
In his monograph on an ancient Japanese pilgrimage centre — a set of three shrines on the Kii peninsula collectively called Kumano sanzan — D. Max Moerman sets out to investigate all possible angles of the centre as both a real and an ideal place in the religious landscape of premodern Japan. He looks at “Kumano” with Michel Foucault’s notion of heterotopias in mind, i.e. places or sites that “at once represent, contest, and invert others” (2). Other theoretical considerations include Allan Grapard’s “call to study Japanese religions in situ” and Jacques Le Goff’s approach to “spatialization of thought” from Le Goff’s comprehensive study of the place of purgatory in medieval Christianity, here in terms of looking at “the relationships between society and cosmology in a premodern religious culture.” (4) Moerman aims at providing new material for comparative studies of other pilgrimage sites and the social construction of a religious landscape. (5)

The example of Kumano is well chosen since few sites in Japan provide the scholar of premodern Japanese religions with such rich and comprehensive material on combined Shinto-Buddhist beliefs and practices including pilgrimage and connected rituals, gender roles and issues of community-building at and around the site, medieval cosmological images as well as soteriological and doctrinal discourses. Whereas these different aspects of Kumano have been looked at before in various studies, Moerman explores the different but to him intricately connected “fields” of the textual, the artistic, and the ritual (1), covering a period roughly from the 8th to the early 17th centuries. The sources under investigation cover a wide range from textual documents such as travel itineraries, diaries of medieval pilgrims, poetic renditions to painted images of the site. Of the extant paintings, a 16th version of the Nachi Pilgrimage Mandala from the late medieval and early modern genre of Japanese pilgrimage “mandalas,” holds a central position in the book.

Moerman divides his book into five chapters and concludes with a short section he calls “An Ambivalent Utopia” aptly pointing to the results of his in-depth study of this complex topic. The monograph is complete with a bibliography, character list, index and illustrations (thirty-one black and white pictures dispersed throughout the main text showing maps, natural landscape and paintings; ten colour plates in insert).

Chapter 1, “Situating Kumano,” serves as an introduction to the entire book and is, as all other chapters, divided into several subsections. Moerman
claims to not intend to provide an institutional history, however, his treatment of the subject in this first chapters does follow a roughly chronological presentation of records on Kumano as an emerging institution, citing mainly from descriptions of pilgrimages in travel diaries and drawing the reader of this subsection into the daily lives and adventures of devout early medieval Japanese pilgrims. Institutional history is certainly a necessary part of the overall study of Kumano pilgrimage and obviously intended to set the stage for further explorations. In the latter part of Chapter 1, Moerman introduces a device he feels will serve to structure the remaining chapters: the map-like and intensely detailed Nachi Pilgrimage Mandala painting. He is aware that this means that he would take the role of a late medieval picture explainer such as a Kumano nun, or Kumano bikuni, who travelled through Japan using the Mandala painting as a prop for her propagations and storytelling. Of course, Moerman disclaims this thought of morphing into a Kumano nun by stating that he, in opposition to the medieval picture explainer, looks “to such paintings for what they conceal as well as for what they reveal” (41) because he feels the Mandala overlooks disparate views of different groups or individuals: the ascetic (treated in Chapter 3), the ex-emperor and members of his court (Chapter 4) and women (Chapter 5).

Chapter 2, “Emplacements,” is intended to provide the wider historical background of the study in preparation for Chapters 3 to 5 and explores the imagery of Kumano in general and images of Kumano including the Mandala in particular. It seeks to uncover composite meanings of the available textual sources — early myths, local legends, foundation accounts and Buddhist hagiographies — especially as to the definition of Kumano in Buddhist terms. The site was seen as a realm of Buddhas and bodhisattvas who came to overlay, but in no way replace, the local, pre-Buddhist deities. Important representations of this fascinating process in premodern Japan are the various “mandala” paintings of which the so-called Kumano mandalas form a distinctive class. They “present a topography far less abstract” than the traditional Tantric and Pure Land iconographic representations of Buddhist cosmology by bringing the cosmology “down to earth”, so that the “heavenly reward” promised becomes directly accessible to the worshipper of the Kumano mandala (90). As a result, Moerman takes the consideration of Japanese Buddhist images into the realm of ritual studies since they form part of ascetic cults that may have served as abbreviated pilgrimages to the Kumano sanctuaries.

After having thus asserted the importance of the Kumano images for the subject under consideration, Moerman invites the reader to join the perspective of the three groups of worshippers mentioned above. The following three