

Sendai Shiro: A Boy Who Became a God

I will tell this story chronologically, from a personal perspective, just as I discovered and investigated it. Why not? I'm under no obligation, now, to satisfy a newspaper publisher's space limitations. Let the tale flow as it will. For me, it all started at the Akiu Onsen spa about 20 miles outside Sendai, the largest city in the six-prefecture Tohoku region of northern Honshu. Downtown Sendai is shown in the photo below. The metropolitan area embraces a million residents, and the city is recognized as the greenest in all of Japan. It was completely destroyed in World War II bombings and was rebuilt from scratch with wide tree-lined boulevards. The Hirose River, which plays a role in this story, runs through it. Immediately after our two days at Akiu Onsen, Yoshi and I would check into a downtown Sendai hotel. Our current hotel, a *ryokan* named Sakan, boasted a thousand-year history, but it didn't look it. Too big, too palatial for my tastes. Good friends Ken and Harue Asano were with us. They had flown from Southern California to join us in Miyagi Prefecture, which is Ken's homelands. The four of us dined together at the Sakan, splendidly, but when night came, Ken and I left our wives to their after-



dinner baths and moved across the street to a little bar named “Cosmos,” or “Kosumosu” if you can read the characters above the entry doors at lower right. The characters translate as “Autumn Cherry.” The place suited us. We drank whiskey, a man's drink, spurning *sake* and *shochu*. “Cosmos” was operated by the husband and wife team of Yōichi and Yuki Satō. That's Yuki in the photo above. She is holding a framed photograph of a young man in kimono whom she identified as “Sendai Shiro.” During my two outings at “Cosmos,” I paid so much attention to the photo, which was nestled among the bottles behind the bar, that Yuki finally gave it to me. It hangs now on a wall in my Lake Forest workshop. Yuki

said she could replace it at “Cosmos.” It had to be replaced, you see, because Shiro was the region's God of Commerce, a talisman guaranteeing success at any shop where the image is displayed. I was fascinated. This wasn't a Shintoist or Buddhist god from mystical antiquity. This was a real human being, someone who had lived re-



JACKSON SELLERS
Lake Forest, California
December 2007

cently enough to be photographed, someone who could be researched. First, however, I had to resolve my doubts. In the photo, Shiro looked mentally retarded. Was my leg being pulled? Japanese, with a sense of humor not unlike that of Americans, have been known to do that, especially if it's some dumb foreigner's leg they wish to pull. So I began asking around in Sendai when I got there. *Have you ever heard of Sendai Shiro?* Well, I never met anybody who hadn't. And, too, his image was popping up everywhere. Samples are shown below. One night Yoshi and I were looking for a *yakitoriya*, which is a restaurant that serves charcoal-broiled chicken tidbits on a stick. We passed up one place because it looked too modernistic and high class. Down the street and tucked into a narrow alley was just what we had in mind – a little shop with seven stools snuggled up to a cluttered counter. We joined the only customer, an elderly gentleman who was drinking *shochu*. Three young auto mechanics came in shortly after we did. Suddenly the place was packed. I ordered my *yakitori* usual – livers and gizzards – and Yoshi chose crunchy chicken cartilage and tender thigh chunks. We washed it all down with hot *sake*. When the guy behind the

counter reached a lull in preparing food and drinks for everybody, I asked him my Sendai Shiro question. He smiled and pulled from a shelf a small figurine not unlike the one shown at bottom left. It was Shiro, the shop's good-luck charm. And it's not just eateries and bars and taverns that display Shiro's image. At bottom right is a huge Christmas decoration hanging from the ceiling of a major Sendai shopping mall. Westerners might conclude that the decoration is a somewhat funny-looking Japanese Santa Claus. It's not. It's Shiro again, dressed as Santa Claus, bestowing good fortune on the mall's merchants. How did this legend get started anyway? Ken Asano jumped onto the Internet and translated a Japanese-language "Sendai Shiro" Wikipedia article for me. *Ah, sō desu*. Now I knew that Sendai's God of Commerce was born as Shiro Haga around 1860 and died about 1902. Until he was seven years old, he was a bright boy. Then he suffered a brain-damaging accident. While watching fireworks on a bridge in Sendai, he fell into the Hirose River and was unconscious for seven days. When he emerged from his coma, he was virtually dumb, able to utter only one word, "*bah-yan*," which means "grandma" or



maybe, in his case, "nanny." Shiro never improved in this respect, but he was affable by nature and fond of kids, and he grew up loitering around the city with an innocent grin on his face. He would drop into shops where he could get something to eat. The Haga family, with a home next to a fire lookout tower, would pay for whatever he ate. At first, the demented boy was known as "Fathead Shiro" or "Under-the-Tower Shiro." Then it was noticed that shops he preferred prospered while others, the ones he ignored, didn't. Only a single photo survived him. A decade or so after his death, a Sendai photo studio began selling it under the label "God of Commerce – Sendai Shiro." A legend was born and still lives.



Postscript

OF course the only good fortune to be found here goes to those who produce and sell “Sendai Shiro” photos, figurines, posters, shopping mall decorations, and maybe even Christmas tree ornaments. It’s just a charming story. Nobody truly attributes magical powers to this “God of Commerce.” If it had been just a few mom-and-pop eateries that paid homage to a demented boy who died more than a hundred years ago, I might not have been interested, or – who knows? – I might have been interested anyway. But huge shopping malls? Shiro dressed as Santa Claus? That can’t be ignored. And I was intrigued by the simple fact that I couldn’t find anyone in a city of a million people who didn’t know Shiro’s name and didn’t recognize his 19th century photographic image. Even when I got pretty far away from Sendai city – deep into western Fukushima Prefecture, for example – I ran into bartenders and such who immediately knew what I was talking about. That wasn’t the case when I got to the really big city of Tokyo, far south of the Tohoku region I was exploring. Old friends who seemingly know everything about Japan, no matter where I’ve gone in the past on my jaunts into the hinterlands, were puzzled when I mentioned “Sendai Shiro.” They thought I was talking about Sendai Castle. You see, in Japanese, *shiro* means “castle.” No, I said, *this is a real person, a popular legend within Sendai*. I was pleased to know something these learned gentlemen didn’t know. Shozo Usami, a humanities professor and book author, sent me an



email after reading “A Boy Who Became a God.” *Interesting, Jackson-san, my friend Shozo wrote. I heard Shiro’s story for the first time at the Katayama luncheon you attended. Here was a mentally handicapped boy who has been warmly treated in Sendai. Tohoku people are not as smart as Tokyo or Osaka merchants. They are regarded as rather timid, but they are warm-hearted. However, the photo shop owner who first started selling the photograph was certainly smart enough. I smile. Anyway, I admire the curious writer’s spirit that allows you to produce such a nice piece. Maybe you are the first American to pick up on this story.*

Sendai Skyline

