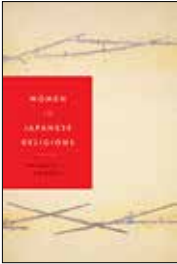


REVIEWS



Barbara R. Ambros, *Women in Japanese Religions*

New York: NYU Press, 2015. 240 pages. Hardcover, \$65.00; paperback, \$17.00. ISBN 978-1479827626 (hardcover); 978-1479884063 (paperback).

WOMEN IN JAPANESE RELIGIONS by Barbara Ambros is a very helpful and easy-to-use book for introducing this theme to an introductory audience in English. Although there are books that have focused on women at specific historical times or in religious movements, there is no precedent for such a comprehensive perspective that moves from prehistoric Japan to the contemporary world. This is the great strength of this book, as has been pointed out already in numerous reviews. The nine sections consist of a careful analysis of the religious experiences of women in periods described as “Prehistory, Ancient, Introduction of Buddhism, Heian, Medieval Period, Edo, Imperial Japan, Postwar, and Lost Decades.” By taking the *longue derée* approach, however, the author could not avoid a certain amount of dualistic oversimplification, and these are a few points to consider.

One of the aims of the book, as explained in the introduction, is to rethink heretofore male-centered narratives from a woman’s perspective by emphasizing the diverse experiences of women of different social backgrounds. Although not limited to religious texts, most religious texts were written by men for men, leaving doubts about whether they can truly reflect diverse experiences. Even where we have writings by women, often the “women’s religious lives” expressed therein were mostly inaccessible to illiterate lay women in traditional society. Serinity YOUNG (1993, xvi) has pointed out that even in the case of “little tradition” as it appears in folklore and fairy tales, or that matters at the popular level of religion are often in the hands of women, they exist in a primarily oral culture. Works by

women take many forms, so it is necessary to take into account many forms and not just texts.

Again, it is unfortunate that, despite the emphasis on diversity in this book, there is no mention of sexual minorities or of the recent challenges in the Christian church in Japan concerning this issue (see HORIE 2007). In any case, it must be said that although the role of religion with regard to women is ambivalent, it is quite limited as far as inspiring women in their daily lives and providing a positive and powerful image with regard to “being a woman.”

In her introduction, Ambros quotes the feminist sociologist Ueno Chizuko that “reproduction of the patriarchal system is not possible without cooperation of women.” If one checks the original context of this quote from Ueno, however, it is clear that this rendering is a misreading. Ueno does not mean to imply that women are accomplices in supporting the patriarchal system. She is pointing out that women have acted as representatives of the patriarchal power system, and she has never wavered in criticizing this patriarchal system as a “transvestite patriarchy” 「女装した家父長」. In Ambros’s book, criticism of the patriarchal system (here meaning the “religious establishment”) is avoided by referring to cooperation by women with this system, but Ueno’s standpoint is quite the opposite. Ueno has published quite widely so it may not be unusual for her to be quoted in a context which differs from the intent of her work, but still it is somewhat annoying.

Chapter 9 contains a discussion of the binomial contrast between “conservatism” and “feminism,” and refers to the “Fundamental Law on Gender Equality” (157). Although a minor point, I would like to point out that technically this refers to the “Basic Law for a Gender-Equal Society” (男女共同参画社会基本法) and concerns not only the equality between men and women with regard to education, but is meant to cover the equality of men and women in all social aspects, including family and work. The official name of the law does not contain the phrase “gender equality” (男女平等); rather, during the process on institutional reform with regard to women in the 1980s, the phrase “Gender-Equal Society” (男女共同参画社会) was substituted for the phrase “gender equality” (男女平等). Nevertheless, the contents and influence of this law are certainly important and reflect a changing paradigm in policies with regard to women (see UENO 2011, 236).

In any case, let me repeat that this book by Ambros is undoubtedly an important contribution to the discussion of Japanese women’s religious experiences, and a valuable introductory study for placing these religious experiences within the broad macro-history of Japan.

[Editors’ note: Although this book by Ambros was reviewed already in the *JJRS* (43/2: 384–86, 2016), we had already commissioned a review for this special issue on gender and believe another look is appropriate in this context.]

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