

REVIEWS

H. Byron EARHART, *Gedatsu-Kai and Religion in Contemporary Japan: Returning to the Center*. Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1989. Illustrated; xviii + 280pp. Hardcover US\$57.50. ISBN 0-253-3500707.

Students and scholars of Japanese religion are once again indebted to Earhart for the publication of this comprehensive case-study of Gedatsu-kai, a medium-size new religion with some 368 local meeting places and approximately 200,000 adherents. The thoroughness of this volume is undoubtedly related to the fact that Earhart spent almost two decades working with this material. In addition, Miyake Hitoshi (Keiō University) and his seminar students collaborated with Earhart in both field research (participant observation, interviews) and in conducting the nationwide survey of this movement. Readers should note that a Japanese volume presenting the results of this team research was published several years ago (EARHART and MIYAKE 1983).

One of the primary concerns of this study was to provide an "inside" view of Gedatsu-kai. To do so, Earhart adopted the life-history method. While at times the details of numerous life-histories become somewhat tedious, the approach provides the reader with a sympathetic introduction into the religious world of both the leaders and average members. In order to supplement the view of Gedatsu-kai which emerges from the limited number of life-histories, Earhart presents the results of a nation-wide survey which was conducted with the cooperation of Gedatsu-kai officials and the assistance of Miyake and his students (of the 18,000 questionnaires distributed, over 5,000 were returned and provide the basis for this analysis). Here we learn that Gedatsu-kai is essentially a working-class movement whose membership is disproportionately female (64.5%). We also are informed of the plurality of motives related to involvement in Gedatsu-kai, the patterns of membership recruitment, and the religious behavior of members before and after joining.

A particular strength of this work is the manner in which Earhart clarifies both what is "old" and what is "new" in this movement. The analysis of the founder indicates the indebtedness of Okano to the beliefs and traditions of Buddhism and Shintoism. The kami, ancestors, spirits, shrines and temples of Japanese folk religion are all important elements of this new religion. The innovations provided by Okano include the *amacha* 天茶供養 memorial ritual, the mediation ritual of *gohō shugyō* 五法修業, and the organization of his followers into a new voluntary association. In spite of these new elements Gedatsu-kai is in many respects a revitalization movement of traditional Japanese religiosity.

In fact, involvement in Gedatsu-kai leads to increased participation in traditional religious practices, such as worship before a *kamidana* and *butsudān*, and visits to the local Shinto shrine and to the family Buddhist parish temple (pp. 108–20).

This study also includes an organizational analysis of Gedatsu-kai at the local, regional, and national levels (chapters 5 and 6). As this section is guided by a historical perspective we are provided with a case-study of the routinization of “charisma.” Although Gedatsu-kai is at present a “lay” religion, there is clearly a pull towards increasing “professionalization.” The difficulties of lay leadership and the maintenance of centers in the homes of branch leaders is encouraging some to consider the development of “church” buildings (pp. 162–69). Only a follow-up study in two or three decades will reveal the accuracy of Earhart’s prognosis here.

In the final chapter of this study Earhart returns to consider the innovative elements provided by Okano and their relevance for addressing the larger theoretical questions surrounding the birth and development of new religions. Following a critique of Western reductionistic accounts which attribute the birth of new religions solely to social crisis and anomic conditions, Earhart develops a model which draws attention to prior religious influences and the innovations brought about by founders in such movements. This framework provides a helpful corrective to approaches which ignore religious elements and attribute the emergence of new religions to rapid social change, social dislocation, or some form of deprivation.

In spite of the strengths of this monograph, I was nevertheless disappointed to find that much of the last chapter focused upon rather dated Western theories of new religions and failed to interact with the recent Japanese scholarship in this area (the work of Shimazono, Nishiyama, and Numata, for example). And since the title of this work includes “Religion in Contemporary Japan,” it does not seem unfair to expect the significance of Gedatsu-kai to be related to the more recent “religious boom” and proliferation of *shinshin shūkyō* or Neo-New Religions. I also found myself unconvinced by Earhart’s concluding remarks regarding the internationalization of this movement. This point deserves additional comment.

Although this movement has been closely connected with nationalistic shrines and the imperial household throughout its history, Earhart suggests that more recently an “international” orientation is emerging: “Gedatsu-kai has expanded and elaborated national values into international values” (p. 242). The author, however, provides no concrete evidence for significant changes in this regard. Perhaps in recent years the nationalistic dimensions of this new religion have received less emphasis than in earlier periods. Nevertheless, latent nationalism is surely present in a religion which emphasizes respect and loyalty to the imperial family and pilgrimages to its national shrines. The nationalistic orientation of Gedatsu-kai is institutionalized in the Three Holy Sites pilgrimage (*sanseichi junpai* 三聖地巡拝), which involves visits to Sennyū-ji, Ise

Shrine, and Kashiwara Shrine, all sacred sites connected to the Imperial household (p. 36). Pictures of the imperial household are also “conspicuously displayed in Gedatsu-kai headquarters, practice halls, and branch meeting places” (p. 113). The national survey of this movement revealed that over 30% of the membership visits Ise Shrine each year and approximately one in four members visit Yasukuni Shrine (either annually or from time to time). The difficulty of transcending these nationalistic roots and rituals becomes clear in ISHII’s (1983) study of Gedatsu-kai in America. His study revealed that 95% of the Los Angeles Gedatsu-kai membership is still Japanese-American and that movement outside of the ethnic community is fraught with difficulties. For such reasons, I find it difficult to accept Earhart’s final interpretive comment.

These remarks, however, should be understood as only minor criticisms. Overall, this is a very fine study which shows both the fruitfulness of combining multiple strategies of data-collection as well as the value of collaborating closely with Japanese researchers. In many respects it provides a high standard and model for future studies of its kind.

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