

Emily Groszos OOMS, *Women and Millenarian Protest in Meiji Japan: Deguchi Nao and Ōmotokyō*. Cornell East Asia Series, Vol. 61. Ithaca: East Asia Program, Cornell University, 1993. xiv + 146 pp. ISBN 0-939657-61-9.

Ōmotokyō is a prototypical and very influential New Religion that has spawned a whole family of “world-renewal” New Religions, among them Mahikari, Sekai Kyūseikyō, and Seichō no Ie. It is therefore gratifying that, with Emily Ooms’s *Women and Millenarian Protest in Meiji Japan*, we now have a systematic study of its foundress, Deguchi Nao (1836–1918). The first monograph on this subject in English, this book not only describes the transformation of a downtrodden peasant woman into a courageous critic of oppression in *fin-de-siècle* society but also addresses the roles of class and gender in the articulation of social protest via a shamanic idiom. Originally written as an M.A. thesis for the University of Chicago in 1984, it makes one wonder what Ooms could possibly write for her Ph.D. that could surpass this study for sound scholarship. Anne Walthall has provided the volume with a foreword.

Women and Millenarian Protest in Meiji Japan avoids plunging immediately into the fascinating and complex life history of Nao, and I think Ooms is right to do so. Even academic audiences sympathetic to the study of religion need an introduction to the psychodynamics and sociocultural framework of shamanism before a person like Nao can be properly appreciated. Ooms lays this preliminary groundwork in her opening chapter “*Kamigakari* [spirit-possession]: A Source of Transformative Knowledge,” which, although not entirely original, is painstakingly researched and based on good authority (e.g., SAKURAI 1974–77). While Ooms does not deny that a shaman’s altered state of consciousness may be due in part to pathological factors, her empha-

sis is rather on the creative aspects of such an experience, and she argues convincingly that the experience was genuinely transformative in the case of Nao and the other women and men who founded New Religions. In such instances, “*kamigakari* is not only a mode of behavior associated with the release of formerly repressed emotions; it is also a cognitive process through which prevailing models of reality may be expressed or new ones constructed” (p. 12). But the symbolic articulation of the creative vision must project a reality that is recognizable to others or it will be rejected as merely idiosyncratic. Nao’s vision was accepted, at least by some people, and in acquiring her own identity through *kamigakari* her symbolic language came to be regarded as vastly meaningful. But by whom?

Ooms addresses this question in her second chapter, “Experience and Consciousness: The Historical Context.” Here she charts the course of Nao’s life and presents evidence that her followers, at least initially, were the marginalized rural peasantry and landless laborers who, like her, had been victimized by the process of modernization. Unlike her, however, few of them had a “voice”; Nao, having found hers in the experience of possession by the god Ushitora no Konjin, was able to give expression to their sufferings and aspirations.

Ooms bases her interpretation of Nao on a theodicy (my word) that explains evil as due to malevolent spirits who have driven Ushitora from the world over which he rightly reigns. Ooms uses the concept of conventional morality (*tsūzoku dōtoku*) to account for the tensions that accumulated in Nao until her cathartic experience of *kamigakari*: Nao, if nothing else, was a woman who embodied the virtues most acclaimed in that era (obedience, honesty, frugality, etc.), but who enjoyed none of the happiness or prosperity that their practice was supposed to bring. Of course, Nao was hardly alone in her travail, and Ooms therefore regards her as typical of many of her socio-economic class. Knowing herself to be virtuous and yet living on the brink of abject impoverishment, Nao could only attribute her misery to a world gone awry. She found solace in the hope of a more just world to be constructed following the return of Ushitora.

As a life history, Ooms’s portrait of Nao is virtually irreproachable, being both rich in detail and thematically coherent. My only regret is that in the decade since 1984 (when I first discovered her thesis and cited it in several of my own studies of Ōmoto) she has not updated her citations from the *Ofudesaki* [Tip of the writing brush], Nao’s record of the revelations she received from Ushitora. It is true that recovery of the original text has been notoriously difficult: some portions may have been destroyed when Ōmoto was twice suppressed by the state (1921 and 1935); others appear to have been withheld from the public by Ōmoto itself; and, most troublesome of all, Deguchi Onisaburō (Ōmoto’s cofounder, whose views differed from Nao’s in significant respects) purged *Ofudesaki* of much of its most radical content. Thus an *Urtext* is unfortunately out of the question, but nowadays one must not overlook IKEDA’s authoritative reconstruction of *Ofudesaki* in *Ōmoto shiryō shūsei*, available since 1982.

I heartily endorse Ooms’s contention in chapter 3, “A New Vision of

Reality: Structure and Content,” that “there is an unfortunate tendency among historians of Japanese religion to underestimate the importance of the cognitive or conceptual dimension of the new religions” (p. 87). But I wonder if she has not overstated her case that the cognitive structure of Nao’s vision of world-renewal (*yonaooshi*) amounts to “millenarianism.” In her preface she writes, “It is generally acknowledged that Ōmotokyō, in the early years when Nao’s influence was strongest (1900–1905), represents the most complete manifestation of millenarian thought and action in Japanese history” (p. 3). This seems a rather sweeping statement, despite the fact that the theoretical basis on which she develops her argument is straightforward and in accordance with the conventional definition (COHN [1970], who sees millenarianism as “collective,” “terrestrial,” “imminent,” “total,” and “miraculous”). I remain unconvinced, however, that “millenarian” is a term wholly congenial to the description of a religion generated by a society and culture that does not appear to favor absolute ethical contrasts. To be sure, much of the rhetoric of the early Nao is irrepressibly strident in its denunciation of the capitalistic and imperialistic hegemony that grew at the expense of Japan’s “little people,” and Ooms almost succeeds in abstracting from the *Ofudesaki* a paradigm that can at least loosely be characterized as millenarian. But it should be kept in mind that in Nao’s view not even Ushitora was irreproachably good; he, like other deities, ordinary people, and even Emperor Meiji, was susceptible to self-exaltation, for which he had been driven into exile in order to “polish the mirror” of his own soul.

There is here not merely the absence of an absolute dichotomy between good and evil, but also the lack of compelling evidence of anarchic behavior. Nao and her immediate followers were simply too conventionally moral to permit the kind of conduct that Ooms nonetheless labels “fanatical.” Stinging though Nao’s rebuke of the Meiji emperor was, I am unconvinced that she imagined a world without him. I believe that she assumed he would still be there when the renewal of the world was complete, ruling but not lording it over his equally selfless subjects. Although one delights in finding in Japanese religious history a woman oppressed but not vanquished, the extent of the changes that Nao envisioned seem exaggerated by calling them millenarian.

I think that Ooms is by no means wholly wrong, but certainly not altogether right. Ōmotokyō under Nao was basically a folk religion premised on a symptomatic belief called “vitalism,” which holds that people of pure hearts flourish and enjoy the benefits of the cosmos while the arrogant and ungrateful do not, thereby imperiling themselves and others. Nao’s innovation was to articulate this well-recognized principle in relation to the actual socioeconomic and political conditions of her time, and to do so with a stunning temerity. It should be noted for the record, incidentally, that Ooms’s use of the term “millenarian” has already been questioned by MIYATA Mami, the author of another M.A. thesis (1989) on Nao that deserves wider attention than it has yet received.

Ooms concludes her study of Ōmotokyō with a perceptive essay entitled “Women and Gender in the New Religions.” This pivots largely around Nao but deals more broadly with the subject of the liberating freedom that

Japanese women often experience in the New Religions. Gender roles in Nao's time were strictly circumscribed except insofar as mediumship was concerned, and the prevailing presumptions concerning soteriological eligibility certainly favored men over women. Ooms presents a fascinating discussion of how Nao redefined certain Buddhist terms in order to explain what to her was a gender anomaly: that she, an insignificant person and—worse yet—a woman, had become Ushitora's chosen vehicle to announce to the world its impending renewal. In resolving this anomaly, Nao envisioned a society in which gender would not disqualify women from enjoying the benefits of virtue either in this world or in the afterlife. Reading Ooms convinces me that the creative resources of women like Nao have indeed exerted a powerful influence on the contemporary character of the Japanese New Religions. There is, moreover, something truly appealing about this stern and long-suffering individual that makes one heartily regret her preemption in Ōmotokyō by Onisaburō during the little-known last decade of her life.

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