J. Christian Greer and Michelle K. Oing
Kumano Kodo: Pilgrimage to Powerspots
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Kumano Kodō, or the "old roads of Kumano," is a modern appellation for a constellation of historical pilgrimage routes on the Kii peninsula. Located on the southern tip of the peninsula, Kumano has a remarkable history that includes ancient asceticism, lavish journeys by retired emperors, devotion by the country's first pilgrimage confraternities, the emergence of Japan's mountain-based tradition of Shugendō, and more recently, recognition by UNESCO. Kumano has centered in cultural imagination throughout this history, ranging from an underworld for the dead in eighth-century mythology to a pure

land of the bodhisattva Kannon. In J. Christian Greer and Michelle K. Oing's recent *Kumano Kodo*, the region is again reimagined as a world populated by misfit *yōkai* (monsters) and *hidden kami* (local spirits), visible especially to the subversively inclined pilgrim.

The book is not an academic monograph, nor does it try to be. The authors, moreover, are not scholars of Japan (Greer studies religion and the global history of psychedelic spirituality, while Oing is an expert of sculpture and performance in late medieval Northern Europe). To familiarize themselves with Kumano, they cite useful anglophone research on the area. Their approach draws from pilgrimage studies (notably, Victor Turner and Edith Turner), heritage studies, *yōkai* and folklore studies, *manga*, and the beatnik movement. Styled as a travelog (that begins with daily itineraries, consumed beverages, and even "shit blasts"—or in more euphemistic terminology, dirty bowel movements taken on the pilgrimage), the book neatly divides into two parts: the first on the historical and present-day background of Kumano, and the second on Greer and Oing's pilgrimage along the Nakahechi (most well-known among the Kumano Kodō routes) to its three main sites of Hongū, Shingū, and Nachi. While the first part unfortunately lacks in factual accuracy and adequate background, the second makes up with an inspiring countercultural trip along the old road that is delightfully funny and intellectually engaging.

The first part, "Walking with Monsters," attempts to situate the Kumano region within a series of significant historical moments, ancient up through the present. Their critiques on the environmental degradation of the Kii peninsula in service of Japan's imperial expansion as well as the political and economic motives behind UNESCO site designation raise valid concerns for the present condition of Kumano and stimulating points for discussion in the classroom. Yet readers should also proceed with caution, as some passages fall short on trustworthy information and context. For instance, the authors locate the temple of Ōminesanji (literally, "the temple of Mount Ōmine") on Mount Kōya, an error that elsewhere confusingly (mis)places practitioners of Shugendō at Kōya, the famous Shingon headquarters, instead of Ōmine, the historical center of Shugendō. In a more conceptually problematic example, Greer and Oing assert in a section on Shinto that "the ideological program of Shinto, more accurately termed State Shinto, subsumed the archipelago's local cults under the unitary myth of divine sovereignty" in an "imperial take-over of Japan's spiritual universe" (54). This might be plausible if the time period in question was the late nineteenth century (when the term "State Shinto" is used by scholars). However, the authors locate this history in the ninth century, when the geographic reach of the court was quite limited and no ideology of Shinto yet existed. Mistakenly situating Kumano as forever suppressed by this alleged era of subjugation, the authors then seem to dismiss today's shrines (Hongū as the main example) and their clergy as cloaked in "the empty priestcraft of imperial religion" (57). This impression permeates their views on Shinto, yet I would venture that Shinto and all of its permutations are surely more vibrant than this sad assessment.

While this first part might induce scholars of Japanese religions to cringe at times, the second part, "Fieldnotes for the Nakahechi Route," is worth the ride. Taking the style of a travelog, it is whimsical, irreverent, and reflective. The pages seem to channel the voices of Jack Kerouac (whom they regularly recall) in his wanderings as a Dharma Bum, Robert MacFarlane in his historically situated peregrinations, and perhaps even Hunter S. Thompson in his gonzo-style subjectivity. Their daily observations are reflected through a prism of *yōkai*, local spirits, and mythological deities—some haunting (like the hunger-

triggered *daru*/*hidaru*) and others protective (the antihero Susano'o serves as their guardian spirit). Setting out in March of 2020, even Covid-19 becomes a *yōkai* (Corona-chan), casting a spectral haze of silence over Kumano and suspension of human activity around the world. Evenings are saturated by the steam of hot springs, the disappearing candlelight of ghost stories recounted in the old style of *Hyakumonogatari Kaidankai*, "impromptu fertility rituals," and hallucinatory dreams lurking with *bakemono* (strange beings) and ascetics at Nachi.

Despite some reservations I have, Greer and Oing's book ultimately offers an engaging journey into the Kumano region, punctuated by uncanny moments and humorously underlaid by a defiance against the bureaucratic engines of the state and UNESCO. Its pages invite us into a liminal plane that emerges on the social periphery of the pilgrim's path. In that sense, *Kumano Kodo* implicitly encourages its readers to explore the world themselves with heightened awareness, levity, and an openness to all that presents itself on and off the trail. Modeling this approach, they begin:

> Following the polar star of high weirdness, the fellowship forged while trekking the pilgrimage road included lovers, animals, plants, *kami*, stones, synchronicities, weather patterns, *yokai*, and *bakemono*. Intercoursing with the spirits that haunt the annals of Japanese folklore (as well as the eccentric pantheons of saints, buddhas, and demons we already carried within ourselves), we unbounded our imagination. (xviii)

Having walked sections of the Nakahechi myself, I couldn't help but revisit my own memories of its uncanny subtleties and daydream about the next adventure. After putting down this book, I imagine many readers will feel beckoned to wander the old roads of Kumano or perhaps other lands of wonder.

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