

Gender and the Millenium in Omotokyo, A Japanese New Religion

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Gender and the Millenium in Ōmotokyō, A Japanese New Religion

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1. INTRODUCTION

The new religions of Japan present the historian of religions with impressive examples of religious change. Of these, none is more significant than the appearance of large numbers of women in active and powerful positions in virtually all lay societies founded since 1800. This represents major change from women's participation in more traditional religious associations such as the parishes of temples and shrines. Women's participation in the new religions has been facilitated by such attitudes as anticlericalism and, since the Meiji Restoration of 1868, social changes such as the universalization of compulsory education and urbanization, all of which have loosened the hold of older religious associations.

These changes alone do not, however, account for women's phenomenal participation in new religious movements. That phenomenon rests not only upon parallel religious and social change, but also upon religious innovation in thought about women.

Women's participation in the new religions differs in its relation to soteriology from that relationship in other religious groups. Women's roles in the Buddhist or Shintō parish have largely been restricted to serving male clerics or assisting male lay leaders through the performance of domestic services (cooking, laundering, cleaning), and these services have not linked to the salvation of the women concerned. Furthermore, an ideology of pollution has been used to bar women from clerical roles and to say that it is more difficult for them to achieve salvation than men, if not impossible. For women or men in temple Buddhism or shrine Shintō, salvation is likely to be viewed as a distant goal, over which laypersons have limited control, and which depends heavily upon clerical mediation.

By contrast, in the new religions salvation is typically believed near at hand and within the believer's power to effect. Pollution notions, while present, are used in a different way and do not typically constitute a barrier either to women's full ritual participation or to their enjoyment of the rewards of dedicated practice. Women expect to experience such this-worldly miracles as healing of the body and repair of fragmented human relations, and they anticipate that improved health and relationships will result in greater economic stability and good fortune. They exert themselves vigorously to bring about these results and understand their achievement to constitute proof of salvations's imminence.

Women's sustained participation in this mode of religious activity in such large numbers and over nearly two centuries would be inconceivable without basic changes in religious consciousness, leading them to believe that such achievements are indeed possible. Such religious innovation took a radical form in Ōmotokyō (founded 1892). Its foundress Deguchi Nao (1836–1919) developed revolutionary notion of gender transformation which stood contemporary notions on their heads.

2. DEGUCHI NAO AND THE FOUNDING OF ŌMOTO

Born in a rural area northwest of Kyōto, rapidly industrializing through the establishment of textile factories, Deguchi Nao's direct experience of social dislocation undoubtedly lay in the background of her later denunciation of the political order and of her view of the world as ruled by evil forces.

Her biography as written by adherents verges on hagiography. Raised in the Jōdo Shinshū school of Buddhism, and desiring in her youth to become a nun, Nao had no formal education and was illiterate. Nevertheless, her later writings frequently referred to popular Buddhist teachings, and it is clear that she had more knowledge of the tradition than one would expect from someone who could neither read nor write. In spite of her desire to avoid marriage, her parents forced her into an arranged marriage, and she gave birth to eight children. Her husband, a carpenter, was an alcoholic and completely useless as a provider for his large family. It was up to Nao to earn a living for them, which she did through increasingly menial occupations, finally reduced to rag-picking. Through no moral failing of her own—indeed, she was thought to be the embodiment of virtue—she suffered great poverty and hardship. Her husband died when she was fifty-three, and two of her daughters went mad [ŌMOTO NANAJŪNENSHI HENSANKAI 1964, vol. 1].

Nao fell into a state of intense spirit possession on the lunar New Year of 1892, when she was fifty-six. Thereafter she continued to receive revelations, and in the following year she was judged by the local constabulary to be insane and was confined to a cell. There, using only a nail to scratch crude characters on the wall, she began to write down the words of the deity possessing her, Ushitora no Konjin, and this divinely inspired writing by an illiterate is cited as a great miracle. Collectively her writings are known as *The Brush Tip (Ofudesaki)*. The deity she deemed responsible for her revelations was popularly believed to be an evil guardian of the

northeast, prone to drive people mad through uncontrolled possession, but Nao developed a contrary interpretation which we will examine below.

Struggling to articulate the meaning of her revelations and continuing states of possession, Nao became affiliated with other new religions of the day, Tenrikyō (founded 1838) and Konkōkyō (founded 1859). Although she enjoyed some success as a healer, however, she remained unsatisfied with the explanation these organizations gave her experience. Naturally they said that Nao's revelations came from other deities than Ushitora no Konjin, namely their own deities, and they refused to help her from any alternative interpretation.

Thus in 1892 Nao was widely regarded by secular authorities as an ignorant peasant woman who was probably mad and by contemporary religious leaders as significant only to the extent that she would accept and promulgate a doctrine originating in the revelations of their organizations' founders. She was not yet able to use spirit possession to launch an independent message of her own, a situation that continued for six years.

In 1898 Nao met Ueda Kisaburō, a man widely experienced in the new religions of the time as well as in techniques of divination and other minor arts of the occult. Nao arranged for him to marry her daughter Sumi in 1900. Throughout their relationship, Nao used Kisaburō, who later changed his name to Onisaburō, to systematize her revelations. As Onisaburō put it, he was Nao's *saniwa*, the male who interprets and proclaims the utterances of a female shaman made in trance. He was also a skilled organizer. They were entirely dependent upon each other in the business of building a religious organization, and either without the other would probably have ended as a minor figure on the fringes of the religious world, a founder manqué, but their combination was highly potent. With Onisaburō's help, Nao was able to attract a following and to articulate a systematic doctrine with continuing revelations received through spirit possession as its basis of authority. A central component of her message concerned gender.

3. THE ORIGINS OF ŌMOTO'S GENDER CONSTRUCTION

Nao's ideas about gender did not arise in a vacuum, but constituted innovations on Buddhist themes she encountered early in life. Foremost among these is *henjōnanshi*, the idea that in order to attain salvation, women must first change into males. Nao might have known of this theme in one or both of two ways: as it is presented in the Jōdo Shinshū school of Buddhism, with which she had been affiliated in childhood, or as it is presented in the Lotus Sutra, which has in popular Japanese Buddhism a kind of ecumenical, non-sectarian character.

In one of the three sutras principally revered in Jōdo Shinshū, the Larger Sūkavatī Vyūha (Sutra of Eternal Life), the main Buddha of the school, Amida, makes forty-eight vows. These promises to the faithful take the form: "if I do not fulfill this promise, may I fail to attain the highest enlightenment." The thirty-fifth vow is a promise that all women devotees will come to despise their gender, be

reborn as males, and never again suffer rebirth as a female. The technical term for this transformation of sex is *henjōnanshi*, “changing into a male.” Amida’s thirty-fifth vow is a promise that women can experience *henjōnanshi* and hence be saved:

If, upon my obtaining Buddhahood, women in all the immeasurable and inconceivable Buddha-worlds in the ten quarters should not, hearing my Name, be filled with joy and trust and awaken their thoughts to enlightenment and loathe their femininity, and if in another birth they should again assume the female body, may I not attain the highest enlightenment [SUZUKI 1973: 47].

In Jōdo Shinshū as elsewhere in Japanese Buddhism, the idea that women can be saved only to the extent that they become like men is upheld, and the female body is despised as polluted and unworthy of rebirth in the Pure Land [JŌDOSHŪ DAIJITEN HENSAN IINKAI 1980, vol. 4: 140].

The idea of *henjōnanshi* has its *locus classicus* in the Lotus Sutra, one of the most widely known and cherished texts of the East Asian Buddhist tradition. In it a female *naga*, a chthonic being combining aspects of the snake and dragon, is called upon to prove that she has fully mastered the Buddha’s teaching, here treated as the penultimate event preceding the achievement of supreme, perfect enlightenment, making the practitioner equivalent to Buddha [PAUL 1979: 185–190].

When the Buddha acknowledged her mastery of Dharma, this female *naga* sat at the foot of a tree, “exchanged the female root for the male,” and, thus having become male, attained Buddhahood [HURVITZ 1976: 200–202]. This text is often cited as evidence that women in Buddhism are theoretically able to attain the religion’s highest goal. Note, however, that they do not do so *as* women, but only after becoming males. Important Buddhist schools in Japan have recommended this text to followers as proof of Buddhism’s compassion towards women [KASAHARA 1975; MOCHIZUKI 1962, 1963].¹⁾

The text’s peculiar logic of transforming sex is based on earlier texts delineating the so-called “thirty-two marks of Buddhahood,” physical signs without which no one can be recognized as having fully attained Buddhahood. Besides long earlobes, the marks of wheels on the palms and soles of the feet, snail-like curls, the characteristic lump on the top of the skull and the furry mole in the middle of the

1) Each of the great Kamakura founders had something to say on the subject, but of them Nichiren (1222–1282) went the farthest, denying that any hindrances apply to women in the Latter Days of the Dharma, which Japan was supposed to have entered in 1052. He viewed the Lotus Sutra as the only text offering a clear and certain assurance of salvation. See Kasahara, 1975 for a review of medieval Buddhist thought on *henjōnanshi* and related themes. In treating a change of sex as a requirement for women’s final salvation, the tradition necessarily commits itself to the notion that sex change is indeed possible, so the next question is “How?” The Nichiren school of Japanese Buddhism has devoted much thought and commentarial literature to this topic. In general the commentaries recommend adherence to conventional notions of women’s subordination to elders, affines, and males in general, meditation upon women’s supposedly greater karmic hindrances and hatred of the female body.

forehead, all Buddhas should possess male genitals. Thus when women ask how they may attain Buddhahood, the only possible answer is, "You can't get there from here." Women must undergo a change of sex. Men need not change sex to attain salvation.²⁾

Related to *henjōnanshi* is the idea that women suffer from greater karmic hindrances than men. The theme of women's supposedly worse karmic hindrances is a popular theme found widely in virtually all schools of Japanese Buddhism, and its logic runs, "Women's karma is worse than men's because they are women, and therefore they are reborn as women, and so they accumulate more negative karma, and therefore they come to be reborn as women again," and so on, around and around. Among contemporary Japanese Buddhist women, this idea is frequently used to explain what they would call "women's lot": namely, the relegation of women to subordinate positions relative to men in virtually every sphere. The only way out is somehow to be reborn as a male [HARDACRE 1984: 197–208].

4. ŌMOTO'S GENDER CONSTRUCTION

By 1900 Nao had developed the basic scheme of ideas she held until her death in 1918, though as time went on she elaborated upon it, including new characters from Buddhist and Shintō myth, and formulating the political implications of her views. The following is a brief overview.

In the beginning of the world, the god Ushitora no Konjin ordained that Nao would become the Transformed Male (*henjōnanshi*), having a male nature in a female body, destined to bring about the renovation of the world after many rebirths, in which profound suffering would prepare Nao to ring in the millennium. In the interim, Ushitora no Konjin was himself displaced by the lesser, evil gods who now rule the world, and was banished to an obscure position.

In the present age, also the last age, Nao was completely transformed by Ushitora no Konjin, so that while her sex remained female, her "nature" (*shō, jō*), that is, her gender, became male, and henceforth she was known as the Transformed Male. Nao invented a neologism having the same pronunciation but written with different characters than the Buddhist term, and she reinterpreted the basic idea to mean a symbolic change of gender rather than a change of sex.

The Transformed Male works in concert with the Transformed Female (*henjōnyoshi*), a term that has no antecedents in traditional Buddhist terminology, namely, her co-founder Onisaburō, who underwent a parallel change when the deity next in pre-eminence to Ushitora no Konjin, Hitsujisaru Konjin, guardian of the southwest, ordained that Onisaburō would become the Transformed Female after eons of suffering like Nao's, only not as long. Like her, his sex remained the same,

2) There are stories of women becoming bodhisattavas and Buddhas without sex transformation, but these are quite rare and less well known than the Lotus Sutra story. See Paul, *Women in Buddhism*, chapters 6 and 8.

but his “nature” was changed to women’s; he became a female spirit in a male body.

The two of them together will preside over an apocalypse in which society will be turned upside down, the wicked put down and the good exalted; this is the “world renewal, world renovation,” (*tatekae, tatenashi*).

Nao explained her understanding of the terms *Transformed Male* and *Transformed Female* as follows:

I am a woman but have the nature (*shōrai*) of a male, and Onisaburō is a man but has the nature of a women [IKEDA 1982, vol. 1: 124].

In this short passage Nao called into question the idea that sex and gender are necessarily isomorphic. She split the two and asserted that they do not have to match, that it is possible for a male persona to inhabit a female body and female persona to inhabit a male body.

Nao’s use of language illustrates a distinction between sex and gender. She used *onna* (women) and *otoko* (man) to refer to anatomical differentiation, and *nyoshi* and *nanshi* to refer to the character traits stereotypically attributed to females and males, respectively. She had this to say on the parallel transformations that occurred within herself and Onisaburō:

In the beginning Ushitora no Konjin appeared in me for the protection of the world. Next, Hitsujisaru Konjin appeared in the Transformed Female. Thus it is that a woman became a man, and provides divine protection to the world. A man had to become a woman, to be so transformed that no further change was possible, for the divine protection of the world. To become the Transformed Male and Transformed Female...is a hardship indeed [IKEDA 1982, vol. 1: 99].

Nao’s ideas on the significance of combining one sex with another gender in the same individual are made clearer by her remarks on why only a woman could accomplish her mission.

In this age of the world, women can accomplish anything. The gods hold women to be their true heralds. In future women will serve even more. Men are difficult [for the gods to use as their messengers] because their egotism always obtrudes [IKEDA 1982, vol. 1: 48].

I am a woman, but because I have hardened [myself] through suffering for ages past, I can do anything [IKEDA 1982, vol. 1: 128].

If I had a male body, I could not accomplish the awesome, divine mission [YASUMARU 1977: 136].

It is precisely because I am a woman that I have been able to endure spiritual training thus far [so far as to become the Transformed Male] [YASUMARU 1977: 136].

Deguchi Nao is the vessel of the Transformed Male; the same spirit in a male

body could not endure until the end of the world...Ōmoto will always be headed by a woman because a man cannot survive through the last age [IKEDA 1982: 49].

Here Nao states that women have superior qualities of endurance and perseverance and are able to subordinate their egos to the will of the gods, qualities that become for her primary characteristics of female gender. Her prolonged suffering uniquely qualified her to become the Transformed Male. Having fully assimilated the female hallmarks of endurance and perseverance through eons of suffering, she become qualified to take on the assertiveness, severity, violence, and authority of a male, and justified in doing so. Note that while Nao had split sex and gender, her characterization of femaleness and maleness remained highly conventional, identifying perseverance, self-effacement, and modesty with the former and initiative, force, and authority with the latter.

Besides the doctrinal, expository use of the terms *henjōnanshi*, Transformed Male, and *henjōnyoshi*, Transformed Female, Nao also used this gendered dyad to control Onisaburō and lesser leaders:

The Transformed Female had better be careful. ...The Transformed Female wants to assert herself too much. For a woman, her ego is outrageous. Egotism is bad...As a male, I am calm and resolute. [Onisaburō] is a woman... she must achieve resolution and calm....The suffering of the Transformed Female is brief, and she must shut it up within herself, depending upon no one else [IKEDA 1982, vol. 1: 115].

Clearly these are threats: if Onisaburō does not accept Nao's control, he will regret it. The two shouted at each other when they were in trance, and Nao occasionally spoke of a war between them, a struggle between good and evil or between charismatic powers and book-learning. Strife between Nao and Onisaburō was in essence a struggle for power to control their growing organization [ŌMOTO NANAJŪNENSHI HENSANKAI 1964, vol. 1: 194, 245]. Here we can see how the terms *Transformed Male* and *Transformed Female* provided a language for talking about something else: competition for status and authority, and, thus, how Ōmoto's concept of gender could acquire political significance.

In the Buddhist problem of *henjōnanshi*, the solution proposed to women, however impossible of implementation, was to become a male. Nao rejected that proposal, based on her negative assessment of male traits, mainly egotism, which she found no improvement over stereotyped female traits. She broke through the circular logic of *henjōnanshi* by holding up an entirely new being, and she denied Buddhist theory's high valuation on male qualities by requiring her male co-founder, metaphorically, to undergo a transformation paralleling her own. Her rationale was that the imminent millenium would be established by their mutual effort, based on their full assimilation of the qualities of the opposite gender. Spirit possession was her authority for the entire complex of ideas [OOMS 1984].

5. GNEDER AND THE MILLENIUM

Nao spoke of a grasp of the relation between the Transformed Male and the Transformed Female as key to an understanding of her teaching. Linking these ideas directly to the millenium, she prophesied:

When the great changes of the world have been set in motion and swell to a peak, and when you understand the destiny of the Transformed Male and the Transformed Female, you will understand the entire universe.....Until now, this world has been controlled by the wicked, but the world will change, and evil will be changed to good... [IKEDA 1983, vol. 1: 116].

The renovation of the world could not happen without...the Transformed Male and the Transformed Female....Their suffering will bring peace to the world [IKEDA 1982, vol. 1: 125].

Ōmoto's soteriology was based on the motif of reversal. Nao's mythology of Ushitora no Konjin's displacement paralleled her own history of long suffering and obscurity. For both herself and her deity she forecast an imminent redressing of wrong, in which political leaders would be cast out and a reign of righteousness would be established by the Transformed Male and the Transformed Female.

The rulers of the world stand at its peak and look down on the people below, giving them misery. They think that as long as they themselves are satisfied, the life of humble people doesn't matter, so they take no pity upon the people. But this way of the world will not long endure. I will renovate the world and cause these leaders to awaken [YASUMARU 1977: 194].

If the laws are not changed, the weak will perish while the strong survive....But the renovation of the world is at hand. I give you warning that many will suffer [YASUMARU 1977].

Humble people have to work without even a day of respite in heat and cold, or they cannot feed themselves. It surpasses endurance. But their governors fine and punish them for the slightest tardiness in payment of loans and taxes. They think money grows on trees, and they use it as if scattering ashes [YASUMARU 1977: 195].

Nao freely criticized the imperial house and its ancestral deities, whose main seat of worship was the Ise Grand Shrine. This passage calls the emperor a beast ruling by usurpation:

The land of Ise and its shrine are disgraced. Those deities have no power of divine protection. The [true] gods have ascended to heaven. On earth are left only the beastly deities, and for this reason, the world is in chaos [YASUMARU 1977: 143].

The earth belongs to the emperor, but soon the renovation of the world will

come. The emperor is greatly worried, and with good reason. He has allowed foreigners to overrun our country.... This emperor who pays no attention [to the nation's plight] cannot hold a candle to me. I will have him withdraw.... He has set up a government and a police force, but because of their ignorance, three-quarters of the people are in misery, and [the emperor's appointed leaders] are not even aware of it. But the gods know and are watching from afar. Soon they will renovate the world...[YASUMARU 1977: 201].

Nao's critique of prewar society and politics was highly radical, entailing criticism of State Shintō, the ruling government, the imperial house, and contemporary gender ideology. Nao's mythology constituted a dramatic reversal of the myths used to justify the rule of the imperial house. In her eyes, the Yamato pantheon standing behind the throne were evil deities with no authority to rule, and to her its priesthood was similarly bankrupt. We have seen how this view led her to devastating critique of government at all levels. She favored in its place an agrarian utopia in which government would be essentially unnecessary.

A gender ideology authored by the state, according to which the one and only life course for women was to become "good wives and wise mothers" (*ryōsaikenbo*) was promoted at virtually every level of society [MINAMI 1965: 225–230].³ Particularly in the years from 1900 to 1920 "women's education" (*joshi kyōiku*) received much state attention, its object being to inculcate women with this ideology. With the exception of period of work in the labor force between the end of school and marriage for those in the lower classes or for women in such professions as nursing and teaching, women should circumscribe their lives within the framework of the family and contribute to the nation through bearing and raising children. Women outside the perimeters of heterosexuality, marriage, the family, and dedication to the state were stigmatized as immoral and unpatriotic [NAGAHARA 1982: 149–184].

Nao contradicted this narrow view of women's possibilities by her every action, from spirit possession, to founding a religious organizations, to developing the notion of gender transformation in the concept of Transformed Male and the Transformed Female. Against the high status associated with male gender, Nao presented an image privileging female gender as more powerful, more capable of saving the world, more suitable to mediate between the human and divine realms. Finally, her view of world salvation held that it would come about through gender transformation, again with a premium on female gender.

3) Closely connected with this ideological monolith was the early twentieth century's development of a discourse of *rashisa*, or conformism. Women should be "womanly" (*onna-rashii*) while men must be "manly" (*otoko-rashii*), and in general not to be in conformity with (*rashii*) one's role came to be an item for public censure in a new way.

6. ONISABURŌ'S CONTRIBUTION TO ŌMOTO'S GENDER CONSTRUCTION

It was less Nao herself than Onisaburō who took the ideas of Transformed Male and Transformed Female to their limits, and he did so less by direct exposition than by the skillful creation of visual imagery. Even before Onisaburō met Nao, he seems to have experimented with the use of stereotyped markers of female gender, such as blackening his teeth, wearing his hair very long, and occasionally dressing in women's clothes. He appears to have used this technique to present himself in an extraordinary light. In his appropriation of the idea of gender transformation, he used another gendered dyad created by Nao.

Nao had invented a second set of terms to explain her dual leadership with Onisaburō, identifying herself with a figure she dubbed the Izu Deity, a father god, the father of the universe who personifies severity, authority, and rectitude, and Onisaburō with another figure called the Mizu Deity, mother of the universe, the embodiment of ultimate benevolence and love. This pair also preserved the idea of split sex and gender for both founders. Neither founder claimed to have changed sex, but both held that their gender had been transformed.

Onisaburō used both the language of Transformed Male/Transformed Female and Izu Deity/Mizu Deity, but the overwhelmingly favored the latter and used it adroitly to promote ideas of his own importance, as early as a text written in 1904 called *The Guidebook to the Way (Michi no shiori)* [ŌMOTO NANAJŪNENSHI HENSANKAI 1964, vol. 1: 258–259].⁴⁾ In this work Onisaburō portrayed himself as expiating the sins of the world. The following roughly summarizes his views:

The Heavenly Emperor created the Izu Deity and the Mizu Deity to save humanity, who are swimming in a sea of mud and pollution. The Izu Deity (Nao) purifies souls, while the Mizu Deity (Onisaburō) expiates sins. The goddess Hitsujisarū Konjin dispatched Onisaburō/the Mizu Deity, and in ancient times she/he appeared as the god Susanoo and took all sins upon her/himself to save the world. Thus Onisaburō can be identified with Susanoo, a prominent male figure in Japanese myth. Likewise, Nao/the Izu Deity can be identified with Amaterasu, Sun Goddess and head of the pantheon from which the imperial clan is supposedly descended.

In the imminent millenium, the world will return to its original purity and goodness, but this can only be accomplished through the cooperation of Nao and Onisaburō. The Izu Deity has been hidden for eons within the Heavenly Rock and Cave,⁵⁾ but Onisaburō holds the key, and when she unlocks it, the new age will be ushered in. Onisaburō/the Mizu Deity is also a direct descendant of Maitreya

4) Ōnisaburō said that in 1903 and 1905 other group leaders burned many of his theological writings on the theme of *henjōnanshi*. Thus, the fact that only one text is surveyed here should not be taken to mean that this was only one he wrote on this subject.

5) The Heavenly Rock Cave (*ame no iwato*) was the place where the Sun Goddess hid after her confrontation with her brother deity Susanoō. See Philippi, 1969, Book 1, chapter 17.

(elsewhere regarded as the future Buddha), who is believed in Ōmoto to be a *kami* and world ancestor [ŌMOTO NANAJŪNENSHI HENSANKAI 1964, vol. 1: 244–250].⁶⁾ Onisaburō will rule over the new age that is soon to come as Maitreya. Here Onisaburō took Nao's motif of gender reversal back to its Buddhist origins.

Onisaburō promulgated his mythology of gender reversal through the presentation of complex androgynous images, publicized to adherents by personal appearances in the transvestite attire of female divinities and by publication of photographs of these appearances in group magazines with nationwide circulation. In Japanese theatre the motif of androgyny has a long and distinguished history, the most salient examples being the *onnagata*, or males playing female roles in all-male *kabuki* theatre, and, in the twentieth century, the *otokoyaku*, or females playing male role in all-female Takarazuka theatre. Significantly, transvestism in a theatrical context is not stigmatized, but instead is honored and prized. The audience remains perfectly clear about the performer's sex; the interest arises from the actor's ability to personify or embody perfectly the gender opposite to the performer's sex. The *frisson* that the audience experiences arises from the perception that sex and gender have been crossed, and performers' skill is evaluated in terms of relative ability to maintain the viewers' sense of volatility and unexpressed potential. Onisaburō's visual imagery drew off this complicated aesthetic and was nothing if not theatrical.

In many of his images, Onisaburō portrayed himself adopting female gender, but assumption of the opposite gender meant different things for Onisaburō and Nao. For Nao, assuming male gender was an elevation of status, allowing her greater authority, assertiveness, and mobility than she ever could have enjoyed in the status to which she was born. This elevated status was without exception a positive, successful, and uncomplicated improvement, allowing her to assert control over males, to speak out, and to advance her own claims. For Onisaburō, on the other hand, the matter was more complicated, because for a male to claim female gender was to embrace a lower status. Onisaburō used gender reversal, however, "as an image of...exchange of ordinary (male status) for extraordinary status [BYNUM 1986: 268]." Onisaburō skilfully used the notion of gender reversal to give himself so extraordinary an aura that he was able to liken himself to or even identify himself with numerous female divinities. Onisaburō was thus knowingly laying "claim to superior lowliness [BYNUM 1986]," which he associated with the mother imagery of the Mizu Deity.

Onisaburō's visual images invite reflection on gender issues. He loved to be photographed and delighted in constructing paradoxical, oblique imagery with his own person as the subject. He adopted the most advanced communications media of his day, namely photography and newspapers, and he even made a film dramatizing Ōmoto's mythology. In addition to such modern innovations, he also painted provocative images of the Mizu Deity in a traditional style of ink painting and

6) Nao validated this identification of Onisaburō with Maitreya in 1916.

sculpted in wood.

In his image of Hitsujisaru Konjin, Onisaburō is dressed as a woman, in flowing robes that may be meant to invoke associations with the Heian Period (794–1133). His hair is loose, and he holds a fan. Before the Edo Period (1600–1868), married women most often wore their *obi*, the belt securing the *kimono*, tied in the front, while unmarried women and girls tied them in the rear [ŌSTUKA and KINOUCHI 1983]. However, the large *obi* tied in the front is also a hallmark of the *oiran*, the courtesan. The courtesan association is muddled, however, by the fact that Onisaburō's hair is neither bound nor cut evenly, but rather looks wild and unkempt.⁷⁾

This photo was taken in 1916 when Onisaburō, Nao and over 100 adherents journeyed to the island he identified by revelation as the seat of his deity, Hitsujisaru Konjin. At this time, Onisaburō's deity was formally installed at the group's headquarters along with Nao's, in a ritual adopting the symbolism of sacred marriage [ŌMOTO NANAJŪNENSHI HENSANKAI 1964, vol. 1: 346].

Compared to the image of *Hitsujisaru Konjin*, that of the Mizu Deity is much more straightforward. It should be considered in relation to the Izu Deity image, and here I believe we are simply invited to study the contrast. The Mizu Deity, swept along on a cloud, is all soft, round contours compared to the rough, bearded Izu Deity representing Nao. Onisaburō said,

The Transformed Male's heart is gentle, but his exterior is awesome, whereas the appearance of the Transformed Female is gentle but her heart firm. None but the Transformed Female has the ability both to gather people's affections and to do great works [DEGUCHI 1935: 150].

In his images of the Mizu Deity and Hitsujisaru Konjin, then, Onisaburō used the idea of gender transformation to present himself as an idealized woman. By doing so in an inverted way, however, he called into question the absoluteness of prewar Japan's monolithic view of woman as "good wife, wise mother." He raised associations of the Heian beauty, the courtesan, and female benovolence, but he did not bind them to male control or to the state. These images suggest the power of woman in their own right.

Appearing as Maitreya, the future Buddha (Figure 4), Onisaburō invokes another set of associations. By identifying himself with the Buddha who will rule over the new age, he implied that he will personally assume rulership of the universe. One hand assumes the *an-i* mudra (Sk: *Vitarkamudrā*, *vyākhyānamudrā*), a gesture frequently associated with Maitreya, the symbolism of which denotes teaching the Buddha Dharma [SAUDERS 1960: 66–75]. Placed between two mountains, he appears to be ascending to confront the viewer. The scene as a whole suggests the imminence of the predicted world renewal.

7) The *obi* is not as wide as one would expect for a courtesan, and the hair is missing the courtesan's characteristic adornments; further this image is missing the high clogs of a courtesan.

The gender symbolism at work in this image is particularly significant. Although aspirants to Buddhahood must, as we have seen, be male, the maleness of a Buddha is very subdued, because Buddhas are supposed to have completely transcended sexuality. The anatomy of male sex has no sexual referent any longer. In Onisaburō's portrayal, too, maleness is signalled by the bare chest, but is ambiguous. Muscles are not well defined, and the breasts are fleshy, even rounded towards a point.⁸⁾ Onisaburō undoubtedly directed the lighting for this shot in order to accentuate this ambiguity. He wrote of himself,

I am a man with a female nature, but my hair is long and thick, my beard thin, my body soft, and my breasts large, so I even resemble a woman physically [DEGUCHI 1935: 150].

These images of a man assuming female gender were highly multivalent, inviting viewers to question the idea of two and only two genders, the idea that sex and gender are isomorphic (one of the basic assumptions, surely, of the "good wife-wise mother" ideal), and the authority of the social and political system validating the good wife-wise mother view of women in the first place. By focusing on Hitsu-jisaru Konjin, the Mizu Deity, and Maitreya, all of them deities outside the imperial house's authorized pantheon, Onisaburō rendered problematic the myth of the absolute authority of the imperial house.

In these pictures Onisaburō invokes a host of symbols, but none of them had an unambiguous messages. Ōmoto's symbolism and doctrine contained two contradictory themes, doctrine stressing a strident patriotism, combined with myth and symbol that directly challenged those sponsored by the state. These contradictions were deemed so threatening by the state that Ōmoto twice suffered massive persecutions, in 1921 and 1935, the second so severe that the headquarters was destroyed by dynamite, and no building material larger than one foot was permitted to remain [NADOLSKI 1975; GARON 1986].

The isomorphism of sex and gender is, like the idea of two and only two genders, one of the most deeply entrenched ideas of western society [KESSLER and MCKENNA 1978]. Although the examples from *kabuki* and Takarazuka suggest that Japan's is a culture with some experience in imagining alternatives to this *idée fixe*, the time of Ōmoto's founding did not encourage such experimentation. The state was extending its supervision into virtually every area of life, and gender was an object of sustained attention and manipulation. Principally through galvanizing the educational system in the service of the narrow vision of women's life possibilities summed up in the phrase "good wife, wise mother," the state not only promoted the indoctrination of women and girls with this ideology but stigmatized the alternative views advanced by an emerging feminist movement.

Ōmoto's attack on the isomorphism of sex and gender struck at a cornerstone

8) This breasty Maitreya is strongly reminiscent of the medieval motif of the breasts of Jesus in the context of the idea of Jesus as mother. See Bynum, 1982, chapter 4.

of imperial Japan's ideological edifice. The assault was oblique, but by challenging something so fundamental and by making the idea of gender transformation the basis of Ōmoto's entire message, the group advanced the proposition that anything is possible. If gender can be changed, anything can be changed, and there remains no aspect of life which might not be otherwise than it is now. To suggest such a sweeping vision to Japanese society in the first decades of the twentieth century was indeed a radical linking of gender and the millenium.

7. CONCLUSION: THE LIMITS OF RELIGIOUS INNOVATION

Radical as Nao's ideas on gender transformation were, and as much as they helped propel her and Onisaburō to positions of leadership and even national prominence, neither Nao nor Onisaburō ever suggested that gender transformation be extended to their followers. Nao did not extend her conclusions, that is, to other women, nor did Onisaburō to other men. Neither directly questioned the family system which was one major vehicle for the perpetuation of the ideology of women as "good wives and wise mothers." Although they provided a symbolic challenge to the system, that is, they never questioned it directly, and hence they ended up further contributing to its maintenance, thus vitiating the potential of their radical ideology. It was thus probably inevitable that when these two powerful personalities passed from the scene, the group began to decline. Ōmoto is now and has been for the last fifteen years hopelessly mired in schism and is no more than a small, rural group with little obvious potential for growth or further innovation.

While Ōmoto's conception of gender was limited in these ways, it formed the basis for a position of social critique that was quite rare in prewar Japanese society. Nao's use of the language of Transformed Female to control Onisaburō in the early years of their association illustrated the political potential, in a narrow sense, of her innovation. When she used her ideas about gender transformation to ground a millennialist eschatology which prophesied the destruction of the prewar empire and its capitalist economy, she created a religious justification for opposition to the prevailing regime. That this challenge was recognized by the state is made eminently clear by its two suppressions of Ōmotokyō.

Examples of religiously motivated dissent are rare in Japan. While they are not unknown in the modern period, they are extremely rare, even among Christians, always a tiny minority in any case. In this light, the exception of Ōmotokyō and the fact that its critique was founded on religious innovation on a traditional Buddhist soteriological theme concerning gender is highly significant in Japanese religious history.

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