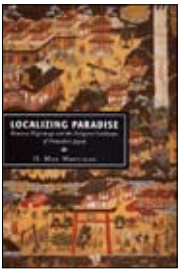

Moerman, D. Max, *Localizing Paradise: Kumano Pilgrimage and the Religious Landscape of Premodern Japan*

Harvard East Asian Monographs 235. Cambridge and London: Harvard University Press, 2005. xiv +297 pp. Illustrations, bibliography, Chinese character list, index, cloth. ISBN 0-674-01395-6.

The reader may wonder why a review of a book on Kumano and religious landscape, famous as a center for pilgrimage and Shugendō practices, is included in a special issue of the *Japanese Journal of Religious Studies* focusing on Pure Land experiences. The answer is in the title: "localizing paradise." Kumano is a site abounding in Pure Lands: the Fudaraku of Kannon, toward which many cast off to the east on fragile boats from the beaches of Nachi; of Amida, associated with the Hongū shrine and the focus of Ippen's (among many others) pilgrimages; the Jōruri of Yakushi, associated with the Hayatama shrine in Shingū, and other variations. In fact, Kumano embodies the "varieties of Pure Land experience" with an abundance and diversity perhaps greater than anywhere else in Japan.[1]

Kumano, located in the southern part of the Kii peninsula overlapping parts of the modern Mie, Wakayama, and Nara prefectures, has been the center of various religious practices—pilgrimage, mountain asceticism (Shugendō), utopian searches for a pure land—since the beginning of Japanese history. The first Tennō, the legendary Jinmu, is said to have landed on its shores on his way to found the Yamato state. As Moerman points out, "it was a landscape both real and ideal, a site occupied by

1. Moerman's work helps to mollify William Lee's earlier assertion in this issue that the influence of Pure Land practices in Shugendō is often overlooked, that "the common conception of Shugendō is that it draws its doctrine and practices primarily from esoteric Buddhism and Shinto" (see Lee on *hanamatsuri*, p. 250).

human communities and heavenly beings, a place of worldly institutions and otherworldly paradises, a realm manifestly other in both space and time and yet inextricably bound to the here and now or premodern experience" (p. 233).

This is one of many studies—McCallum on Zenkōji (1994); Fowler on Murōji (2005), and Reader on Shikoku (2005), to name only a few—which sheds light on the multifarious aspects of Japanese religion through a thorough study on one specific locality, and the flow of religious activities and ideas through the history of a specific geographic area. Moerman describes his aims as follows:

> The topics of this study—the combining of Buddha and kami cults, the ritualization of death, the political significance of religious practices, and the religious construction of gender—are in no sense unique to Kumano. It is my contention, however, that studying the ways in which these issues informed Kumano's particular religious landscape can increase our understanding of the larger, common religious landscape of premodern Japan.
>
> By examining Kumano as an object of narrative and visual attention, as well as a center of ritual practice, I hope to show the range of religious meanings that were projected onto its terrain as well as the historical changes in beliefs and practices that they reflected. (p. 5)

Moerman succeeds splendidly in describing and analyzing these topics, giving the Kumano area the careful attention it deserves for its role in the religious history of Japan. He brings order to the variety of Kumano experiences by first giving an introductory outline in the chapter on "Situating Kumano," discusses its religious geography (including a section on "multiple paradises") in the chapter on "Emplacements," and then takes up the specific themes of "Mortuary Practices," "The Theatre of State," and "A Woman's Place." The reader thus gains not only a feeling for the religious ideals sought by many through Kumano, but also insight into entanglements of State and the role of Kumano in the political arena. Moerman also sheds light on gender issues in Japan by showing how Kumano offered both religious opportunity for women (as in the activities of the Kumano *bikuni*), while also promoting exclusion through the development of areas off-limits to women (*nyonin kekkai*). Certainly not all aspects of Kumano have been covered, and the topic is worthy of many more studies, but Moerman has provided an informative and readable account.

The work is richly illustrated, with eight color plates, and photos usefully placed throughout the text. My only disappointment, on a personal level (as one who grew up in the Kumano area), is that Moerman's text does not capture or convey the enthralling beauty of the Kumano landscape, from the lush forests and mountains and clear fast-flowing rivers, to the craggy stone shores of the expansive sea, which was crucial in making Kumano the site of religious practices and, in the present day, has made Kumano a World Heritage site. Perhaps some color photos of the Kumano mountains or Nachi beach should have been added to those of the mandalas and other paintings. But maybe I am asking too much of an academic study; after all, this is not meant as a coffee-table book. We should be grateful for the meticulous care

that Moerman has taken in not only providing a fascinating and detailed account of Kumano, but also for his contribution in describing and analyzing many important aspects of Japanese religions.

REFERENCES

Fowler, Sherry D.
2005 *Murōji: Rearranging Art and History at a Japanese Buddhist Temple*. Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press.

McCallum, Donald F.
1994 *Zenkoji and Its Icon: A Study in Medieval Japanese Religious Art*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Reader, Ian
2005 *Making Pilgrimages: Meaning and Practice in Shikoku*. Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press.

Paul L. Swanson
Nanzan Institute for Religion and Culture