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Martin Nogueira Ramos

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Avery Morrow
Brown University

Takashi Miura
Agents of World Renewal: The Rise of Yonaoshi Gods in Japan
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For a long time, Marxist historians or scholars working on the "history of the people" (*minshū-shi* 民衆史) have shown interest in the so-called *yonaoshi gami* 世直し神 ("gods acting for the renewal of the world") of the period from late Edo to early Meiji. For Marxist historians like Sasaki Junnosuke 佐々木潤之介 (1929–2004), who tended to search in the past for the traces of a proto-revolution in each popular revolt (*ikki* 一揆), impoverished city dwellers and peasants relied on these new gods as a means to fight the authorities and to provoke significant upheaval in the society; for *minshū-shi* scholars like Yasumaru Yoshio 安丸良夫 (1934–2016), who also had inherited a rather economicist vision of history, many commoners were convinced that, at the end of the Tokugawa period, the shogunate and the domains were no longer able to alleviate their suffering; liberation would come through the help of supernatural beings, that is, the *yonaoshi* gods.

In order to discuss the established theories on this phenomenon, Miura Takashi 三浦隆司 adopts an emic perspective by observing concretely how the *yonaoshi* gods were invoked in different contexts: he considers that former studies have relied too much on etic viewpoints and made use of the concept in a catch-all way. Indeed, such works often blurred the distinction between popular movements and overused the concept of "world renewal" without paying enough attention to the actual discourses of the commoners. By focusing on case studies ranging between the 1780s and the 1920s, he also breaks through the usual periodization chosen by his predecessors who generally ended their studies in the 1870s. Rather than lengthy discussions of theoretical issues, the author makes extensive use of a vast array of primary sources ignored in the past, like popular songs, private diaries, or satirical woodblock prints.

The author's main contribution to the field is to show that the revolutionary facet that scholars have tended to assign to *yonaoshi* movements should be considerably questioned. He aptly demonstrates that the gods invoked by the protesters had mostly limited objectives and that their scope did not extend beyond

the boundaries of a few villages or a region. These *yonaoshi gami* were essentially moral figures whose task was to help rectifying a temporary economic problem (high taxes, price increase for commodities, or usury rates by moneylenders), and therefore bring "communal revitalization." In other words, the anti-regime stance of the *yonaoshi* movements should not be overemphasized; their aim was economic, not political. Miura argues that the apparition of movements relying on new gods to achieve an upheaval of the society or sharing millenarian beliefs is not discernible before the 1880s.

The most important achievement of this study is to show the extreme diversity of these gods. A brief overview of the seven chapters will testify to this aspect. The first five chapters deal with movements intended mostly to obtain economic relief; the last two chapters present cases of gods who shared some (but not only) antiauthoritarian or millenarian features.

In the first chapter, the author focuses on the case of Sano Masakoto 佐野政言 (1757–1784), the head of a *Hatamoto* 旗本 family (a direct retainer of the Tokugawa) working as a guard in Edo castle who murdered the Junior Elder (*wakatoshiyori* 若年寄) Tanuma Okimoto 田沼意知 (1749–1784) in the third month of 1784. Dwellers of Edo swiftly deified Sano since they considered the Tanuma family to be corrupt and also because, after the incident, the price of rice suddenly dropped. The second chapter presents six uprisings that occurred between 1797 and 1868. During these events, the peasants relied on new gods in order to obtain the removal of specific economic measures by the authorities deemed to be harmful for the management of their farms. By paying close attention to the words used by the commoners, Miura proves that these *yonashi gami* could be incarnated by living or killed community leaders or even communities themselves. The third chapter is dedicated to two Tokugawa bureaucrats, Egawa Hidetatsu 江川英龍 (1801–1855) and Suzuki Chikara 鈴木主税 (1814–1856), who were deified by their constituents for providing economic relief. These examples make clear that world renewal movements should not be considered necessarily subversive or opposed to the rule of the warriors. The fourth chapter is devoted to the belief in late Edo Japan that earthquakes were provoked by a giant catfish (*namazu* 鯰) living below Japan; the author focuses on the woodblock prints produced in the aftermath of the major earthquake that struck Edo in 1855. These documents show that, despite the enormous damage caused by the quake (and therefore the giant catfish), many commoners venerated this god. Thanks to him, the wealthy had to employ a large working force in order to rebuild their properties and revive their economic activities. In other words, the god forced them to share their wealth. In the fifth chapter, Miura challenges established theories on the *Ee ja nai ka* ええじゃないか (1867–1868) phenomenon, a series of celebrations that happened after sacred talismans were thought to have fallen from the sky. He convincingly demonstrates that these festivities were not as anarchic or driven by anti-Tokugawa resentments as was often written in previous works, but

rather possessed internal structures and conventions that were in continuity with earlier folk celebrations.

Chapter 6 focuses on the Chichibu Incident of 1884 (*Chichibu jiken* 秩父事件), a large-scale uprising in Saitama prefecture partly monitored by the People's Right Movement (*Jiyū minken undō* 自由民権運動); during the events, the rioters considered (or pretended to consider, for the professional revolutionaries) the leader of this political movement, Itagaki Taisuke 板垣退助 (1837–1919), as a god acting for the renewal of the world. For the author, this is the first time a *yonaoshi god* served as a means to overthrow the ruling government. The last chapter is dedicated to the millenarian beliefs of the new religion Ōmoto 大本 in the 1890s and the early 1900s. The revelations received by its leader, Deguchi Nao 出口なお (1837–1918), announced the impending renewal of the world, in its entirety, by the force of a divinity, Ushitora no Konjin 艮の金神.

All the chapters deserve praise. However, the reviewer would like to bring attention to the methodological approach used by the author in chapters 5 and 6. Concerning *Ee ja nai ka*, past studies, mostly driven by a Marxist agenda, stressed excessively on a somewhat schematic view that opposed the oppressed downtrodden to the ruling authorities. These scholars might have slightly overemphasized (or fantasized) the revolutionary potential of the frantic dancing and festivities held after the fall of sacred talismans. Miura, by considering the subject in its direct context (the harvests in 1867 were abundant) and in its "folkloric" context (the resemblance between *Ee ja nai ka* and former popular phenomena like *Ise odori* 伊勢踊り or *O-kage mairi* お蔭参り), argues these festivities were often supervised under the scrutiny of the local authorities, and that anti-Tokugawa stances were virtually unobservable.

As for the Chichibu Incident of 1884, the author tackles the issue by adopting an "on the ground" perspective; he demonstrates that the methods used by the rioters were not radically different from those in the past. He pays particular attention to the interrogation records in order to show that the rioters fought for different motives, even if they all relied on the same "god." Indeed, if a minority might have considered the movement as an opportunity to challenge the authorities, the majority struggled for economic relief. However, for all the participants, discourses and actions needed to be embedded in the *yonaoshi* framework to be persuasive.

On the whole, this study offers refreshing insights on a debate that (wrongly) seemed to be over. It reminds us of the necessity to consider, in their diversity, direct accounts of the actors involved, instead of developing hermetic theoretical frameworks beforehand and trying to find evidence that fits in.

Martin Nogueira Ramos
École française d'Extrême-Orient