



Philip L. Nicoloff, *Sacred Kōyasan: A Pilgrimage to the Mountain Temple of Saint Kōbō Daishi and the Great Sun Buddha*

Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2008. xiii+ 392 pp. Hardcover, \$89.50/£46.74. ISBN: 978-0-7914-7259-0; Paperback, \$29.95/£16.99. ISBN: 978-0-7914-7260-6.

KŌYASAN IS WELL-KNOWN as one of the great traditional religious centers of Japan. Founded by Kūkai in the ninth century and the headquarters of Shingon Buddhism, it has long attracted pilgrims and visitors from all over Japan and now, increasingly, (after Kōyasan was included, along with Yoshino and other sacred sites in the Kumano region, in UNESCO's list of World Heritage sites) visitors from outside Japan. The mountain center, long a monastic training center from which, until the Meiji era, women were excluded, contains numerous resplendent temples, along with Kūkai's mausoleum, where, according to legend, he sits in eternal meditation awaiting the coming of the future Buddha, Maitreya. Kōya's extensive graveyard, set in deep forests, is perhaps Japan's most striking center for the memorialisation of the dead. Indeed, the whole of Kōyasan is deeply evocative, with its forests, cool (at times in winter extremely cold) mountain air, its wildlife and the trappings of religious wealth and artistic splendour that suffuse the place.

Philip Nicoloff's book provides a comprehensive guide to Kōyasan, its temples, sights, surroundings, and rituals, along with a general history of the place, Shin-gon Buddhism and its foci of worship, and of the life and post-mortem persona (as Kōbō Daishi) of its founder. Nicoloff, an Emeritus Professor of English at the University of New Hampshire who has spent plentiful time in Japan and who clearly has developed a real love for Kōyasan, writes extremely well, and his descriptions of the location and of his experiences there make for vibrant and compelling reading. He takes us on a comprehensive tour of the whole site, starting with the train journey from Osaka and the subsequent cable car ride up the mountain (the mode in which most visitors now approach the sacred center), and leading us through Kōya's various landmarks, with extensive descriptions of its buildings, statuary and art works, and on to Kōya's atmospheric graveyard and Kūkai's mausoleum (by which Nicoloff passes a night's vigil). He records various ritual events that occur through the year there, before finally taking us back down the mountain again at the end of the book, and back to the train station in Osaka.

The format within which Nicoloff presents his account is especially suitable for undergraduate students: the main text is a straightforward descriptive narration of Kōyasan, while the academic apparatus of the book (including discussions of some of the more pertinent issues raised, explications of various topics touched on in the text, and evidence of the depth of Nicoloff's scholarship in English and Japanese sources) is contained within the copious and extensive endnotes. This in general works well, and makes for smooth reading. However, at times this split between main text narrative and academically detailed endnotes leaves room for errors and misrepresentations to surface. For example, we are told that the eighty-eight stage Shikoku pilgrimage was "increasing in popularity during the Kamakura era" (91), even though there are in fact no records of a pilgrimage of this sort (with eighty-eight stages in Shikoku) until the seventeenth century. The endnotes actually correct this error, but if one does not read the endnotes carefully there are times when one might glean some misleading information.

I found the book immensely enjoyable. Although I have not been to Kōyasan for many years, many of its images came back to me as I read Nicoloff, and I am sure this will be the same for others who have previously been there. Those who have not, and those with little knowledge of what a Japanese sacred mountain center might be like, will get a good insight into such things through Nicoloff's skilfully constructed account. The various outlines of festivals, including Kōbō Daishi's birthday celebration festival, which Nicoloff says provides "the most fun and excitement" of all Kōyasan's events (and through which he provides a clear indication of how enjoyable some aspects of religious activity are in Japan) are well worth reading, and will be of great value to students taking courses on religion in Japan.

At the same time, this cannot be described as an analytically focused book, or one that moves forward academic discussions and analyses of sacred places and their dynamics. Nicoloff is so captivated by what, for him, is clearly the magical charm

of Kōyasan, and also by the ambiance of Shingon Buddhism and of its main figures of veneration (Kūkai/Kōbō Daishi and Dainichi) that he frequently veers towards the devotional in his writing, and he seems to rely a lot on what appear to be hagiographic sources. Thus, on p. 295 (endnote 33) we are told that of all the religious bodies that claimed responsibility for the kamikaze winds that destroyed the Mongol fleet and saved Japan in 1281, none had the credibility of the claim by Kōyasan—a statement that owes more to hagiography and sectarian claims than to empirical evidence. Equally, when Nicoloff narrates various stories and legends relating to Kūkai and Kōyasan, he does not consider the contexts and underlying reasons why they might have appeared; for example, there is no discussion of what led priests at Kōyasan in the tenth century to promote the legend of Kūkai's transcendence of death, or consideration of the extent to which such factors as economic necessities and the desire to increase Kōyasan's clientele might have played their part.

My main disappointment, however, is that Nicoloff does not dig into a number of questions that appear on the surface and that could have done with more thought and analysis, especially in the context of Kōyasan's position in contemporary Japan. Thus, while we hear of the railway that brings visitors to Kōyasan, I would have liked to know more about the relationship between the Nankai Company and Shingon, and the role of the former in helping transform Kōyasan into what is now not just a sectarian center and sacred center, but also a major tourist site. More, too, would have been appreciated on Kōyasan as a World Heritage site, especially since this new status and the influx of new, and especially international, visitors it has brought, appear to be helping Kōyasan in the face of declining visitors from within Japan. Indeed, more comment on the effects of modern visiting patterns (by rail, bus, and visiting Kōyasan because of its status as a site of cultural heritage) might have been useful, if only because of the implications of such modern forms of temple visiting on Kōyasan. Is it being affected by the processes of commercialisation and by a shift from devotionism to tourism, as is evident at many well-known religious sites in Japan and that can be very readily seen, for example, in that other great institution associated with Kōya, Kōbō Daishi, and Shingon, the Shikoku pilgrimage (MORI 2005)? Reading Nicoloff one would not know, since he tends to portray visitors as if they are virtually all impelled primarily by religious motives.

More problematic still was the lack of comment and lack of incisive discussion of such contentious issues as Kōyasan's associations with war and nationalism. While we learn of Kōyasan's memorial to deceased kamikaze pilots (203) and of its monument and memorial ceremonies for executed Japanese war criminals (213–14), there is no comment on the implications of such things or about what links there were (or remain) between Kōyasan, the Shingon elite, and Japan's militarism and nationalism. While here Nicoloff appears simply to avoid or carefully tiptoe around such potentially problematic issues, elsewhere he goes further and engages in sanitised and idealised depictions of Japan and of Kōyasan which appear at odds with historical realities. Thus, when describing the English language stele set up at Kōyasan in 1908

by Shimazu Tadashige to memorialise those who died in Hideyoshi's 1597 invasion of Korea, Nicoloff states that Shimazu (the descendant of a prominent clan of warlords) "wished to make twentieth-century English-speaking visitors aware of the benevolence the Japanese always had felt toward foreign peoples. This was a timely issue, for Korea had just been made a Japanese protectorate in the wake of Japan's triumph over Russia" (211). Can one really see either event (Hideyoshi's invasion of Korea and the slaughter that it brought about, or Japan's twentieth-century annexation of Korea) as evidence of a benevolent attitude towards foreign peoples? I somewhat doubt it.

Yet, if Nicoloff often skirts issues and can at times be overly reverential, he has nonetheless produced what overall is a very useful and finely-crafted description of what one sees and what goes on at a major Buddhist center. In such contexts this book will be a valuable teaching resource for Japanese religious courses (and especially ones about Buddhism, its iconography, rituals, and the like), and will be a valuable addition to such course reading lists. I suspect that many of the students will enjoy it more than the overtly analytical volumes that we ask them to read.

REFERENCE

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