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YONAOSHI

Visions of a Better World

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INTRODUCTION

The term "*yonaoshi*" (世直し、よなおし, literally 'world renewal/repair/remaking'), and the various specific concepts it has been used to signify, has a long history in Japan. With its earliest origins in a series of anti-government riots in Edo in the late 18th century, the idea rose to new prominence, and received its lasting associations, in connection with peasant uprisings and outbursts in the dying years of the Tokugawa shogunate.[3] During the late 1860s, farmers and villagers driven by "a millenarian urge to remake the world" and displaying an unparalleled "commitment to act and change" rose up across the country.[4] In ways that draw numerous parallels with the Ranters, Levellers, and other radical reform groups of the 17th century revolutionary period in England, these rebels saw in the collapse of the centuries-old political order a long-awaited opportunity to erase long-established forms of inequality endemic to the countryside and they directed their often-violent attentions to the property and the bodies of local elites. *Yonaoshi* continued to be a watchword in the northeast of Japan even after the shogunate had fallen. Riots and uprisings flared into the first years of the Meiji era in these rebellious provinces, and millenarian *cris de*

1 Sapienza University of Rome
2 Tohoku University
3 Takashi Miura, *Agents of World Renewal: The Rise of Yonaoshi Gods in Japan* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2019), p. 1.
4 George M. Wilson, *Patriots and Redeemers in Japan: Motives in the Meiji Restoration* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), p. 59; H. D. Harootunian, 'Late Tokugawa Culture and Thought', in *The Cambridge History of Japan, Volume 5: The Nineteenth Century*, edited by Marius B. Jansen (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), p. 218.

couer continued to echo in Tochigi, Fukushima, and other areas of Tōhoku.[5] The establishment of the new government and its effective suppression of dissent, however, put an end to *yonaoshi*-based rural uprisings by the early 1880s, but the term found a home in the so-called "new religions" of the late 19th century among adherents convinced that they were "living in a time of crisis that would be overcome by divine intervention".[6] Even as these groups rose to prominence in the new century, though, *yonaoshi* took on a life of its own and entered into the general Japanese lexicon. Shedding its explicitly spiritual meanings but retaining its associations with a world in an unsatisfactory state, injustices that need righting, and an idealized moral vision of the future, the term was set free to resonate with different causes and different efforts for reform or revolution. Finding purchase in such disparate applications as quotidian mumblings about bettering personal lifestyles, calls for improvement in the cultural and economic spheres, and condemnation of political and economic systems, *yonaoshi* has in the last century become an almost ubiquitous term, but one which still holds at its heart a revolutionary dream of a better world.

This volume presents a collection of essays based on presentations given at the 6th annual Hasekura League International Japanese Studies Symposium, *Yonaoshi*: Envisioning a Better World. Taking the generalized definition of *yonaoshi* as a starting point, the symposium invited participants to explore the theme in both a Japanese context and as a concept that reaches across borders and language boundaries to connect with human experience in a wide array of geographic and temporal settings. Planned jointly by Sapienza University of Rome and Tohoku University, in part to celebrate the long history of cooperation

5 See Stephen Vlastos, 'Yonaoshi in Aizu,' in *Conflict in Modern Japanese History: The Neglected Tradition*, edited by Tetsuo Najita and J. Victor Koschmann (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1982), pp. 164-176; M. William Steele, *Alternative Narratives in Modern Japanese History* (London: RoutledgeCurzon, 2003), pp. 44-60, among others.

6 Nancy K. Stalker, *Prophet Motive: Deguchi Onisaburō, Oomoto, and the Rise of New Religions in Imperial Japan* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2008), p. 37.

between the two institutions, the symposium was originally scheduled to be held in Rome. The outbreak of COVID-19 in late 2020, however, forced a rescheduling and the event eventually took place online over two consecutive weekends on the 5th- 6th and 12th-13th of March 2021 in sessions designed to minimalize the inconvenience of the widely differing time zones in Italy and Japan. While concerns over the ongoing pandemic momentarily hampered cultural exchanges among the Hasekura League institutions and have made impossible – for the time being, at least – any chances for the international cohosting of joint ventures, the online conference provided an invaluable opportunity for participants to resume interactions and share their outlook on a theme that took on fresh significance in the light of the multifarious and universal challenges posed by the global pandemic. The sense of hope and belief in the possibility of fundamental and positive change coming in the wake of the global disaster still remained in its early months, a context that augmented the earnestness and passion of the presentations and provided for a memorable exchange of ideas and scholarship.

The sequence of the chapters in the current volume follows a roughly temporal order, starting with a philosophical discussion that functions as a timeless opener and lays a kind of epistemological groundwork for the subsequent entries. Paul Ziche presents a thought-provoking analysis of a 1797 essay by Johann Gottfried Herder (1744-1803) titled "On our knowing and not-knowing the future" ("Vom Wissen und Nichtwissen der Zukunft"). Herder, a theologian, anti-idealist philosopher, writer, and theoretician of the humanities, discusses in this pamphlet whether it is humanly possible and desirable to know the future, only to conclude that humans cannot know the future and should not want to know what they are not able to know. The philosopher acutely notes at the same time how it is just as natural for humans to want to reach out into the future. The question raised by Herder – and Ziche himself – in this chapter is of interest far beyond the intriguing problem of understanding Herder's outlook. The 'radical transformation' that the question posed in the paper signifies can be offered as an initial means to

approach *yonaoshi,* as Ziche convincingly demonstrates that the German thinker's robust arguments can show how ideas that are relevant for political transformation relate to epistemological, theological, psychological, aesthetic, anthropological, and other issues.

Taking a stance concerning the future is a prerequisite for any 'radical transformation of the world' as a political-social and/or religious process of change. The options that we have for reaching out into the future, and the difficulties that we encounter in doing so, clearly are of key importance for the many challenges that we face today. The upheaval and renovation occurring during the Meiji period in Japan (1868-1912) is the subject of Sonia Favi's informed second chapter in the book. Favi details how the management of tourism at a (semi-)private level in the newly-opened country in the late 19th century played a crucial role in inspiring future governmental tourism policies, analysing critically the circumstances that led to the creation of a public organization for promoting tourism, the Kihinkai, and exploring the backgrounds and activities of its members. Tying these activities to Japan's position on the international diplomatic stage in the late Meiji period, the main argument holds that the Kihinkai initiated a pioneering project in tourism diplomacy, devised at a time when governmental involvement in tourism was still in its infancy even in Europe, representing an endeavor in the early years of modern Japan that was innovative, even from a global perspective.

The book then moves to the social-literary realm, where Kuroiwa Taku introduces the first Japanese translation of a famous French medieval epic by Ban Takeo published in January 1941 under the title *The Song of Roland: Islamic War* (『ロオランの歌　回教戦争』). The chapter focuses on the unusual subtitle of this Japanese version of the French epic, closely examining the explicit references to Islamic civilization in the Japanese rendition of the original text and its foreword and to the relative contributions of its translator and its editor. Examining excerpts from materials related to the translation, including separate works by its editor and his mentors, all notable propagandists during

the war years, Kuroiwa illustrates the ideological and social background of this Japanese rendition of *The Song of Roland* and presenting new insight into the complicated place of Islamic societies and their histories in wartime Japanese understandings of Asia.

A thorough and compelling description of political and social phenomena also characterizes Geraldine Castel's chapter, which, building upon a significant body of scholarship documenting the dangers technology might represent for democracy, explores whether in the context of the 2019 General Election in the UK evidence can be found of a possibility for *yonaoshi* in the sphere of digital politics. Sifting through the digital morass of misinformation and manipulation that washed over the Internet during that bitterly fought election, she identifies a trail that might be followed out of the gloom and points to signs that resistance is mounting to counter the significant threats technology represents for democracy, particularly in the three areas of disinformation, manipulation, and demobilization.

The following chapter by Cinzia Calzolari centers on Ainu culture and recent developments in its people's production in the fine arts. Using the case of Bikky Sunazawa (1931-1989), the most celebrated Ainu modern artist, the chapter explores how art can function as a source of resilience and a site of resistance for a community afflicted by more than a century of collective trauma related to systematic discrimination, racism, and the simplification and commodification of its cultural heritage. Calzolari argues that Sunazawa's life and work are a clear example of how often art and important artists who have not been provided with the space and acknowledgement they deserve still somehow find a way to stand out. Sunazawa renewed artistic forms and developed an engaging approach, finding artistic success and bringing new vigor and attention to issues surrounding Ainu civil rights with his art and life.

The book also includes four chapters from younger scholars, a very welcome set of contributions that highlight the quality of the global research sustained by the Hasekura League's promotion of international, cross-cultural research activity. Hoizumi Sora's

chapter takes up the topic of the Japanese wartime preoccupation with overcoming modernity and relates it to prominent Catholic ideologues, presenting new insight into the movement and its cultural context. Samantha Audoly focusses on the presentation of the tonsure in the classical Japanese text *Yoru no Nezame* in her chapter, shedding new light on a Heian narrative unjustly neglected outside Japan. Elena Fabbretti's contribution provides a compelling portrait of prominent modern Japanese writer Nagai Kafū, exploring the hidden political dimensions of his later-life retreat into nostalgia for the lost past. Finally, Dario Minguzzi presents a discussion of social value attached to poets and their works in the early Heian period, providing new information concerning and a rewarding analysis of the dynamic relationship between Confucian scholarship and the composition of Sinitic poetry revolving around the self-proclaimed 'uselessness' of poetry.

This volume was composed and assembled in the months following the March 2020 symposium, and the progress to the present has again been marked with arresting parallels to the work's theme. Just as the millenarian hopes that fueled the paroxysm of *yonaoshi* unrest in the Japanese countryside in the last years of the failing shogunate were betrayed with the establishment of the new Meiji order, so too did the optimism and firm resolve of early 2020 give way to frustration and pessimism as the virus mutated and continued its spread. The authors engaged in adapting and expanding their presentations into book chapters did so in an often very different mindset and with significantly altered expectations of the future than those that had informed their initial efforts. Thus, while it is to be hoped that the current collection of essays can recreate in some small way the genuine and lively atmosphere of the symposium, the contradictory nature of the context in which the works were originally conceptualized and presented and that in which they were written down provides another dimension of interest and, perhaps, an additional layer of insight into the roots of *yonaoshi* and the potential for a better world.