

## **The Power of Writing in Deguchi Nao's Ofudesaki**

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In 1892 Deguchi Nao, an impoverished Japanese widow who had suffered for decades in an arranged marriage with an alcoholic husband, began hearing voices and channeling spirits. She was told that the world was about to be destroyed for its disobedience to the divine beings called kami, that she had been chosen to be the medium of a kami named Ushitora no Konjin, that Konjin would try to save as many people as he could from the cataclysm and usher in a golden age, and that her little village of Ayabe would become the center of the world.

For several years, Nao attracted the scorn of her neighbors, was imprisoned, and continued a life of poverty with no visible blessings from the kami. But in 1899, an itinerant spiritualist named Ueda Kisaburō (later Deguchi Onisaburō) somehow became attracted to her cause. Even as he attempted to change the direction of her mission, through new revelations he became roped into a divine message much larger than his own, and despite Nao's lack of education or social standing, she ended up becoming the co-founder of a major religious movement named Oomoto. She accomplished all this principally through a single tool: words from the kami, which her unlettered but firm hand recorded on scraps of paper.

This chapter aims to build on preexisting studies by focusing on how the writing Nao produces becomes powerful, including the power that inverts her gendered relationship with Onisaburō and gives her spirit authority over his. Although the text is sometimes repetitive, the statements most often repeated are actually the most interesting and insightful—the work of a creative imagination (cf. Corbin 1969) that deserves scholarly attention.

**A note on sources used**

I hope to show how Deguchi Nao's automatic writing became an ordered religious experience that made her a powerful figure. However, the widely available edition of that writing, *Ōmoto shin'yu* (Murakami 1979), is not an entirely faithful record but a scripture edited by the religious group Oomoto. Notably, the messages offered for the period 1892 to early 1896 are reconstructions by Deguchi Onisaburō, and others are falsely dated.<sup>1</sup> (Nakamura 1920:385-391; ONH 1964:93; Yasumaru 1977:85, 239ff) I have attempted to exclude these, and include unedited manuscript material that is more haphazard, more personal, and more revealing. In Oomoto circles, these manuscripts are called the "Ofudesaki".

The original manuscripts, said to cover over 10,000 pages, are no longer open for examination. They are generally attested by three witnesses. The first, least reliable, witness is Onisaburō's official version of the most important manuscripts, originally published in the Oomoto newsletter *Shinreikai* and now helpfully digitized. (SSK 1986; Iizuka 2012) The second, a manuscript called *Ōmoto nenpyō*, was compiled in 1918–19 by a team of researchers led by Deguchi Uchimarū. (Deguchi 1980:278, 290) Uchimarū's team carefully reconstructed the edits that Onisaburō had made to clean up the group's theology and avoid dangerous political statements. The result was never directly published due to internal Oomoto politics. The current location of this witness is unknown, and it is available only through a redaction by the independent archivist Ikeda Akira (1982). The third witness, *Keireki no shin'yu*, was compiled in 1961–63 by another research group led by Uchimarū with an eye to finding concrete descriptions of Nao's life. It survives only in mimeograph form (ONH 1972), although much of it has been quoted in a classic study by the highly respected scholar Yasumaru Yoshio (1977) and in a massive biography of Nao by Uchimarū's son Deguchi Yasuaki (1995). Yasumaru, who participated in the latter research group, also records a few stray quotations which are not found elsewhere.

Outsider scholarship of Deguchi Nao began with prewar attempts to dismiss her divine experience, aided by anti-religious rhetoric surrounding Japan's psychiatric movement. (Nakamura 1920, Kuisako 1971) In the postwar period, Yasumaru Yoshio (1977) recast Nao as a religious critic of modernization and state mythology. His analysis of Nao's world-critique has been continued by others. (Miyata 1988, Ooms 1993) There have also been evaluations of Nao in

feminist historiography (Yamashita 1990, Hardacre 1992, etc.) and sociological analyses (Wöhr 1989, Kawamura 1990). The uses to which Nao has been put by scholars will be discussed in the conclusion.

### **The epistemology of surprise**

The operating premise of the Ofudesaki is the ability of divine reality to *surprise* the mundane. One constantly encounters phrases like “this mission will surprise everyone” (6 May 1903) or that Nao’s village of “Ayabe will surprise even distant countries” (19 Nov. 1896). Only the gods, in Japanese *kami*, are all-knowing; without divine assistance, people know nothing and will be taken unaware. (22 Sept. 1898) From a human perspective, the power of the *kami* is *strange* (*mezurashiki*). Normal logic does not apply. The weak can defeat the strong; things can become totally different than they were before. “Cow shit will take over the world. We can do strange [*mezurashiki*] things. *That* thing becomes *this* thing.” (6 Aug. 1899) We wake up one morning and discover the world to be totally new and fresh to us—this is proof of divine power.

The foolishness of modernized, profit-seeking humans is that they think the world will always follow scientific rules and that they can control it using “intelligence and knowledge,” another phrase that appears frequently in the text. “The *kami* worry so deeply, but it does not enter the ears of the people of today’s world, made of intelligence and knowledge ... They imitate foreign beasts, eating beef and horseflesh, wearing Western clothes. They do not humble themselves to the *kami*.” (23 June 1898, after Miyata 1988:124) To the very end, Konjin insists to Nao that the world is not mechanical but is full of strange occurrences and divine surprises, always ready to upset the best-laid plans of mice and men. This greatest secret is really no secret at all, and it is hard to disagree with the text’s conclusion that “no matter what intelligence and knowledge you think with, you won’t be able to rule the world forever.” (SSK 1986:I:222)

True knowledge comes through the grace of the *kami*, who are the only ones with true omniscience and choose their prophets as they please. The text does not state that Nao has the intelligence and knowledge to figure everything out for herself. If we claim the text to be her work, we employ the same line of attack used by Oomoto’s critics, and belittle Nao’s belief that she was a passive receptor of divine truths. If we want to really know the worldview of the

Ofudesaki, we must treat it like the Quran, as a sacred message *experienced* by its prophet, and as a great illumination of the darkness of human ignorance.

Our ignorance, manipulated by the intrusion of foreign teachings and selfishness, is leading our species towards certain destruction, and the central kami of the Ofudesaki, Ushitora no Konjin, has struggled for thousands of years to save us. Ayabe will become the center of his revitalizing mission. The word “hardship” (*kurō*) appears constantly in the Ofudesaki, most frequently as a description of Konjin’s efforts, or an acknowledgment of what Nao has endured. “Kami so desires to save the world, he has come here bearing hardships, difficulties, mortifying regrets.” (2 April 1903) Through the magic of writing he can express these regrets to Nao and provide consolation:

Deguchi, do not worry. When Deguchi worries, Kami’s heart sinks and he can’t do as he pleases... In just a bit we will bring you to an honest place, so prepare yourself. Making money won’t do. With this spiritual training, you can do any task. Although you are a woman, Deguchi, you have been hardened with hardships for a long time, so you can do anything, but this task is one that would be asked of no one, you are sent out aimless and penniless, so it would be cruel if this very great task could not be done. You will not be alone. (19 Sept. 1900)

While Konjin is convinced of Nao’s abilities, it would be a grave insult to the text to render this passage as “I am a woman, but ... I can do anything.” This is one of many messages addressed to Nao by what she perceived as a spiritual being, and only by recognizing the existence of Konjin in Nao’s experience can we see why her religious experience was not principally about “liberation” for herself, but was about heavenly beings offering love to her. (Wöhr 1989)

This is not to deny Nao’s desire for escape from her decades of misfortune. Her own description of her life was unambiguous: “I [was] a karma-person being boiled off in hell’s cauldron.” (Deguchi 1995:227) However, as Yasumaru notes (1977:133), there is no hope for salvation in this saying of Nao’s, which recalls the tortures endured in Buddhist hells and

assimilates the karmic worldview that hardships, including the hardships particular to women, are the result of past misdeeds. When a higher power acknowledges your hardships and puts them in light of a greater undertaking, it sounds totally different from these laments.

Nao endured hardships for decades. Konjin tells her that he has endured them for over 3,000 years, demeaned as an “evil god” and dropped into the latrine. (25 Jan. 1897; 5 May 1900) But all their suffering has been towards a noble end, and now the time has come for their work to bear fruit, like a “flower sprouting from a cooked bean.” (8 July 1897) In one of the few surviving manuscripts from Oomoto’s earliest days, Konjin even riffs on a popular song to describe his relationship with Nao: “Ise counts on Tsu, Tsu counts on Ise. Ushitora no Konjin counts on Nao.” (Ikeda 1982:28)

Many works of theology and poetry in world religions describe this emotional aspect of the relationship between an individual and her God. A glaring difference between the Ofudesaki and most texts, though, is in the nature of Konjin as a being. He is not merely a name for God; he is himself an individual kami in a polytheistic universe. On one hand, the multiplicity of kami spring from a single root, the Great Origin or *Oomoto*: “at the start of the world, it all started out as one. The kami are of a single womb” (17 Aug. 1898). But distinct to the Ofudesaki is this belief that the other kami are not merely names for one and the same thing. Rather, they have been fully individuated and are not even necessarily conscious of each other.

Konjin has been hidden away for thousands of years and is unknown to most of the deities, but he has a few friends, all female: Empress Jingū, whom Nao would have known of from her appearance on Japan’s first banknotes (13 Jan. 1897), Dragon Princess Otohime from the folk tale of Urashima Taro, who lives under the ocean and keeps treasure there (22 Nov. 1896; 3 Sept. 1898), and an original figure, Kinkatsukane no Ōkami—Great Goddess of the Palace Gold—who is said to be an imperial princess wearing crimson *hakama* trousers underneath a twelve-layered kimono. (ONH 1972:III:35) Elsewhere Kinkatsukane is described as an androgynous figure clutching a golden *gohei* wand, a type of ornament that would have been seen at traditional Konpira shrines in the area. Kinkatsukane, like Konpira, is described as a kami that can both start relationships and break them off. (Yasumaru 1977:152; 19 June 1900) All of these powerful and wealthy female assistants, derived from a variety of sources in

Japanese folklore, lend their protection to Nao and occasionally possess her. (August 1899, in SSK 1986:V:75)

The language of the Ofudesaki paints a beautiful and enticing picture. Together with the female assistants, other friends like *tengu* and *daruma* (5 April and 1 July 1897), and the “guardian spirits” of Oomoto’s believers, Nao and Konjin will renew the world, destroying the unstable “foreign spirits” and ushering in divine perfection, the “world of crystal”, “world of [the savior] Miroku,” or “world of pine.” This is not, as Yamashita Akiko claims, a “new human world” (1990:23), but a world ushered in by the kami and ruled quite hierarchically by the kami. Nao is called to this task. Nao is Konjin’s unique messenger. Hardened by decades of unspeakable suffering, she alone is able to bear the responsibility of bringing Konjin into the world.

### **Seeing meaning in the world**

It took roughly a decade for this worldview to become fully articulated to Deguchi Nao. A pious woman from a young age, and the victim of many cruelties which increased that piety, Nao had occasionally demonstrated clairvoyance by the mid-1880s and was seized by a fit of automatic writing at least once. Already, this writing was a surprise to her, as she believed herself illiterate and indeed could not read what she had written. (OSH 1924:109) At that time, such incidents did not interfere with her everyday life, but starting in January 1892, shortly after her daughter Yone went mad and was enclosed by her husband in a cage, Nao became subject to intense “attacks” that induced frequent possessions and dramatically changed her behavior. The Ofudesaki describes an incident in which a kami descended into Nao in the middle of the night and began screaming “here I am on Earth, what a wonderful place!”, hurting Nao’s throat and awakening and angering the neighbors. Such incidents were undesirable to Nao, and she could control them only with great difficulty. After the third such “attack,” Nao was completely shunned by her village, and she would pick rags during the day and listen to divine messages all night. (ONH 1972:I:27, III:35)

Although Nao lived in poverty and had no income beyond rag picking, she refused money from her daughter. On the contrary, she began offering handfuls of dirt to her visitors,

explaining that money will ruin the world, but dirt is a gift from the earth, the source of food and life. Her neighbors deserted her over such antics, but a vagrant female shaman, also shunned in the region due to a long record of playing cheap confidence tricks, befriended Nao and mooched off her for several months while offering prayers for Yone's exorcism. She helped Nao build a shrine in her yard, venerating a stone that Yone had hurled from her cage. In front of the shrine, Nao created a diorama of Konjin's prophecy: an explosive-looking bush to symbolize the coming chaos, a pine tree for the kingdom of Kami, and an *omoto* plant, a treasured symbol of celebration. This *omoto* could be the source of the name Oomoto that Nao gave to her religious movement. (ONH 1972:I:19; Deguchi 1995:311-315, 364-368)

The village became suspicious of Nao's warnings of fiery apocalypse in light of several arsons around the area, and in 1893 she was imprisoned in a small cage for 40 days. Nao did not interpret her harsh imprisonment as a final rejection by society. She spent her time writing oracles on the walls, which turned into a habit of automatic writing that became the Ofudesaki, and singing songs to passersby. Konjin told her that it was a mere test on the path to creating a world-changing movement, and once she was released she moved along with the task of Oomoto. (Kawamura 1990, 2007)

But she must have realized, as well, the need for company on the divine mission. Although there are no Ofudesaki surviving from this time, the quest for social legitimacy that followed her imprisonment makes this clear. Oomoto could never merely be a closed relationship between Nao and God: for the divine task to succeed, it had to be open in its interrelation with the larger world. This meant that both Konjin and Nao had to appeal to the believers they did have in order to discover and harness some sort of authority. Beginning in October 1894, she became a local agent of the new religious movement Konkokyō. (Deguchi 1995:434)

### **Appealing to men, and losing Adachi**

Nao came to rely on local patrons of Konkokyō, notably two adult men named Adachi and Aoki. She acted as their servant, sitting beneath them, addressing them as "*sensei*," and preparing their food, all apparently from the hope that they would be responsible interpreters of Ushitora no Konjin's messages. The Ofudesaki seems to respond to the disrespect with which

she is held: “Master Adachi, Master Aoki, this Nao is a woman, so please figure for yourselves that she suffers in her heart.” (Yasumaru 1977:119, 122)

Language cannot pierce the hearts of these men. The Ofudesaki is apparently valueless to them, and they do not even believe it divine, as one admonishment reflects: “This Ofudesaki is not written by Nao! Ushitora no Konjin is borrowing Nao’s hand to write it. Even if I say this, some have severe doubts, and this slows things down and causes big problems for Kami. See this and sit down!” (29 Sept. 1897) Konkokyō followers, we learn, are giving Konjin “arbitrary names” from the imperial *Kojiki* pantheon or elsewhere, and advertising spiritual healing as if the all-powerful kami were mercantile “billboards.” Konjin will not go along with this: “This Konjin is not for sick-healing! He will turn the world well upside down.” (1 Sept. 1898) As the text later summarizes, “Ayabe’s Oomoto is different from other churches.” (4 Sept. 1900)

Konjin attempts to break from Konkokyō, and assures Nao that her daughter Sumi will inherit the leadership of Oomoto. Men in general, says Konjin, are too egoistical to be relied on. (23 Sept. 1897; 8 Nov. 1897) But Nao cannot go alone, and by 1898, the situation has completely deteriorated. Konjin admits to Nao on 1 September that “this Oomoto is not going well.” To Adachi, the text adopts weirdly deferential language. “We have many tasks for you, Lord Adachi,” admits Konjin, but “we hope it is not too much for you to convert Lord Okumura and put him underneath you.” (12 Dec. 1898) As most studies of the Ofudesaki note, it is a fierce and shockingly irreverent document, but here it is measured, even polite in its treatment of Adachi. Konjin is becoming subservient to his servants. The power of writing seems to be failing.

In October 1898, Nao interviewed a charismatic spiritualist named Ueda Kisaburō, who had learned of her reputation while passing through the area. At the time, though, she was distrustful of him. He informed her that he was possessed by the god Inari, but back in 1892, the shamaness had diagnosed Nao’s insane daughter Yone with possession by Inari. Probably, Nao associated Inari with a malicious fox spirit. (Deguchi 1995:365, 475)

One can only imagine Nao’s feelings after all these failures, but Konjin maintains an optimism about the eventual success of his plan. In early 1899, we read the following:



An honest person has been prepared for you, so until this honest person arrives you won't understand. When that person should arrive, you will know immediately. The messengers of Konko[kyō] may act high and mighty, but when the honest one presents himself, they can shuffle back and scratch their heads [in deference]. (6 Feb. 1899)

This is a rather bold claim for the spirit of a powerless, impoverished woman to make, but a few months later, Konjin comes through as he had promised: he issues a letter to Ueda, requesting that he return to Ayabe.

### **Becoming a man, and gaining Onisaburō**

Ueda responded to the summons—probably he was convinced that Nao had a real connection to the spirit world. On 3 July 1899, he met her again in Ayabe. At this time Nao's young daughter Sumi was an abused, mistreated servant girl, and Konjin first uses the magic of language to dub her “Lady O-Sumi,” Nao's divinely appointed successor, before moving on to an evaluation of Ueda:

Nao, your successor is your lastborn, Lady O-Sumi! Ueda Kisaburō, with whom we have a bond, will be given a great task. In its place we will make him a great general. This great person will be so made by Nao's power. If this great person is here, Nao is going to be all right. ... Lord Ueda will do a mighty hardship for us. Eight are the number of [Nao's] children, but he is more fine than all of them. (17 July 1899)

Ueda founded a college of theosophy in Ayabe, and his teachings won the approval of Adachi and other locals. But with his opportunities came a host of problems. Ueda was a thoroughly unreformed soul with a fickle, opportunistic, entrepreneurial spirit. Like L. Ron Hubbard, he had once told a friend that he could make a lot of money starting a religion. (Miyata 1988:104) The spirit of cooperation was hampered by the complexity of Ueda's theosophical theories. The text endorses Ueda's theosophy on 3 September and 17 September 1899, paralleling it to Konjin's Ofudesaki, but on 23 October it tells him to desist from his “foreign

learning”, meaning Chinese characters, and write using only native Japanese kana—in modern terms, the writing level of a seven-year-old. (Ikeda 1982:87n)

As they attempt to work out their differences, the Ofudesaki refers to Konjin, and by extension Nao, as “the transformed male” or *henjōnanshi*. After several months, Ueda becomes known in the text as “the transformed female” or *henjōnyoshi*, sometimes even shortened to “the female”. This turns out to be the spark for a great web of parallels which would develop in the years to come.

In Buddhism, *henjōnanshi* is a term from the Lotus Sutra describing women who become men through faith. It has its roots in the late classic and medieval perception that women needed to become men in order to reach enlightenment. But the Ofudesaki’s use of the term has no relationship to its Buddhological use. If the text had an awareness that *henjōnanshi* was a Buddhist term, this would surely be raised at some point, since from time to time it warns that Buddhas are foreign spirits that took power away from the kami, and that the kami are now going to regain control (e.g. 15 Dec. 1896; 5 May 1897; 23 May 1898). While Ushitora no Konjin is not as antagonistic towards Buddhas as he is towards Western modernizers, the soteriology of the text orbits entirely around his own divine mission, which ties the transformed male to a transformed *female*.

Ushitora no Konjin is identified as the *henjōnanshi* as early as 30 November 1898,<sup>2</sup> but the details of this is are not made clear. On 20 October, the Ofudesaki confidently pronounces that Sumi ought to marry Ueda to ensure both of their positions in the succession. Although Sumi found Ueda a bit effeminate, both sides agreed to an arranged marriage, and the wedding was held on 31 January 1900, the Lunar New Year. (Deguchi 1995:524) By February 1900, however, it is clear that the text is searching for an accurate way to describe in divine language why Nao remains “patriarch” of this new divine household. On the 4th, we read:

The *henjōnanshi* is a man by nature—for a man does not tell a lie—a woman does not come out in the open so even if something is a bit wrong, that does not mean coming out into the open—but this Task is like a loom. Just the warp won’t do, just the weft won’t do, you haven’t understood up until now, it’s all been a mess, but from now on we’ll align

warp and weft, some work for the workers. Spinning the thread, threading the reel, spooling the reel, making the binding-reel, these jobs are a hardship.

This metaphor must be grounded in Nao's own experiences at the handloom. Presumably this alignment of "warp and weft" implies that part of her hard labors will be given to someone else. But it is not yet clear from the extant text of the *Ofudesaki* whether the submissive "woman" here is Ueda. Two days later, we hear some musings about him, as his "bond" (*innen*) with Nao needs to be "made clear". The text also discusses *saniwa*, the traditional male interpreters of female oracles. Konjin desires a *saniwa*-like male partner, and yet wants his own message to be known without being diluted into another sect like Konkokyō.

Everyone will be coming to this Oomoto from many countries, so all the world's guardian spirits will descend upon here, so many *saniwa* will appear. Distinguish between the *saniwa* and save all the people! ... If there are bad *saniwa*, then bad guardian spirits will appear, so the *saniwa* are the most important thing. ... Right now, Deguchi, when I speak to you, Ueda is also thinking that it is your body speaking, and if he is not listening to what you're saying, if he becomes like Adachi, it will be pitiful to me ... Up until now, we have let Ueda do whatever he wanted. From now on he will become a bit constrained.

Konjin does not want Ueda to leave him as Adachi has done, but he worries about his own identification: he wants to be known as the spirit inhabiting Nao, and not as Nao play-acting. Getting Ueda to accept Oomoto's spiritual world is key, and the unusual discussion about good and bad *saniwa* becomes comprehensible in this context. About a week later, on 14 February 1900, the first explicit link between the Nao-Ueda relationship and the male-female duality finally appears.

Deguchi [Nao] and Master Ueda's spirits have a bond, so they will do a strange thing!

This transformed male, and Master Ueda's transformed female, if you can understand that the two of them have a bond, the world will ring! ... I will transmit these things to Lord

Ueda and make him write them! There is a theosophy that I will make him understand about this ancient bond, so I will make Ueda understand these things! And I will show you how to understand Ueda's spirit!

Indeed, after this revelation, "Master Ueda" assumes a greater position in the text. Just a few months later, Konjin dubs him Deguchi Onisaburō, assigning him the surname of his mother-in-law. He keeps this name for the rest of his life and will be called Onisaburō below. (Deguchi 1995:529) Onisaburō is very nearly named Nao's successor, on account of his marriage to Sumi. (1 and 12 Aug. 1900) He is often called a woman, in a simultaneously playful and serious way: "Ueda's work is a hardship, although it's not like a man ... Deguchi and Ueda are warp and woof." (9 Sept. 1900) Now Onisaburō, too, endures hardships for the sake of the true task; he is one half of the weaving. By "constraining" him with the title of transformed women, he is irreversibly *harnessed*.

The context in which *henjōnanshi* is used does not imply that one side should be kept and the other thrown out. There is no evidence in the text that it relates to the Buddhist term, and it would be grossly unfair to claim that Nao had a "negative assessment of male traits". On the contrary, the use of *henjōnanshi* alongside the entirely novel term *henjōnyoshi* is correctly identified by Ooms (1993:114) as an ideal of *alignment*. Previously Onisaburō had no strictly defined role in Konjin's plan, but this language reveals a metaphysical order to Nao and Onisaburō's human alliance.

Nao led Onisaburō on pilgrimages and ceremonies called *shusshu*, as expertly described and analyzed by Ooms (1993:58–65), and the text generally offers divine reassurances that his free spirit can be controlled and put to use. He is enjoined to print the Ofudesaki in a newspaper (19 Aug. 1900) and to "put up a newspaper company" (16 Oct. 1900)—both tasks were accomplished as soon as he had money, roughly a decade later. The "female" can join the "male" in bringing about the future Age of Miroku by abandoning the pursuit of worldly things and reading the Ofudesaki (6 Dec. 1903), something which Onisaburō did end up doing with remarkable diligence.

### **A strange, shamanistic, spiritual metamorphosis**

How did “manliness” relate to Nao’s own personality? On 25 September 1900, Konjin reminds her of an inexplicable incident that once happened in her life: on her way to see her daughter Hisa, who had been stricken with madness, a stranger approached her on the road and called her a “strange [*mezurashiki*] woman.” The man said that she had a “man’s eyes” (cf. 29 Sep. 1903) and called her a “man” and “seven women.” Konjin tells Nao that this stranger was “not human,” but was some kind of being predicting to her all that would follow: “You now understand that *this was fate*. Since December 1891 your heir Yone has again gone mad—Hisa in Yagi has gone mad—from January 1892, you too, Deguchi Nao, have seemed mad to the world—the origin of the madness of all three is madness caused by the kami ... for eight years we have warned, by bringing together the fated ones, *we can do strange [mezurashiki] things in Ayabe*. To transform the world, *weird people will appear, and weird things will happen*.” (emphasis added) This is what was to be proven: not that Nao’s true nature is to be a man, but that Nao’s true nature is to be *weird*.

I hesitate to venture that in Nao’s eyes, Onisaburō was probably a “weird person” constantly offering annoying symbolic interpretations of the divine mission. But the text does not say this; Onisaburō is not mentioned on this day. Rather, in the immediate context of the stranger’s prophecy and the Deguchi family’s madness, *Nao herself is one of the “weird people.”* Weirdness is something not of this world. The English “weird”, in its modern sense, is derived from *Macbeth*’s “weird sisters,” witches who control the fates of men; the Japanese word in the text, *hen*, literally means “changed,” a weird departure from an initial state, and the same *hen* used in *henjōnanshi*. Nao has changed into the *henjōnanshi*, and become *hen* and *mezurashiki*, not as a psychological self-discovery, but because of the same surprising, strange, dangerous power that has driven her daughters insane and taken over her as a medium; a power that tells her, through automatic writing, of its origin in the spirit world. Furthermore, this divine madness and spiritual transformation has made her unusual and apart from the ordinary world, as it has done to her counterpart Onisaburō.

To reiterate, Nao did not see the teaching of transformed male and female as something she herself was imposing on Onisaburō to put him in his place, nor as an ego-conscious

“identity,” but as a mysterious fate imposed on both him and her by the will of the kami. Indeed, metamorphosis is typical for the kami: as Konjin tells her, “Kami changes into this and that. Everyone takes him for someone else. This Oomoto is a shapeshifter (*bakemono*)! [But the] heart doesn't move one bit.” (3 March 1900)

### **“A great battle of male and female”**

The honeymoon did not last long, for Onisaburō was skeptical of Konjin’s total rejection of worldly authorities and “intelligence and knowledge.” When Nao and her followers protested in front of a police station against a fine she had incurred for rejecting vaccinations, proclaiming that the kami were more powerful than doctors and police, Onisaburō paid the fine behind her back. (Ooms 1993:64) Onisaburō attempted to change Oomoto’s outlook and teachings to fit in better with mainstream society and Shinto mythology, and Nao fought back. Now that they were bound together, they had to decide matters of leadership together, but this was clearly no easy task.

The surprising thing about the Ofudesaki is that it continues to serve as an *instruction* to Nao even in these years of strife. It does not reject Onisaburō, but paints a broader picture of his “antagonist” role in a larger divine drama, borrowing terms from Nao’s beloved Noh theater and making mythological analogies, and continues to tie him into Konjin’s mission by elaborating on earlier terminology. We learn there is another Konjin, called Hitsujisaru no Konjin. This kami has a strong will and is not listening to Ushitora no Konjin yet, but soon he will descend into Onisaburō and fix these problems. Until that happens, Onisaburō, infected by “intelligence and knowledge,” can only reflect the troubled state of the modern world.

Have we not said, in every Ofudesaki, that you cannot understand this mission with intelligence and knowledge?! ... When Hitsujisaru no Konjin breaks his ego and reforms Ueda’s heart, afterwards things will go according to the mission ... (4 May 1902)  
Ueda Kisaburō is the antagonist portraying a disordered world. (20 March 1903)

The [transformed] female's hardship role became in June 1902 the role of the disordered world, [but] from then on she will gain the protection of Hitsujisaru no Konjin ... (27 March 1903, in ONH 1972:II:31)

Why is it that Onisaburō is trying to change the nature of the divine mission? It is not merely that he is “disorderly”: he has a large number of kami possessing him, like Inari and Hitsujisaru no Konjin, but also trickster spirits and the rebellious Shinto kami Susano'o. To explain why this is, the text returns to the metaphor of warp and weft, giving it a surprising new depth again grounded in Nao's own experience with the handloom.

The [transformed] male's role is the warp, the female's role is the weft. The warp doesn't change one bit, it restores things to the ancient original, [and] no one knows its accomplishments from the start. It's the role of piercing through in a single thread. The woman's role is the weft, so the spirits protecting her change as well! (27 July 1902) It is known that this [divine] world will come, so the spirit of the transformed male and the spirit of the female, split from the [same] ancient spirit, align good and evil, the male being the role of the warp, the female the role of the weft, the weft being the many-colored role ... (13 June 1903)

The warp of a loom stands straight as the weft ends pass through it, uniting them into a cloth. But the weft is not usually a single thread: it is desirable to thread ends of multiple colors, by which even rags might make a beautiful pattern.<sup>3</sup> Thus, it is Nao's “male” duty to stand firm and represent the ancient and unchanging way of Ushitora no Konjin, while it is Onisaburō's “female” duty to reflect all the “many-colored” spirits and changes of the world.

As they continue to argue, their reconciliation takes on metaphysical importance. Within the Ofudesaki, Oomoto's leadership dispute is not about the legitimacy of Onisaburō's claim to authority, and it does not throw the movement into question. Rather, there is strife precisely *because* Oomoto is *different* from “other churches” and properly corresponds to the reality of the world!

What happens in the world is all carried out within Oomoto, so it is shown to us as the transformed male and female, so with this war within you will better understand the success and failure of Japan and foreign countries ... (27 February 1903)

Good and evil are comparing their powers, so they show us a great battle of male and female, so for people who draw close to us, Oomoto's ways are completely different from the ways of the other churches, so male and female have been carried out within this Oomoto! (27 April 1903, in ONH 1972:II:31)

Unlike an ordinary church, which would have a single chain of authority to make the universe appear under control to members—or indeed, unlike imperial Japan, where the Emperor was meant to keep the peace between conflicting political interests—Oomoto shows us the reality of spiritual warfare between good and evil, and between men and women. If Nao and Onisaburō's problems can be resolved, then there is hope to resolve the imbalances between good and evil and men and women in the world as well.

What the text ends up accomplishing is fascinating. Limited to the medium of text, Konjin cannot stop Onisaburō from going behind Nao's back or over her head. If the *shusshu* pilgrimages were a means of controlling Onisaburō, as Ooms proposes, they did not accomplish this either. But what the Ofudesaki does succeed at is *explaining* Onisaburō's behavior within its divine mission. No matter how much he wrestles, he cannot escape from being the transformed female.

Indeed, Oomoto became Onisaburō's destiny and fate. Following the failure of several apocalypse prophecies, Nao's followers deserted her, and Onisaburō left Ayabe to seek more orthodox priestly training in Kyoto, leaving her family in wretched starvation. But Onisaburō eventually returned and resumed Oomoto's activities, this time making himself the primary spokesperson and authority for their group.

### **Onisaburō as Miroku**



As Onisaburō negotiated the new form of Oomoto in 1909-10, Konjin delivered a “sealed” Ofudesaki to be opened after Nao’s death. (ONH 1964:389) It reads in part: “Succession of Oomoto in Ayabe will forever be to those with a woman’s body. A woman’s body will forever carry out the divine mission, and a man’s body will forever choose the spirit of a transformed female to rule the world. This task cannot be changed ... Your lastborn Sumi, when she becomes the second to inherit the divine task, will become the great god Kinkatsukane” (26 May 1910).

This message’s emphasis on a “woman’s body” and the immutability of Konjin’s commands, as well as the decision to hide it from Onisaburō until after Nao’s death, reflects the real challenge to the Ofudesaki’s authority being made at the time. Yet even at this dire point, the “transformed female” was included in Oomoto’s leadership. This message emphasizes the continuity of the 1909-10 reorganization with the battles of 1902-4, reminding Onisaburō of his complement, and Nao of hers.

It turned out, too, that this was not the final word. On 18 June 1916, another Ofudesaki reiterated female succession. But at the ceremony of the Opening of Kamishima a few months later, where Nao and Onisaburō played equal roles, an Ofudesaki was produced from Nao’s hand that proclaimed Onisaburō to be Miroku, the savior god who transforms the world. (ONH 1964:347; 4 Oct. 1916) At that time, Nao said to Sumi: “Kami is telling me that *sensei* [Onisaburō] is the great god Miroku. No matter how many times I listen, he says it again and again. Up until this moment I’ve had such a great misunderstanding.” (Deguchi 1986:105; 1995:697) The last Ofudesaki from her brush, which came on 25 July 1918, has a sense of closure: “The hands of the transformed male, by Ofudesaki, showed the origin of the root of the world, and the time has come for the transformed female to persuade people to listen. ... We have nothing more to say.”

Nao’s own feelings about Onisaburō and the success of Oomoto are not really separable from her experience of the Ofudesaki as revelation to her. Although there are many hundreds of pages of Ofudesaki accompanying years of struggle in the divine task, the unity of opposites designed in 1900 becomes a fixture. Onisaburō’s spirit is a “great general” and Konjin’s complement in the divine task. He may not be Konjin’s own successor, but he is a “ruler of the

world”, and is indeed eventually affirmed as the world-transforming “Miroku”. Nao herself admitted to misunderstanding what Konjin had been telling her; this strange process of automatic writing had the ability to drive confusion from her mind so that she could know the true thoughts of the kami.

Onisaburō’s respect for Nao by this time was unambiguous. In his newsletter *Shinreikai*, where he printed a sizable majority of the Ofudesaki, he also explained Nao’s character and the basis of his faith in her:

Other religious founders are half spirit and half ego, or maybe even 70 or 80 percent ego, being religious founders mostly as mere humans. *But the founder of Oomoto has a body which is entirely a vessel for the Kami, one hundred percent moving in the spirit, and not a tenth of her actions come from her own ego. This point is of the highest value for explaining the peerless pure-mindedness of her revelations.* (SSK 1986:I:57; emphasis in original)

This was no empty talk for Onisaburō. This is the conviction which drove him to publish Nao’s Ofudesaki, which was eventually suppressed by the censors for its subversive content, leading to his own prosecution and imprisonment. Until the group’s final suppression in 1936, Onisaburō placed terms such as “divine mission,” Ushitora no Konjin, and the transformed male and female at the center of his teachings, encouraging people to read Nao’s Ofudesaki to understand their meaning. (Kuisako 1971:280–282)

Following Nao’s death in November 1918, Onisaburō, the transformed female, buried her in such an enormous and elaborate mausoleum that the Japanese government eventually ordered it destroyed for too closely resembling an imperial grave. (Yasumaru 1977:245) The “sealed” Ofudesaki was retrieved, read openly, and published. Revived in the postwar period, Oomoto outlived Onisaburō and continues to be run by Nao’s female descendants today.

**Conclusion: Reading the Ofudesaki as a religious text**

When we try to incorporate the other into our own understanding, we are often quite tempted to leap to the conclusion that the other shares our desires and visions. Despite being an unpredictable and elusive text of unclear agency, Deguchi Nao's *Ofudesaki* contains much material that looks familiar to modern-day scholars: anger about widespread injustice, desire to destroy large social systems, and an irreverent attitude towards the sacred cows of the modernizing state. To wit, it looks like Nao herself, writing from a tiny shack in an impoverished 19th century town, is engaging in cultural critique. As Isomae Jun'ichi writes (2010:317–8) in his “positive deconstruction” of Yasumaru Yoshio:

Yasumaru values religion highly, but that is because, in his words, religion “may be thought of as the most primeval shape of people's spiritual independence from state control, and the essential form of internal authority.” For Yasumaru, religion is the domain strongest in independence, and in it one can establish a vision of totality where for the first time reality can be handled from completely critical standpoint. In order to absolutize social criticism, a theory of criticism of the world became necessary, based in an apocalyptic vision where “this world is the ‘world of evil’ and ‘world of beasts’”, and “Nao's kami defines the totality of this world as entirely evil, and announces an apocalyptic reconstruction.”

Yasumaru's constructionist view of religion as a tool of “internal authority” employed by that human agents, rather than a natural force that acts on us, puts his readers in an awkward position. Take, for instance, Nishikawa Yūko's intelligent reflection on Yasumaru's study of Nao (2016). In order to integrate the *Ofudesaki*'s otherworldly voice into her research on premodern women finding their own voices, she joins Yasumaru in “reading [its] religious thought as a period type of political thought first and foremost.” In other words, in order to appreciate the message of the *Ofudesaki* it is necessary to strip it of its cosmic breadth and divine influences, like disassembling a handwoven cloth in order to more fully enjoy its colors.

This is not to impugn the intent of these writers. On the contrary, it is exciting to discover that Nao is not merely a “hallucinating” fanatic, and that she can be appreciated rather than

incarcerated. So eager are we to embrace such apparent similarities, though, that we may end up doing an injustice to the text, failing to acknowledge the things that it does which we would never do. As we have seen in this brief overview of the Ofudesaki's language, attributing its authorship to Nao herself pulls the rug out from under her writing desk. It is not what Nao believed the text to be, and it is not what the text claims itself to be. This is a highly creative text, full of sparks of imagination, but Nao does not attribute the act of creation to herself. This is a message from the kami, about correspondences between humanity and the divine.

The Ofudesaki faults the world, not for statism or patriarchy, but for abandoning the kami and straying from their guidance. It warns us all, not that inequalities should be remedied through structural change, but that the world is about to be plunged into darkness, "like a fire that has gone out," (13 Oct. 1912) and rebuilt under divine direction. This is the work of a Micah, not a Marcuse. Nao experienced the act of writing as something coming in on her from without and directing her thoughts and behavior, and she would not have lent her support to any movement that failed to acknowledge the divine agent behind this behavior, Ushitora no Konjin. If we remove religion from the Ofudesaki, there is nothing left.

The analysis of Nao's relationship with Onisaburō has been forced into the overly restrictive reading of the Ofudesaki as cultural critique. The Ofudesaki, which attempts to establish a nationwide religious movement with Nao as its central authority, is seen as an "anti-authoritarian" and "anti-establishment" text. Since Onisaburō argued for including identification of Oomoto kami with nationally established kami from the very beginning, and Oomoto developed a quasi-fascist youth arm in the 1930s, the conclusion is reached that Onisaburō was an imperialist who "hijacked" Nao's group and changed its direction. It takes considerable confidence to reduce a character as versatile as Onisaburō to a single political ideology, and to make Nao his antithesis despite her eventual endorsement of him, but this dualism has been key to academic studies of Nao's life.

If we relinquish such commitments, though, it is easy to see that Onisaburō did not simply bend Oomoto to his will. He did not just do the changing, but was changed himself. He brought with him many outside ideas, such as classical mythology and esotericism, and a playful attitude towards religion. But he himself was bound into a system of correspondences and a

divinely ordained mission, both novel experiences to him at such a visceral level. He recognized the darkness invading Japan from without and resolved to renew the Japanese spirit. He read the Ofudesaki closely, made sense of its handwriting, and published it for the world to see. Like Nao, he became an incessant writer, publishing an 81-volume epic as well as constantly producing new works of poetry and calligraphy, which he distributed throughout the country. One might say that he came to believe in the power of writing just as much as Nao did.

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<sup>1</sup> The messages ascribed to the period 1892 to 1898 in *Shinreikai* include a patchwork transcribed at later dates by Onisaburō, as the period critics Nakamura (1920:174) and Kuisako (1971:172) warn. But there is little evidence that he was inventing from whole cloth, as Ooms (1993:73) and Miyata (1988:115) imply. Rather, there is plenty of evidence in Ikeda's (1982) comparison of *Shinreikai* and *Ōmoto nenpyō*, and from the shared vocabulary of all three witnesses, that Onisaburō was compiling, abridging, and editing a text which he did not initially write.

<sup>2</sup> Two Ofudesaki on this theme (16 April 1897, 23 June 1898) supposedly predate Ueda's arrival, but a comparison with contemporary *Ōmoto nenpyō* texts puts some doubt on their dating (see footnote 1). They do not deviate from the scheme of complementarity discussed here.

<sup>3</sup> Even today, the art of using a traditional handloom to make multicolored cloths is passed down from mother to daughter by Oomoto's female leaders. Some of these looms and fabrics can be seen in an appendix to their in-house edition of the *Ōmoto shin'yu* (Ōmoto Honbu 2014:166-9).