



Barbara Ambros, *Emplacing a Pilgrimage: The Ōyama Cult and Regional Religion in Early Modern Japan*

Cambridge and London: Harvard University Press, 2008. 330 pp.
Cloth, \$39.95. ISBN: 978-0-674-02775-9.

A NUMBER OF intriguing and informative studies on Japanese religions recently have focused on a specific geographical site rather than a general religious tradition or specific person or school. Ambros herself mentions the work of Allan Grapard and his argument for “more studies focused on a specific institutional complex,” as well as the work of Helen Hardacre on the Musashi and Sagami Provinces, Nam-lin Hur on the Buddhist temple Sensōji, and Sarah Thal on the cult of Mt. Konpira in Shikoku (3). One could also refer to the work of Max Moerman on Kumano, and

Donald McCallum on Zenkōji. To these works can now be added this book on the Ōyama cult to the southwest of the Kantō region.

In *Emplacing a Pilgrimage*, Barbara Ambros provides a detailed study of a specific site and its evolution through history, from a medieval mountain retreat to its function as a regional Shingon academy, to its emergence as a regional pilgrimage center with the Ōyama *oshi* guides in the Edo period, the “reconfiguring of the Pantheon” with the coming of Nativism and later Edo period Shinto, and finally to the “new order” with the disassociation of kami and buddhas in the late nineteenth century. As with other studies of this kind, it illuminates more than just what happened at one local site—through this site and the careful examination of its concrete activities one can also see reflected there the flow of history and the wider trends in Japanese religious activities.

Ambros has not only written an interesting and readable study of Ōyama and the religious activities associated with it, but her approach has shed light on numerous important issues in the study of Japanese religions. For one, her study presents another strong example (if any more were needed) to counteract the impression that Buddhism was “degenerate” in the modern (Edo) period. As Ambros says in her Epilogue, “the vitality of the Ōyama cult demonstrates that early modern Buddhism was far from moribund or corrupt. It was not a mere instrument of the state, as has often been claimed in earlier scholarship that subscribed to the theory of the degeneration of Buddhism...” (239). A second contribution is a more nuanced understanding of the *shinbutsu-bunri* “events” as a major cultural revolution. As travels to various places in Japan clearly show, the effects of the attempt to “separate kami and buddhas” were strikingly different in content and extent depending on local social, political, and religious conditions. As Ambros explains, “Ōyama’s modern transformation illustrates the value of regional history in furthering our understanding of a crucial watershed such as the disassociation of *kami* and Buddhas. Although it is tempting to construct a narrative that focuses on the national implication of the early Meiji regime’s religious policies and ideology, their actual implementation differed among localities.... The cult’s transformation from a combinatory to a dual cult with distinct Shinto and Buddhist spheres is emblematic of the transition of the Japanese religious landscape from the premodern to the modern periods” (243). We are indebted to Ambros for providing us with a rich study for a deeper understanding of these issues.

My only complaint on finishing the book was that I wished the discussion of the Ōyama cult to continue into contemporary times. The current state of the Ōyama pilgrimage (or at least one manifestation of it) is covered, however, by the DVD film “Opening the Gates to Heaven: A Pilgrimage to Ōyama,” which was filmed by Ambros in 2000 and edited and produced by her in 2004. (The film was screened and discussed at a panel at the annual conference of the American Academy of Religion in November 2004, and can be acquired by contacting the producer at bambros@email.unc.edu.) This matter, as well as her subsequent reflections on the

role and influence of a “participant observer” to the pilgrimage, are discussed in her essay on “Researching Place, Emplacing the Researcher: Reflections on the Making of a Documentary of a Pilgrimage Confraternity,” in the current *JJRS* 36, pages 167–97.

Paul L. Swanson
Nanzan Institute for Religion and Culture