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Legitimizing an Evil Teaching

Deguchi Onisaburō and “Superstition” in Modern Japan

This article examines the writings of Deguchi Onisaburō, the cofounder of Omoto, and argues that he actively utilized the discourse of “superstition” to criticize a variety of contemporaneous religious movements and by doing so, legitimize Omoto as the only “true” religion destined to save Japan. Scholars of modern Japanese religions have highlighted the ways in which intellectuals, journalists, and proponents of mainstream religions condemned new religions as “superstitious and evil teachings” in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Yet, an analysis of how new religions themselves responded to the charge of superstition has been neglected. Onisaburō was one of the most prominent religious figures in the early 1900s and possibly the public face of “superstition.” However, this article demonstrates that Onisaburō himself appropriated the language of superstition in his own writings, instead of rejecting it. More specifically, he used it to characterize established religions represented by Shinto and Buddhist institutions as backward and vilify other contemporaneous religious practices as worthless delusions. According to him, the teachings of Omoto alone represented the path forward for modern Japan. This article thus reverses the prevailing understanding of the discourse of superstition in modern Japan as simply targeting and demeaning new religions. Representatives of new religions also internalized it and invoked it to further their goals.

KEYWORDS: Omoto—Deguchi Onisaburō—superstition—secularity—Shinto

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THE DEVELOPMENT of the concept of “superstition” (*meishin* 迷信) in modern Japan has become a topic of great interest in the last decade (JOSEPHSON 2012; MAXEY 2014). Scholars have shown that the category of superstition evolved in tandem with the categories of the “secular” and “religion.” Veneration of the imperial family was classified as a matter of public ritual, while the doctrines of mainstream Buddhist denominations, Shinto-derived groups, and Christianity were contained within the sphere of private and personal “religion.” Spirit possession, spiritual healing, and a wide variety of popular practices, as well as a number of new religious communities founded by charismatic leaders, were labeled as embarrassing “superstition.” The boundaries drawn between the secular or “not-religion,” religion, and superstition reorganized preexisting practices and views within the conceptual grid of a modern nation-state (THOMAS 2019). According to Josephson, superstition was antithetical to the secular and served as a foil for the definition of proper, respectable religion (JOSEPHSON 2012, 4–5). Those who continued to engage in superstitious practices or, worse, joined suspicious “pseudo-religions”—that is, evil cults—were castigated as the “enemy within” who impeded Japan’s reconstruction as a “civilized” country (SAWADA 2004, 238–258).¹ Journalists, academics, and various political actors aggressively sought to eradicate the elements that they regarded as superstitious from modernized Japan.

Far less is known about the perspectives of the targets of stigma surrounding superstition. How did those who were rebuked as representatives of superstition respond to criticisms from society at large? What were their strategies for defending themselves? What concepts and discourses did they utilize to legitimize their practices? To answer these questions, this article focuses on Deguchi Onisaburō 出口王仁三郎, the cofounder of Omoto, one of the most prominent religious movements in the early 1900s. Despite its massive following in the mid-1910s and 1930s, Omoto was universally vilified as superstition and as an “evil teaching” (*jakyō* 邪教). The movement was subjected to severe government persecution in 1921 and 1935. As the leader of Omoto, Onisaburō was arguably the public face of “superstition” in early twentieth-century Japan.

Upon examining his writings and activities through the organizational framework of Omoto, it becomes clear that Onisaburō was concerned with the

1. See McLAUGHLIN’s (2012, 54) application of GLUCK’s (1985, 132–138) framework of “metaphorical foreigners” to analyze the positionality of new religions in Japan.

conceptual boundary of superstition. He was keenly aware of the positionality of Omoto in society and sensitive to the criticisms the movement received. Thus, Onisaburō sought to promote Omoto as a force of good, compatible with the modernizing agendas of imperial Japan. I find that he did so by adopting the language of “superstition” himself. That is, in much the same way that his detractors attacked Omoto and its leadership, Onisaburō condemned established religions and other religious actors as “superstitious” and detrimental to the progress of Japanese civilization. This discursive maneuver in turn implied that, unlike its opponents, Omoto was *not* superstition. Onisaburō went a step further to elevate Omoto beyond the categories of both superstition and religion by identifying the highest objective of Omoto as the realization of the Imperial Way (*kōdō* 皇道), a remaking of Japanese society based on the divine authority of the emperor. In other words, far from rejecting the discourse of superstition or taking a principled stance against this discourse as it was employed to castigate religious minorities, Onisaburō internalized and subverted it to legitimize his own movement.

In this article, I argue that those who were disenfranchised as “enemies within” in modern Japanese society did not quietly endure their marginalized status as passive victims. Rather, these agents played a critical part in shaping, and at times reformulating, the conceptual field of superstition to advance their own agendas. I begin by outlining the attacks levied against Omoto from the mid-1910s to the mid-1930s to contextualize the discursive environment in which Onisaburō operated. Then I analyze Onisaburō’s own expositions on the concept of superstition and ways in which he leveraged it to denounce certain movements and practices while presenting Omoto in a favorable light. I conclude by tracing the concrete steps that Onisaburō took in an attempt to ensure that Omoto was free of “superstition” and above reproach.

Omoto as the Representative “Superstition”

In early twentieth-century Japan, Omoto was arguably the most high-profile example of a movement vituperated as deceptive superstition. Omoto traces its origins back to a spirit possession experienced by its cofounder Deguchi Nao 出口なお in 1892.² A kami named Ushitora no Konjin 長の金神 (Golden Kami of the Northeast) possessed her and revealed the imminent destruction of the present world of evil. Nao’s prophecy and her ability to perform miraculous healing attracted a small group of followers. She was eventually joined by a charismatic youth by the name of Ueda Kisaburō 上田喜三郎, who assisted Nao in

2. The movement inspired by revelations obtained through Deguchi Nao’s spirit possession took on various names in different stages of its development. I refer to it as Omoto in this article for the sake of convenience and consistency.

formulating the organizational structure of her community. Kisaburō became the cofounder of Omoto, later changing his name to Deguchi Onisaburō and becoming Nao's son-in-law by marrying one of her daughters.³

Omoto grew rapidly in the 1910s due to a combination of factors, including Onisaburō's proselytization strategies and promotion of a spirit possession technique known as *chinkon kishin* 鎮魂帰神 (pacifying the soul, returning to the divine) believed to allow for dialogue with various spirits and grant miraculous blessings.⁴ Omoto appealed to a wide range of demographics. Although it is difficult to estimate the size of Omoto's membership, the group claimed to have one to three million adherents by the 1930s (GARON 1997, 70–71). Notably, it attracted some prominent intellectuals and members of the Japanese military such as Asano Wasaburō 浅野和二郎, a scholar of English literature, and Akiyama Saneyuki 秋山真之, a navy admiral who had played a key advisory role in the Russo-Japanese War (MURAKAMI 1978, 121–126).

Omoto's popularity was matched by intense public criticism from its detractors. For example, when Omoto's membership in Shimane Prefecture expanded considerably in the late 1910s, the local newspaper *Shōyō shinpō* 松陽新報 published a series of articles expressing concerns about Shimane residents embracing the “evil teaching Omoto.” An article dated 3 February 1919 offers the following lamentation:

The fact that this evil teaching [Omoto] has recruited as its adherents a few members of the intellectual class (*chishiki kaikyū* 知識階級) is one of the reasons why the foolish masses are being tricked (*shūgu o madowasu hitotsu no riyū* 衆愚を惑はす一つの理由). More than that, all these soldiers, teachers, judges, and doctors—where has their sense of self gone? They regard their allegiance to this doctrine as their ultimate honor and run around in a half-crazed state (*hankyōran* 半狂乱). Shouldn't we say that this is the height of idiocy or the upper limit of stupidity (*taichi no kocchō, baka no ikidomari* 呆痴の骨頂、馬鹿の行止まり)?

(ONS 1: 417–418)

Conspicuous in this excerpt is the notion of insanity and derangement, that only those who were deluded would join a pseudo-religion like Omoto. *Shōyō shinpō* seems to operate according to the understanding that journalists had the moral obligation to advertise the danger of this “cult” in order to protect the “masses” who were either too dumb or ignorant to defend themselves. The implicit assumption is that people who became Omoto adherents were being

3. For more on the early history of Omoto, see MURAKAMI (1978, 65–91) and YASUMARU (1987, 156–191).

4. See STALKER (2008, 12–16) for her discussion of the relationship between charisma and entrepreneurship as embodied by Onisaburō. See also STAEMMLER (2009) for a detailed history of the *chinkon kishin* practice.

tricked and that they were threats to the rest of society. These discourses were predictable and well-established tropes mobilized against “superstition” by the early twentieth century.⁵

Furthermore, around the same time, an association of Shinto priests based in Matsue in Shimane Prefecture issued an official resolution dated 21 February 1919 against the encroaching threat of Omoto. A significant number of shrine priests were apparently joining Omoto, and the association saw this situation as compromising to the integrity of its priesthood:

Ayabe Kōdō Ōmotokai 綾部皇道大本会 (that is, Omoto),⁶ which has become extremely widespread recently, harms public safety and causes social bewilderment. Despite this fact, there are those who become members of this movement while being shrine priests and contribute to the ministry of said movement in both covert and overt ways... these individuals are forgetting their original duty as shrine priests and are tarnishing the sanctity of Shinto shrines. With this understanding, our association issues this resolution supporting the following measures designed to confront this situation. (ONS 1: 418)

The resolution lists specific measures to be implemented against shrine priests who join Omoto, including the issuing of an initial warning to those suspected of having an interest in Omoto and demanding the resignation of those who ignore the warning. The resolution concludes by adding that whenever such a resignation—that is, dismissal—is processed, local newspapers are to be notified to make an official announcement, implying that those who join Omoto will be subjected to public censure and shaming. This concluding remark suggests that the association was likely in close contact with journalists and reporters. Accordingly, *Shōyō shinpō* publicized the association’s resolution in an article titled, “Kōdō Ōmoto is the enemy of Shinto” (ONS 1: 418–419).

Shinto representatives were not the only ones to express fears concerning the expansion of Omoto. For example, in early 1920, Jōdo Shinshū priests and parishioners in Kanazawa reportedly stormed into a lecture hall where Omoto preachers were scheduled to speak; the Buddhists blocked the doorway to prevent people from entering (ONS 1: 420–421). Jōdo Shinshū leaders also circulated pamphlets criticizing Omoto and advising their parishioners not to be fooled by the group’s teachings. Members of established religions responded in a similar fashion wherever Omoto’s growth was notable. These responses also indicate the degree to which Omoto’s appeal was widespread, potentially jeopardizing the membership base of both Shinto and Buddhist organizations.

5. For an analysis of the discourses of “madness” and “mental illness” associated with specific religious practices, see JOSEPHSON (2012, 20–21, 178–185).

6. Omoto at this time was known as Imperial Way Omoto. Ayabe 綾部 in Kyoto was the location of its headquarters.

Moreover, there were several public intellectuals in the 1910s and 1920s who condemned Omoto for its pernicious effects on Japanese society. Psychologist Nakamura Kokyō 中村古峯 is famous for his criticisms of Omoto published in special issues of a journal entitled *Abnormal Psychology* (*Hentai shinri* 変態心理), which were dedicated to debunking the false beliefs of Omoto from a psychological and medical standpoint (HYŌDŌ 2005). Nakamura was a favorite among journalists who sought to acquire an “expert opinion” on Omoto, and he gave speeches denouncing the movement. He described Omoto as “a collective of paranoids (*paranoia* パラノイア), delusional lunatics (*mōsōsei chihō* 妄想性痴呆), superstitious believers (*meishinsha* 迷信者), and swindlers (*yamashi* 山師)” (*Ōmotokyō no meishin o ronzu*, 40). Nakamura also referred to the *chinkon kishin* practice as a kind of hypnotic trick (*saiminjutsu* 催眠術) that utilizes people’s preconceived beliefs. He based his criticisms on the premise that Omoto was “a great superstition and an evil teaching” (*dainaru meishin de ari jakyō de aru* 大なる迷信であり邪教である) that needed to be “eradicated” (*shōmetsu* 消滅) and “set straight on the correct path” (*seidō ni michibikan* 正道に導かん) (*Ōmotokyō no shōtai*, 69–71).⁷

The renowned scholar of religion Katō Genchi 加藤玄智 also lamented the spread of superstitious views in Japan, although he did so in a much milder tone than Nakamura. Katō argued that following the conclusion of World War I, the prestige of traditional religions such as Christianity and Buddhism plummeted, creating an opening for new religions and pseudo-religions to emerge. Some of these new movements could be regarded as “new superstitions” (*aratana meishin* 新たな迷信), and he found it strange that top businesspersons, military officers, and intellectuals were attracted to these superstitions. Katō ultimately attributed this phenomenon to a lack of “mental fortitude” (*seishinteki soyō* 精神的素養) among the Japanese and held that more work should be done in “social education” (*shakai kyōiku* 社会教育) so as to prevent people from turning to superstitions like Omoto (*Ōmotokyō no shōtai*, 73–74).

Omoto’s massive appeal also alarmed the state. The group’s vision of world transformation was informed by its visions of the “Taishō Restoration” (*Taishō ishin* 大正維新) and the Imperial Way, focusing on the realization of a divine form of governance based on Japan’s singular mission in the world. Thus, Omoto provided an alternate modality of being a loyal “Japanese subject” that was impermissible in the eyes of the imperial government.⁸ The fact that Omoto

7. Kanō Yūkei 狩野有景 was an educator and a former Omoto member who eventually turned against the movement. He authored the *Ōmotokyō no shōtai* in order to “expose” Omoto as an evil and dangerous superstition. In this book, he lists negative comments about Omoto made by experts and scholars of various backgrounds, including Nakamura.

8. For more on Omoto’s vision of Japan’s place in the world and its seemingly paradoxical Japan-centered universalism, see MIURA (2018; 2019, 154–174).

attracted some members of the aristocratic class also proved inconvenient for the state. Public outcry against Omoto became particularly intense in the late 1910s, with some Omoto defectors going so far as to publicly claim that Onisaburō was actively planning to subvert the government by stockpiling weapons and training his young adherents to take up arms on his behalf (MURAKAMI 1978, 118–119, 130–132). The “First Omoto Incident (Suppression)” started on 12 February 1921, when the authorities stormed the Omoto headquarters in Ayabe. They arrested Omoto leaders with charges of *lèse-majesté* (*fukeizai* 不敬罪) and violation of the Newspaper Law, as Omoto had purchased *Taishō nichinichi shinbun* 大正日日新聞 and proselytized actively through the platform. The authorities confiscated various documents and records from the headquarters and also searched for the rumored stockpiled weapons, to no avail. Although Onisaburō’s supposed plan to subvert the government proved to be a fabrication, major newspapers nonetheless reported on the government crackdown and portrayed Omoto as a dangerous organization. The authorities proceeded with the charges of *lèse-majesté* against Onisaburō and the Newspaper Law violation against other Omoto leaders, though they were unable to find any evidence of subterfuge. The authorities also dismantled Omoto sanctuaries in Ayabe because they resembled Ise Jingū 伊勢神宮 (MURAKAMI 1978, 131–138).

The first suppression did not deter Onisaburō from furthering his world transforming agendas. During the 1920s, he pursued new international connections, putting into practice his vision of “ten thousand teachings [from one] identical root” (*bankyō dōkon* 万教同根) by affiliating with various religious movements from continental Asia and also traveling to Mongolia to establish an earthly utopia.⁹ Moreover, in the 1930s, Onisaburō solidified his ties with rightwing activists such as Uchida Ryōhei 内田良平 and Tōyama Mitsuru 頭山 満, who actively voiced their vision for the “sacred imperial way” (*shinsei naru kōdō* 神聖なる皇道) (oss 2: 718–720). Onisaburō’s political stance emphasizing the authority of the emperor seemed to align with the accelerating centralization of state power in the 1930s. However, Onisaburō’s maneuvers only exacerbated the state’s suspicion toward him, eventually leading to the “Second Omoto Incident” in December 1935. The authorities cited the Peace Preservation Law and *lèse-majesté* against the Omoto leadership and, greatly expanding the 1921 dismantling of Omoto facilities, completely destroyed the Omoto sacred grounds in Ayabe and Kameoka 亀岡 by demolishing all major buildings. The authorities justified this suppression by arguing that superstition had to be wiped out thoroughly and that Omoto was a superstition “incompatible with the national body” (*kokutai to ai irenu* 国体ト相容レヌ) (oss 3: 231). As a Police Bureau chief in

9. For more on Omoto’s international activities during the 1920s, see MURAKAMI (1978, 147–178) and STALKER (2008, 142–169).

the Home Ministry remarked a few months after the crackdown, Onisaburō was the “mastermind behind an evil teaching” (*jakyō no genkyō* 邪教ノ元兇) whose existence had to be “forever eliminated from this sacred land, as long as our country exists” (OSS 3: 238). Major newspapers parroted the government propaganda (MURAKAMI 1978, 204–209).

The two suppressions of Omoto were extraordinary in their magnitude, but perfectly ordinary in the sense that they reflected the modern “orthodoxy” of outrage against superstition. This outrage was propelled by the mass media, public intellectuals, and representatives of “good” religions who cited predictable tropes of delusion, illness, and danger to characterize communities like Omoto and figures like Onisaburō as immediate threats to Japanese society. Their indignations, furthermore, were substantiated through state power and violence. However, the ways in which Onisaburō himself engaged with the discourse of superstition significantly complicate this picture. As I will show below, Onisaburō actively employed the same language of superstition in his own writings in order to legitimize his spiritual vision and repel criticisms against him and Omoto.

Onisaburō on “Superstition”

Onisaburō was a prolific writer, and he expressed his views on a variety of topics through his essays and transcribed sermons published by Omoto, which were read primarily by Omoto adherents. A common topic of discussion for Onisaburō was customs and practices he regarded as obsolete in the modern age. He denounced these practices as superstition, and when he did so, he sounded remarkably similar to the people who attacked him and Omoto for being superstitious. For example, in 1932 he published a short exposition aptly titled “Superstition” in which he criticized the conceptions of inauspicious directions and other geomantic concerns deriving from interpretations of the traditional calendar:

People often say that it is inappropriate to build a bathroom in the northeast. The northeast is where the sun rises, so it does feel good to keep that direction clean and organized, but there is nothing more to it than that. One should place a bathroom somewhere inconspicuous in any case. This is all a matter of design, and one should not be concerned at all about the superstition [about the direction of the northeast]. [Similarly] if one is concerned about the auspiciousness of the year or the date, then one is being conquered by superstition (*meishin ni seifuku serarete iru* 迷信に征服せられている), and things will turn out negatively because of that. Nothing is more idiotic than being born in this vast world and living in such a constrained fashion so as to limit one’s behaviors based on the supposed auspiciousness or inauspiciousness of certain dates.

(DOC 3: 284)

Here Onisaburō refers to the custom of maintaining geomantic purity in the direction of the northeast, traditionally identified as an unlucky direction and described as the “gate of demons” (*kimon* 鬼門). He acknowledges the functional merit of keeping the northeast clean but stresses that there is no need to fear the northeast as inauspicious. The direction of the northeast held special significance in the Omoto cosmology since it was associated with Ushitora no Konjin, the main deity of Omoto whose name directly references the “northeast” (*ushitora*). According to Omoto mythology, Ushitora no Konjin was a righteous kami who was confined to the northeast by evil kami. The evil kami branded Ushitora no Konjin as a demonic spirit, resulting in the identification of the northeast as an inauspicious direction. Omoto’s central mission was to reinstate the authority of Ushitora no Konjin and restore righteousness in the present world of evil. Given this cosmology, it makes sense for Onisaburō to work to dispel negativities associated with the northeast; yet it is noteworthy that he does so by specifically reframing the negative associations as superstition. He took the same approach with the custom of choosing auspicious days to perform certain actions, particularly life-changing events such as marriage and moving. As will be discussed more below, Onisaburō was dismissive of Japanese customs that struck him as irrational, and he did not hesitate to adopt a modern Western lifestyle. This attitude frustrated Deguchi Nao and her ardent followers and resulted in friction between them and Onisaburō (OOMS 1993, 64–65; STALKER 2008, 38–43).

Furthermore, Onisaburō went beyond disapproving of traditional customs to lambast specific ritual practices associated with better-established religious institutions. For example, he focuses his criticism on religious sites renowned for pilgrimages and ascetic practices in a 1919 essay:

Even in this age of Taisho, in which our society has become much more enlightened, superstition continues to flourish (*meishin no ato wa taenu* 迷信の跡は絶えぬ). Just pay a visit to Mount Inari of Fushimi, Mount Myōken of Nose, or Mount Kurama. One will see naked worshipers walking around barefooted and praying in front of kami and buddhas. They repeatedly recite the Heavenly Prayer in a strange and rasping voice; they then proceed to recite the *Heart Sūtra* or chant the *Lotus Sūtra*. What nonsense is this? There are also many individuals who pour candle wax on their arms, and while enduring their skin being burned with greasy sweat on their foreheads they pray fervently for blessings in order to fulfill their selfish desires. In addition, there are many practitioners of superstition (*meishinsha*) who refuse to partake in the heavenly blessing of food and starve themselves to death, all the while asking kami and buddhas to realize their ridiculous wishes. (DOZ 5: 319–320)

Onisaburō does not shy away from openly mocking austerities associated with sites such as Fushimi Inari and Mount Kurama. In particular, he denounces

seekers of “this-worldly benefits” (*genze riyaku* 現世利益) and categorizes practices including sutra chanting and fasting as “superstition.” This criticism is doubly ironic. The promise of this-worldly benefits was central to the growth of Omoto, particularly in its incipient phase, following a pattern of institutional expansion shared by other new religions; moreover, Onisaburō himself had engaged in ascetic practices on a mountain prior to meeting Nao for the first time in 1898 (MURAKAMI 1978, 31–41). Nonetheless, Onisaburō here fully embraces the modernization and enlightenment discourse and devalues the importance of immediate, material benefits. This discursive move suggests that he was most likely aware that his detractors often cited claims of miraculous blessings as evidence of the superstitious nature of “pseudo-religions.” It is worth considering that this essay was published at a time when Omoto experienced rapid growth and was exposed to a level of public outcry unprecedented in the movement’s history. Critiquing certain religious practices as superstition served to differentiate Omoto from such practices. Onisaburō thus sought to explicitly disentangle his movement from the label of superstition.

Furthermore, Onisaburō in some instances adopted a seemingly secularized attitude to tacitly critique those who rely on religious efficacy. In a 1928 composition titled “The Great Plan of Kami” (*Kami no keirin* 神の経綸), Onisaburō stresses the importance of human effort in ameliorating the existing world and admonishes those who quickly depend on or expect divine assistance:

Everything in the world exists in part because of human effort. However, humans cannot stand on their own. Each human being has a divine spirit or soul of the kami within, and this is how the world has developed to the extent that we can see today. Humans work with kami, and that is how a heaven (*ten-goku* 天国) is created; that is how a pure land (*jōdo* 浄土) is created; that is how a civilized world (*bunmei no yo* 文明の世) is created. Forgetting this principle and thinking that, since kami and buddhas are omnipotent, all we have to do is to have faith and they will grant us all of our wishes—this is the epitome of superstition and delusional belief. (DOZ 6: 425)

Onisaburō envisions a mutually dependent relationship between humanity and kami in which civilizational progress is made possible through the combination of human and supernatural powers. In assuming a linear progression of human civilization, Onisaburō here reveals his modernist bent. Once again, he is in vigorous agreement with his critics, most of whom were advocates of “practical learning” (*jitsugaku* 実学) that could contribute directly to Japan’s modernizing agendas; forms of knowledge that deviated from this pragmatic, scientific framework were to be jettisoned as superstition (SAWADA 2004, 5–6). Interestingly, Onisaburō also equates a “civilized world” with a “heaven” and a “pure

land” and contrasts it against “delusion.”¹⁰ He thus reifies the distinction between respectable religions beneficial to the civilizing objective of the secular state and unacceptable superstition hindering the collective goal of the state. Onisaburō operated on the same binary between “good” and “bad” religions (that is, superstitions) that his detractors utilized. The point on which Onisaburō disagreed with them was that he saw himself as being on the good side, while none of his critics shared that view.

At the same time, the distinction between proper religion and dangerous superstition was of secondary importance for Onisaburō, who above all emphasized the centrality of the Imperial Way based on the sacrality of the imperial family. Onisaburō elaborates on this point in the following 1934 essay, in which he discusses the necessity of venerating a “true kami” (*shin no kamisama* 真の神様):

Sākyamuni, Christ, Muhammad, Confucius, and others are founders of religion (*shūkyō no shiso* 宗教の始祖) and are great individuals, their deeds renowned in all of human history. However, in today’s world, they no longer possess the power to lead and save people. The reason for this is that they are “dead gods and dead buddhas” (*shishin shibutsu* 死神死仏). In the modern age, they have no energy left, not even to let loose a good fart. In short, they are dead lions and dead tigers. A live cat has more vitality than dead lions and tigers and is actually more useful in daily life because it will catch mice. A live cat can bite and harass dead tigers and dead lions as it pleases. Having said that, it may be beneficial in some cases to study the sayings and actions of great religious figures, reflect on their marvelous willpower, and uphold them as models for one’s own life and outlook. However, those who pray to these figures in order to have their wishes come true are foolish and superstitious (*gusha de ari meishin de aru* 愚者であり迷信である).

Citizens of our great imperial country should venerate a true kami who is alive. What is this kami who is alive? This kami is none other than our emperor, the inheritor of the unbroken lineage of the heavenly gods who have manifested themselves as presiders of the universe from the very beginning of heaven and earth—a living kami who reigns with a supreme mastery of the three virtues of the lord, teacher, and parent (*shu shi shin no santoku* 主師親の三徳). Our emperor is the lord, teacher, and parent of the world. We pity the fact that many citizens of Japan, who had the good fortune of being born as children of this great parent-kami, are serving as children of and praying for salvation from the dead gods and dead buddhas who have no karmic ties to them. In other words, venerating and worshiping the founders of foreign religions is like being filial to the parents of strangers’ families who died thousands

10. When Onisaburō discusses “heaven” and “pure land” in this context, he seems to be talking about an ideal world or society on earth, not a postmortem realm into which one aspires to be reborn.

of years ago and is extremely misguided. The blind followers of established religions (*kisei shūkyō no mōshin no tohai* 既成宗教の妄信の徒輩) in Japan today are forgetting their own ancestors and parents and are devoting themselves to the ancestors of strangers' families. (OSS 2: 412)

Onisaburō begins by praising the founders of major world religions but claims that they are powerless in the modern world, comparing them to dead lions and tigers; people may find their deeds inspiring, but wish-fulfilling prayers offered to them are now futile and nothing but superstition. Onisaburō uses the expression “established religions” (*kisei shūkyō*) to refer to these “dead,” outdated religions. The underlying message is that it is new movements like Omoto that have the ability to guide people toward salvation. Onisaburō then moves on to criticize Japanese citizens following these old impotent religions, reminding them that they should be upholding the Japanese emperor, the one true kami. For Onisaburō, this spiritual unification of Japan under the emperor—and the global expansion of this unity—represents the crux of the Imperial Way. To promote this vision, he positions the veneration of the emperor above not only superstition but also respectable religions like Buddhism and Christianity. In fact, in the passages above, he blurs the boundary between superstition and religion by implying that all religions that fail to recognize the divine reign of the emperor are superstitious, particularly for Japanese citizens. The author also insinuates that since Omoto promotes the true Imperial Way, it also stands above both religion and superstition. Onisaburō thus elevates and legitimizes Omoto in a way that directly mirrors the imperial government's policy of interpreting veneration of the imperial family as a matter of public duty, separate from people's private religious preferences and not infringing upon their religious freedom. The imagery of the family, in which the emperor is the parent and Japanese citizens are his children, also resonates with the contemporaneous government propaganda.¹¹

His writings from the late 1910s and the mid-1930s show that “superstition” was a topic of great interest for Onisaburō for a significant portion of his career in the Omoto leadership. He criticized a variety of traditions as superstitious, using the same “modern” and “enlightened” language that his detractors mobilized against him. In other words, instead of rejecting the framework of

11. It remains a point of scholarly debate whether Onisaburō's flowery language about the emperor was purely tactical, a mere performative response to the first suppression in 1921, or expressed his sincere adoration for the imperial family. It is also possible that the image of an “idealized” emperor highlighted repeatedly in Omoto's publications was an indirect criticism of the “actual,” living emperors of modern Japan, who did not live up to the movement's expectations. It is impossible to ascertain Onisaburō's “genuine” intentions, but analysis of his discursive maneuvers is necessary to understand how Onisaburō sought to situate Omoto within the complex social and political climates of the 1920s and 1930s. See MURAKAMI (1978, 128–129), STALKER (2008, 72–73), and YASUMARU (1987, 199–200, 239–241).

superstition or opposing it as a matter of principle, Onisaburō embraced it and subverted it into a legitimating framework through which to present his own vision. He was skillful in setting up a foil against which he could differentiate his movement, ultimately associating it directly with the official state ideology that trumped both superstition and religion. At the same time, Onisaburō’s engagement with superstition was not merely discursive. In the following section I will analyze the ways in which Onisaburō grappled with the question of superstition both internally within the Omoto organizational structure and externally in response to government scrutiny.

Reforming “Superstition” Within

Onisaburō did not only criticize an array of practices in society at large that he regarded as superstitious; he also challenged some views within Omoto itself that he recognized as backwards. This tension between Onisaburō and some factions within the Omoto membership was particularly poignant while Deguchi Nao was alive. Initially, Onisaburō encountered Nao in 1898 in his capacity as an interrogator of spirits (*saniwa* 審神者) in order to “evaluate” the spirit that was possessing Nao. Apparently, Nao had been frustrated by the fact that her spirit possession experience and the kami communicating with her were not receiving wide recognition. By this point, Nao had already acquired a small group of adherents while maintaining an affiliation with government-approved Konkōkyō 金光教. Nao had identified the kami possessing her as Ushitora no Konjin, also the main deity worshiped in Konkōkyō. She had come a long way since her very first possession experience in 1892, when she was locked up in a cell because people around her thought she had gone insane, especially since Nao would often scream out loud about the impending end of the world. The screaming ceased once she started to commit the content of her spirit possession to writing, which was compiled later as Nao’s *Ofudesaki* お筆先, but the boundary between “delusion” and “prophesy” remained precarious.¹²

In the late 1890s, Nao sought a way to free herself of the subordinate role she occupied under Konkōkyō and have her prophetic messages certified as originating from an authoritative spiritual source. Onisaburō fulfilled this aspiration, aiding Nao with the process of establishing a new organization for her community and legitimizing her prophecies in a way that also complied with the mandates of government-approved Shinto. For example, Onisaburō defined the objectives of this new religious community as to “respectfully uphold and proselytize Foundress Deguchi’s marvelous, sacred, and beautiful teachings” while

12. The fact that Nao’s possession was initially interpreted as an expression of her madness is emblematic of the emerging discourse of superstition associated with mental illness in the late nineteenth century (JOSEPHSON 2012, 185).

also “venerating our imperial family for its glory and perfection and absolutely adhering to the imperial will” (OSS 2: 31).¹³ From a certain perspective, from the very beginning Onisaburō’s involvement with Omoto hinged upon rescuing the group out of the realm of “delusion” and rendering it as a community based on respectable doctrines.

However, some of Nao’s earliest followers were unhappy with Onisaburō’s interventions, and this friction manifested in different ways. For example, Onisaburō was critical of Nao’s most loyal followers who interpreted her teachings literally. Some of them reportedly walked around with lanterns even during daytime based on Nao’s teaching that the present world was covered in darkness; some also insisted on walking in the middle of the street, despite cars and horse carriages, because Nao had taught them to never stray sideways and stay in the middle of the path. Other members refrained from wearing Western clothes and shoes and eating meat since they were all evil foreign customs according to Nao. Onisaburō derided these practices as “superstitious, obstinate, and foolish” (*meishin gangu* 迷信頑愚) (ONS 1: 243).¹⁴ Despite his interest in nativist traditions, Onisaburō held a cosmopolitan and flexible attitude toward Western customs, maintaining that material advancements and innovations could be embraced so long as they were accompanied by spiritual growth.¹⁵

Onisaburō’s pragmatic—and, for some, inflammatory—outlook is illustrated by the following episode concerning the smallpox vaccine (*shutō* 種痘). As already mentioned, Onisaburō married one of Nao’s daughters, Deguchi Sumi 出口すみ. They had their first child, Deguchi Naohi 出口直日, in 1902. When the local authorities circulated a notice to have children vaccinated against smallpox, Nao protested and maintained that children must not be vaccinated. When Naohi was born, Nao had declared that the leadership of Omoto was to be inherited by a female in her lineage; it was incumbent, therefore, that Naohi’s body remained pure, not contaminated by a “foreign” technology like the smallpox vaccine.¹⁶ When the authorities levied a fine of twenty yen for noncompliance, some Omoto members argued that they should not pay the fine, since doing so would mean that Japan [Omoto] was defeated by a foreign power. A group of

13. At this point, the organization was called Kinmei Reigakukai 金明霊学会 and affiliated with another state-sanctioned organization called Inari Kōsha 稲荷講社.

14. This quote is a later recollection by Onisaburō about the early years of Omoto’s history. See also YASUMARU (1987, 184).

15. YASUMARU (1987, 186) characterizes Onisaburō’s relatively cosmopolitan attitude toward the West as emblematic of a strand of early modern nativist thought that actively incorporated Western and Christian knowledge (ONS 1: 269–270).

16. Nao was possibly also concerned about the origin of the vaccination technology being cowpox and potentially exposing her granddaughter to an “impure” substance deriving from an animal (*chikurui* 畜類) (YASUMARU 1987, 184–185; ONS 1: 249–250).

Omoto adherents stormed the local municipal office to express their displeasure about the vaccine mandate and the fine, leading to a confrontation with officials. Onisaburō, most likely not sharing the misgivings about the vaccine, secretly paid the fine to prevent further conflict with the authorities. This covert act angered Omoto followers close to Nao, further driving a wedge between them and Onisaburō (YASUMARU 1987, 184–186).¹⁷

The antagonism against Onisaburō among some Omoto members eventually reached a point where they refused to listen to his sermons, interfered with his proselytizing activities, and even burned some of his writings. Radicals attempted to assassinate Onisaburō as well, their plan thwarted only thanks to Onisaburō’s clairvoyance (ONS 1: 258–266). This antagonism intensified as Nao and her closest adherents’ millenarian expectation heightened in the early 1900s. During this time, Nao predicted a catastrophic end to the present world, accompanied by devastating natural disasters and other calamities through which a significant percentage of the world’s population would perish. Nao had expected this apocalypse to commence with Japan’s total defeat against Russia during the Russo-Japanese War. After this period of tribulation, an ideal world would emerge on earth.¹⁸ Onisaburō remained skeptical of these apocalyptic visions, dismissing them as pronouncements that “misled people” (YASUMARU 1987, 187–188).¹⁹ In March 1905, Onisaburō departed Ayabe temporarily to maintain some distance from the Omoto community (ONS 1: 277).

When Japan’s victory over Russia became apparent, many Omoto adherents were disillusioned with Nao’s apocalyptic prophecies. The membership dwindled precipitously, leaving Nao and her family in a state of dire poverty, to the point of struggling to secure enough food to feed themselves. Onisaburō rejoined the Ayabe community in 1908. Prior to his return, Onisaburō had acquired an official certificate as a shrine priest and had built connections with government-sanctioned Sect Shinto groups such as Ontakekyō 御嶽教 and Taiseikyō 大成教, preparing avenues through which to provide organizational legitimacy to Omoto (YASUMARU 1987, 227). From 1908 onward, Onisaburō’s leadership status in Omoto became indisputable. He quickly reformulated Nao’s eschatological prophecies into a utopian vision of world unification under the spiritual leadership of Japan and its Imperial Way. Onisaburō thus emerged triumphant over “superstitions” within the organization.

Onisaburō’s reformulation of Omoto continued, mostly in response to external pressures. The first suppression in 1921 occurred a few years after Nao’s

17. For more on the frictions between Onisaburō and the old-time followers of Nao, see ONS (1: 213–217).

18. For more on Nao’s apocalyptic visions, see YASUMARU (1987, 215–220) and OOMS (1993).

19. Onisaburō’s direct dismissal of some of Nao’s prophecies can be found in a copy of a text known as the “Great Origin of the Way” (*Michi no Ōmoto* 道の大本) attributed to Onisaburō.

passing in 1918. Onisaburō himself was arrested on 12 February and was charged with *lèse-majesté* as explained above. During his detainment, Onisaburō composed a document titled “Opinions on Improving Omoto” (*Ōmotokyō kairyō no iken* 大本教改良の意見), dated 4 May 1921. This document outlined the ways in which Onisaburō planned to rectify “problematic” elements within his organization. He dedicates a significant portion to discussing the positionality of the *Ofudesaki*, the central scripture of Omoto:

I first encountered the *Fudesaki* around 1899 or so.... At first, I was able to keep a calm attitude when reading the *Fudesaki*, and I was often labeled as a heretic by old-time members and Nao because of this. But over the last twenty years, I was gradually drawn in, and by 1917 or so, I had come to have a steadfast faith in the *Fudesaki*. As a result, I made a grave mistake at this time [that is, being arrested]. Thinking about it today, a *Fudesaki* purported to be written in a state of spirit possession is a trick of evil gods (*jashin no itazura* 邪神のイタヅラ) and brings nothing but harm.... I am determined to eliminate future causes of delusion by burning all the *Fudesaki* composed by Deguchi Nao and Deguchi Oni [Onisaburō] while being possessed.²⁰ (ONS 1: 592–593)

This document was made public by the authorities on 13 May 1921 and understandably caused consternation among Omoto adherents. Onisaburō later retracted the content of the document, claiming that he did not mean any of it (*kokoro nimo naki koto* 心にも無き事) and that he had composed the document merely to satisfy the authorities.²¹ Accordingly, Onisaburō did not follow through on his declaration to burn the *Ofudesaki*. What he did end up doing was curtail the importance placed on the *Ofudesaki* as the primary sacred text of Omoto. He sought to replace it with his own *Reikai monogatari* 霊界物語, a massive collection of teachings and allegories about the world of kami and its relationship to humanity. The shift from the *Ofudesaki* was most likely a deliberate move by Onisaburō since he knew that some content of the *Ofudesaki* had given the authorities ammunition to justify the *lèse-majesté* charge.²²

Another significant change that followed the first suppression was the official prohibition placed on the *chinkon kishin* practice involving spirit possession. Even before 1921, Onisaburō had been aware that the spirit possession technique was attracting unwelcome attention to Omoto, including that of notable detractors like Nakamura Kōkyō. Accordingly, he had warned about the danger of

20. Onisaburō had produced some *Ofudesaki* of his own.

21. Onisaburō gave elaborate explanations as to how and why this document was created, including a pragmatic one for wanting to bring the trial to a swift conclusion as well as a spiritual one involving spirits possessing him and guiding him to testify in a certain way (ONS 1: 591–595).

22. In fact, Omoto had received a warning about its publication of a collection of Nao’s prophecies prior to the first suppression (MURAKAMI 1978, 143–147).

uncontrolled spirit possession without a potent interrogator of spirits. Despite the warnings, the popularity of the *chinkon kishin* practice did not fade away. Onisaburō eventually issued an official ban on *chinkon kishin* in March 1923.²³ He thus significantly altered two important pillars of Omoto’s institutional growth, the *Ofudesaki* and the *chinkon kishin* technique, as direct measures to appease the authorities. Onisaburō reacted flexibly to changing circumstances and was observant of the ways in which certain practices within Omoto were perceived as superstitious by broader society.

Moreover, Onisaburō’s international endeavors in the 1920s and his political activism in the 1930s can be viewed as attempts to align Omoto with the expansionist and authoritarian agendas of the state. Onisaburō’s excursion to Mongolia, for example, was underpinned by a Japan-centric idea that Mongolia was to serve as a utopia where all religions coexist harmoniously and to which Japanese and colonial Korean subjects could migrate. During the 1910s and 1920s, Mongolia was romanticized in the Japanese imagination as a highly spiritual yet “uncivilized” or “uncultivated” region of the world. Onisaburō combined this Orientalist view of Mongolia with his vision of world unification in which Japan was to lead other countries as the original “parent country” or the “prototype of the world” (*sekai no hinagata* 世界の雛形) (STALKER 2008, 142–146).²⁴ Based on this same underlying framework, he established the Universal Love and Brotherhood Association (Jinrui Aizenkai 人類愛善会) in 1925 with the aim of promoting friendship and goodwill among all nations, but with Japan clearly in charge. Along with his ideal of “ten thousand teachings [from one] identical root,” this universalizing language helped to recast Japan’s expansionism through a soteriological lens. Although there is no concrete evidence that Onisaburō mapped out his international activities specifically for the purpose of self-promotion following the first suppression, the direct convergence between Onisaburō’s exploits on the Asian continent and the Japanese state’s paternalizing rhetoric of prosperity and civilization building is undeniable (MURAKAMI 1978, 160–179, 182–191).

Furthermore, Onisaburō began to reassert the centrality of the Imperial Way with renewed intensity in the early 1930s. As highlighted in the last section, Onisaburō frequently referenced the sacrality of the imperial family and called for a “unification of ritual and governance” (*saisei icchi* 祭政一致) through which the personhood of the emperor was invested with both suprahuman and political authority. In 1933, Omoto published a document titled “Basic Principles of Imperial Way Omoto” (*Kōdō Ōmoto shinjō* 皇道大本信条). This document

23. Even this official ban did not convince some Omoto adherents to stop engaging in the practice (STAEMMLER 2009, 231–239).

24. For more on the idea of *hinagata* and the role it played in Onisaburō’s international vision, see MIURA (2019, 154–174).

actively associates Omoto's doctrine with state-sponsored Shinto, describing the emperor as "the most noble and precious living kami who is to reign over the world." The document also explicates the relationship between the imperial family and Ushitora no Konjin, the main Omoto deity addressed here by its more formal name of Ōkunitokotachi no Mikoto 大国常立尊:

We believe that our ancestral deity Ōkunitokotachi no Mikoto, having received a divine order from Amaterasu Sume Ōmikami 天照皇大神, is executing the work of the Rebuilding and Renewal of the World and presides over the phenomenon and spiritual worlds as a great protector deity who establishes order and peace. (ONS 2: 135–136)

Here Ushitora no Konjin/Ōkunitokotachi no Mikoto is placed in a subordinate role under the authority of Amaterasu. The central Omoto message of world transformation is made possible only under the beneficence of the imperial deity, implying a clear hierarchical relationship between the imperial institution and Omoto. Onisaburō's performative allegiance to the imperial family manifested in Omoto's auxiliary organizations as well. In particular, the Showa Sacred Association (Shōwa Shinseikai 昭和神聖会) engaged in overt nationalistic campaigns calling for the integration of the Imperial Way into all aspects of life including politics, economy, and education.²⁵ Onisaburō went all in, proclaiming that Japanese citizens had "heavenly endowed" duties to respect the gods, revere the emperor, and serve their nation as "subjects of the imperial country" (*kōkoku shinmin* 皇国臣民) (ONS 2: 136).

In the end, however, the second and more intense suppression in 1935 demonstrated that Onisaburō's relentless compliance with the emperor system and attempts to prove that his movement was not superstitious were futile. Superstition was superstition in the eyes of the state. No amount of posturing, repositioning, and negotiation could change that fact. In the mid-1930s, Omoto might have been "one of the staunchest supporters of the emperor" (GARON 1997, 77), but it was still an evil cult.

Conclusion

Onisaburō is often depicted as a figure who was larger than life, someone who defied conventions and commonsensical expectations. Yet, as the leader of Omoto, he responded cautiously to shifting circumstances and paid close attention to both how his movement presented itself and how it was perceived by the rest of society (MURAKAMI 1978, 200–201). He maneuvered carefully around the discursive contours of superstition and attempted to extricate Omoto from that categorization

25. The association vocally opposed the so-called "organ theory" concerning the seat of the emperor (*ten'nō kikan setsu* 天皇機関説) (ONS 2: 165–174, 190–198).

by first internalizing the discourse and then projecting it outward. His vision of Omoto was to contribute to the prosperity of a “modern” and “enlightened” Japan by realizing the true Imperial Way, unlike numerous “superstitions” that abound in the world. The very discourse mobilized against movements like Omoto could paradoxically be employed as a lens for legitimization.

From obtaining an official shrine certificate to affiliating with a reputable Sect Shinto group to echoing expansionist propagandas of the state, Onisaburō worked tirelessly to be liberated from the stigma of superstition. Put differently, Onisaburō sought to align Omoto with the mandates of the “Shinto secular” in extremely overt ways (JOSEPHSON 2012, 254–255). Ultimately, he was rejected. The boundary between the Shinto secular and superstition was not to be disrupted. It was incumbent for the state that Onisaburō remain the face of backward and perverse superstition, so that state authority and legitimacy were kept intact. The irony is that the closer Onisaburō approached the Shinto secular by reforming Omoto to meet the demands of the state, the more threatening he became as a potential disrupter of the boundary between the secular and superstition. The intensity of the two suppressions Omoto suffered attests to how sacrosanct the imperial regime held this boundary.

This article has mostly dealt with the writings of Onisaburō himself. Further research is necessary to understand the perspectives of ordinary Omoto members, many of whom were attracted to the movement because of the material blessings promised through the *chinkon kishin* spirit possession technique, perhaps not so different from the people Onisaburō criticized in his essays. More work is also needed to illuminate how other religious leaders in positions similar to that of Onisaburō responded to society at large labeling them as superstitious. For example, an examination of movements such as Konkōkyō and Tenrikyo and their response to the charge of superstition would yield meaningful comparative perspectives.²⁶ Based on findings in this article, it is likely that these movements did not simply resign themselves to being attacked and that they proactively renegotiated the boundaries of religion, superstition, and the (Shinto) secular. I further surmise that these movements and their adherents did not fundamentally reject the notion of superstition but, like Onisaburō, employed it to advance their own positions. For now, Onisaburō’s writings provide us with an alternative angle through which to understand the history of the concept of superstition in modern Japan and the ways in which different actors sought to appropriate it in their search for legitimacy. As Onisaburō once put it, “We are working earnestly and tirelessly for our country and our lord, dedicating our lives to the great path of the kami’s divine light and spreading our gratitude for the kami’s

26. For a preliminary analysis on this topic, see KATSURAJIMA (2015, 250–269).

beneficence and the virtues of our imperial family. How could anyone ever say we were superstitious and delusional?” (DOZ 2: 614).

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- DOZ *Deguchi Onisaburō zenshū* 出口王仁三郎全集. 8 vols. Deguchi Onisaburō. Manyūsha, 1934–1935.
- ONS *Ōmoto nanajūnenshi* 大本七十年史. 2 vols. Ed. Ōmoto Nanajūnenshi Hensankai 大本七十年史編纂会. Tenseisha, 1964–1967.
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