by Torakichi



Fig. 5 *Tengu* Rituals

## Having Seen the Unseen

In Hirata's epistemology, the act of direct observation confers a distinct form of social and intellectual authority—what might be termed “the empirical prestige of *“Having Seen.”*” Whereas knowledge derived from texts or secondhand reports remains mediated by transmitted authority, firsthand observation possesses unique credibility precisely because it arises from perceptual and experiential engagement with phenomena.

This emphasis on direct experience resonates with early modern empiricist ideals, notably those articulated by Francis Bacon (1561-1626), whose methodological innovations helped lay the foundations for modern science. Bacon consistently urged that genuine understanding must be grounded in encounters with tangible realities rather than in transmitted scholastic learning or bookish speculation.

Within Hirata's framework, the principle of *“Having Seen”* thus functions simultaneously as an epistemic privilege and a mode of social distinction. The eyewitness acquires authority as a mediator between the visible world and the unseen realms that populate Hirata's cosmology, thereby rendering the extraordinary intelligible within a discourse that claims empirical legitimacy.

In *Senkyō Iibun* Hirata's distinctive form of empiricism is often demonstrated by *Tengu Boy*. Torakichi Comments on Learning as follows:

Half-baked learning just makes people arrogant and narrow-minded. Details in books are often different from facts when directly seen... Take microscopic views for example, where flies are small, but on closer look there are tinier insects around them, and there might be even tinier ones surrounding those tiny ones. Just like that there are many different layers of things, layers of superior things, so this heaven and earth could be in the belly of a god.

*Senkyō Iibun* p.339

He further asserted “learning in itself is not objectionable, but that no one has ever attained genuine insight *through reading alone*”. [emphasis added] As such his only but powerful proof lies in his own epistemology of *“Having Seen the Unseen”*.

The *Tengu Boy's* reference to “microscopic views” above suggests the extent to which visual repertoires associated with microscopy had circulated in the late Edo period. Although direct access to *Micrographia* (1665)<sup>5)</sup> by Robert Hooke (1635-1703) was limited, its

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5) Robert Hooke's *Micrographia* (1665)

images and derivative representations appear to have been sufficiently well known to reach not only intellectuals but also segments of the common populace.<sup>6)</sup>

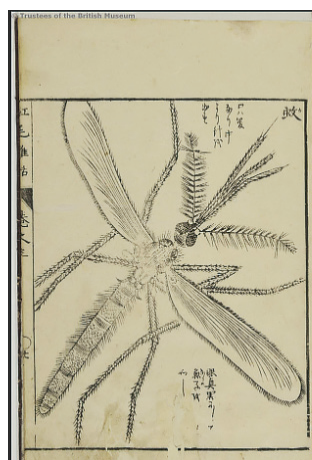


Fig. 6 Microscopic observation



Fig. 7 Compound microscope

In Morishima Chūryō *Kōmō Zatsuwā* 『紅毛雑話』 (1787)

In early modern Europe, the rise of optical technologies made the “microscopic view” a symbol of a new empirical regime. With instruments such as the microscope observation of previously invisible structures became possible, challenging the authority of transmitted texts. The microscopic view thus came to represent not only enhanced vision but an epistemological ideal: reliable knowledge must derive from directly apprehensible phenomena rather than from scholastic or textual authority, reinforcing the broader Baconian shift toward experience-based empiricism. Within the British Royal Society, figures such as Hooke famously demonstrated “*close looks*” at insects and other minute bodies, astonishing their audiences by revealing structures inaccessible to the unaided eye. These demonstrations elevated the status of perceptible phenomena, newly extended by optical technologies, as the foundation of trustworthy knowledge. They demonstrated that entities imperceptible to the naked eye nonetheless exist beyond the limits of ordinary human perception.

Hirata’s position displays a comparable epistemological orientation. His critique of bookish learning resonates strongly with modern scientific empiricism supported by the *Tengu boy*. When asked about geography of the earth and stars, Torakichi’s comments:

6) 紅毛雑話

With laughter he answers what you say is incorrect because your knowledge comes from books you read. I have not read but *actually seen it close up*. [emphasis added]

*Senkyō Ibum*, p.313

Torakichi's responses—based on what he claimed to have directly witnessed in the unseen realm—are treated by Hirata not as fanciful tales but as empirical testimony. In this framework, extraordinary vision becomes a primary source data, and the *Unseen World* becomes an expanded field of perceptual inquiry. Hirata thus extends empiricism beyond conventional sensory boundaries while maintaining its core commitment to experience over textual authority.

### Science, Technology, and Tools of *Tengu*

*Senkyō Ibum* abounds with examples in which Western scientific knowledge is combined with accounts of the mysterious. One illustrative instance concerns Torakichi's apparent understanding of chemicals:

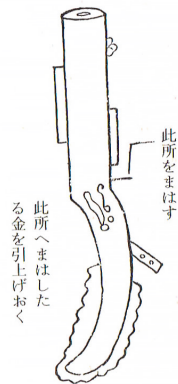
**Question:** Takahashi Yasuzaemon Masao, standing nearby, asked why Mt. Asamayama burns continuously. “Is it true that this is due to the anger of the *kami* (gods)? Have you heard the reason?”

**Answer:** Torakichi responded that the phenomenon results from the mountain's high sulfur content: the more the mountain burns, the more sulfur it generates.

*Senkyō Ibum* P.121

The text also records interviews conducted by serious scientists, including Kunitomo Tōbei. Kunitomo's engagement served both to confer authority on Torakichi and to substantiate the anticipated technological sophistication of the *tengu* world. Having designed and constructed his own air-gun, Kunitomo was initially disappointed that he could not examine the details of the air-guns said to exist in the *Other World*, as Torakichi had already returned to the mountains. When informed that Torakichi would soon return, Kunitomo brought his air gun to demonstrate the device and to exchange observations. The interaction proved mutually instructive.

Hirata summarized their findings as follows: “The guns in the *Other World* do not rely on fire but operate solely through compressed air, producing no sound when fired” *Senkyō Ibum*, p.218 (Fig. 8).

Fig. 8 Air-gun in *Tengu* World

This account illustrates the integration of empirical observation, scientific experimentation, and imaginative projection into a unified narrative framework, situating Torakichi as both a conduit of hidden knowledge and a mediator between the real and the unseen.



Fig. 9 Arrows of unknown usage Fig. 10 Charm/talisman Fig. 11 Other weaponry

#### IV Conclusion

Hirata is widely recognized as one of the most prominent *Kokugaku* scholars of the late Edo period and among the most influential *Shintō* theologians of the nineteenth century. His writings—especially those articulating a vision of national essence and divine ancestry—

influenced the loyalist intellectuals associated with the *Sonnō Jōi* movement. Yet these later political associations cast a long shadow: in the postwar period his works became a scholarly taboo, limiting critical engagement and contributing to a persistent underestimation of his intellectual significance. Recent reassessments, however, have begun to recover the methodological sophistication of his work, revealing that the *Senkyō Ibun* remains notably underexamined.

This paper explored how Hirata and his late Edo-period associates transformed the purported “abduction” of the so-called *Tengu Boy*, Torakichi, into a widely circulating cultural phenomenon. It argues that Hirata’s treatment of Torakichi’s testimony in the *Senkyō Ibun* articulates a distinctive form of empiricism that, in significant respects, resonates with the epistemic commitments of modern scientific empiricism. At the same time, Hirata expanded empiricism beyond the bounds of ordinary perception. Torakichi’s account of the *Unseen Realm* (*Senkyō*) becomes a testing ground for expanding empiricism beyond the limits of conventional sensory experience. The imaginative projection onto the figure of the *tengu* functions not merely as myth-making but as an epistemic strategy: Hirata treats Torakichi’s testimony as observational data—evidence gathered through embodied experience in the *Unseen World*. Late Edo audiences, predisposed to engage with unusual reports from beyond the known world, were thus encouraged to reconsider what counted as credible perception and admissible empirical evidence.

By portraying the *Unseen World* as technologically more advanced than the visible one, Hirata further argues that knowledge typically presumed to be foreign had, in fact, long existed domestically within a hidden domain. In this way, he reconfigures empiricism to accommodate *Shintō* cosmology. Disciplined inquiry into extraordinary perception is cast as compatible with, and even necessary for, recovering Japan’s forgotten knowledge.

The analysis reveals that Hirata and his contemporaries operated with a model of technological and epistemic progress in which empiricism, perception, and inherited cosmologies mutually reinforced one another. Their “discourse of the strange *Unseen World*” strategically recalibrated the relationship between evidence, authority, and tradition. By constructing a philosophical bridge between the old and the new, they claimed emerging domains of knowledge while redefining—and reaffirming—the legitimacy of earlier traditions.

Although often portrayed simply as a religious fanatic or nationalist ideologue, Hirata appears instead as a fervent believer in—and theorist of—the *Unseen World*, the *Senkyō*. The evidence considered here suggests that Hirata’s intellectual circle shared a concept of progressive technology and intentionally connected *Shintō* esotericism with the seemingly novel through their discourse on the strange *Unseen World*. By forging this philosophic

bridge from the old to the new, they laid claim to emerging knowledge while reaffirming the foundations of earlier *Shintō* thought and their nativist philosophy.

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### Appendix

#### *Tengu* and *Shugendō*

Within *Shugendō* (修験道)—a syncretic mountain religion integrating esoteric Buddhism, Daoist longevity practices, and local folk beliefs—mountains were inhabited not only by practitioners but also by powerful unseen mountain deities believed to have completed austerities long before human ascetics. These beings, regarded as perfected mountain adepts, came to be identified with *tengu*. As a result, early representations of *tengu* overlap with images of *yamabushi* (山伏), whose distinctive costume echoes the attire attributed to these supernatural predecessors.

As Figure 12 illustrates, the earliest iconography typically depicts the crow-like *karasu tengu* (烏天狗), complete with beak and wings (1853). Such beings were believed to inhabit key *Shugendō* training

sites, including Mt. Kurama, Mt. Hiei, Mt. Fuji, Mt. Haguro, Mt. Tsukuba, and Mt. Daisen. Among these, Mt. Kurama holds special significance due to its association with the medieval warrior Minamoto no Yoshitsune (1159–1189). In the *Noh* play *Kurama Tengu* (鞍馬天狗, earliest record 1465), the young Ushiwaka (Yoshitsune) encounters the *Great Tengu* (大天狗) of Kurama, who abducts him into the sacred mountain realm and trains him in superhuman martial arts. In this narrative, *tengu*—often portrayed elsewhere as malevolent—emerge as benevolent guardians who protect the vulnerable and instruct the worthy. Although Yoshitsune’s historical training at Kurama is attested, the *tengu* legend served to explain the seemingly superhuman qualities attributed to him in medieval war tales, including the *Heike Monogatari*.

By attributing Yoshitsune’s extraordinary martial prowess—his acrobatic movements and ingenious battle strategies—to training received from *tengu*, these stories framed *Genji* victory and the establishment of the Kamakura Shogunate in 1192 as events endorsed not only by worldly forces but also by the unseen realm. In this way, *tengu* motifs functioned to reconcile historical events with a broader cosmological order.

The theme of *tengu* as guardians or trainers of the young persisted into the Edo period, as illustrated by Toyokuni’s ukiyo-e print *Tengu Kozō Kiritarō* (Fig. 13). With the Meiji government’s suppression of *Shugendō* in 1872, institutional and popular belief in *tengu* diminished sharply, and although interest survived at the level of folklore, it never fully recovered its earlier religious significance.



天狗 (『狂歌百物語』二より)

Fig. 12 Early Tengu



Fig. 13 Tengu Boy Kiritarō

(by Toyokuni)

This role of the *tengu* as a trainer and guardian of the young and weak persisted throughout the history of *tengu* belief into the Edo period, as exemplified in Figure 2. The figure of a young *tengu* boy is depicted in Toyokuni’s Edo-period ukiyo-e *Tengu Kozō Kiritarō*. Following the Meiji government’s prohibition of *Shugendō*, popular faith in *tengu* declined sharply and never fully recovered, even after the postwar revival of *Shugendō* practices.

## Source of Illustrations

Fig. 1 Hirata, Atsutane, and Koyasu, Nobukuni. *Senkyō Ibun / Katsugorō Saisei Kibun* 『仙境異聞・勝五郎再生記聞』. Iwanami Shoten, 2000.

Fig.2 ibid.

Fig.3 ibid.

Fig.4 ibid.

Fig.5 ibid.

Fig.6 Morishima Chūryō *Kômō Zatsuwā* 『紅毛雑話』, 1787.

Fig.7 ibid.

Fig.8 Hirata, Atsutane, and Koyasu, Nobukuni. *Senkyō Ibun / Katsugorō Saisei Kibun* 『仙境異聞・勝五郎再生記聞』. Iwanami Shoten, 2000.

Fig.9 ibid.

Fig.10 ibid.

Fig.11 ibid.

Fig.12 Lafcadio Hearn, *Kyōka Hyaku Monogatari* (狂歌百物語) vol.2, 1853.

Fig.13 Toyokuni III (豊国三代), Ukiyo-e print *Tengu Kozō Kiritarō*, (天狗小僧霧太郎), 1861.

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Abducted by an Alien *Tengu* master:  
 Witness to the Unseen in Hirata Atsutane's *Amazing Tales*  
*of the Hermit World* (*Senkyō Ibun* 仙境異聞 1822)

ONABE Tomoko

This paper examines the cultural and intellectual significance of *Senkyō Ibun* (1821), Hirata Atsutane's influential but understudied account of the alleged abduction of the boy Torakichi by a *tengu* master. Although Hirata is widely recognized as a leading *Kokugaku* scholar and *Shintō* theologian of the late Edo period, his works long suffered from postwar scholarly neglect due to their later association with nationalist ideologies. Recent reassessments, however, have begun to highlight the methodological sophistication of his thought. Building on this renewed attention, the present study investigates how Hirata and his intellectual circle transformed Torakichi's testimony into a widely circulated cultural phenomenon that articulated a distinctive form of empiricism.

Through close analysis of *Senkyō Ibun*, this paper argues that Hirata formulated an epistemology grounded in the authority of direct observation—what may be termed “the empirical prestige of “having seen.”” Torakichi's reports of the unseen realm (*Senkyō*) are treated not as fantastical tales but as eyewitness data, extending empiricism beyond the limits of ordinary perception. This perspective resonates with early modern European empiricism, particularly Baconian critiques of scholastic learning and the elevation of firsthand sensory experience, exemplified by seventeenth-century microscopic observation. Hirata's skepticism toward textual authority parallels this shift while adapting it to a *Shintō* cosmological framework in which extraordinary perception is both possible and meaningful.

The paper also highlights the interdisciplinary engagement of Hirata's circle, which included religious philosophers, political thinkers, and experimental scientists such as gunsmith Kunitomo Tōbei. Their interviews with Torakichi integrated technological curiosity, empirical inquiry, and imaginative projection, contributing to a shared discourse on the “strange unseen world.” By depicting the hidden realm as technologically advanced, Hirata further positioned *Shintō* esotericism as a repository of knowledge equal to, or surpassing, Western scientific innovation. In doing so, he forged a conceptual bridge between inherited tradition and emerging domains of knowledge, reframing the relationship between evidence, authority, and cosmology in late Edo intellectual culture.

