

Tenshin Okakura Kakuzô and Sister Nivedita On an Intellectual Exchange in Modernizing Asia

Shigemi INAGA

International Research Center for Japanese Studies
Graduate School for Advanced Studies, Kyoto, Japan

The paper treats a case of cultural exchange between Japan and India in Modern era. Tenshin Okakura Kukuzô (1862-1913)'s stay in India in 1901-02 was a marked incident of the Japanese encounter with the Indian intellectuals. His friendship with Swami Vivekananda (1863-1902) and Rabindranatha Tagore (1861-1941) and others are well known. Yet his intense relationship with Sister Nivedita (1867-1911) during the preparation of Okakura's first book in English, *The Ideals of the East* and *The Awakening of the East* (1902 posthumously published in 1938) has not yet been thoroughly investigated.

In the first place I will briefly outline the circumstances in which Okakura stayed in India. Secondly I would propose some of the concrete evidences which may establish the mutual influence which occurred in the elaboration of Okakura thinking of *The Ideals of the East* as well as in Sister Nivedita's idea of the Indian national identity. Thirdly, I may argue that this intellectual collaboration prepared positive appraisal with which Sister Nivedita celebrated the new Bengal nationalist paintings at the beginning of the 20th Century. In conclusion, the role of female mediators in the colonial context will be critically examined.

1

Okakura's first book in English, *The Ideal of the East with special reference to the Arts of Japan* (written in 1901 and published in 1903) was based on his lectures given in English at his house in Yanaka, Tokyo. Among the attendance was Josephine MacLeod (1858-1949) who encouraged Okakura to make a stay in India and see Swami Vivekananda, whom she had adored since her first encounter with him in New York in 1894. Swami Vivekananda (1863-1902), a distinguished disciple of Ramakrishna, was famous for his legendary success at the First international Parliament of World Religion held in Chicago at the Columbus World Fair in 1893. Leaving Shimonoseki on Dec.5, 1901, Okakura arrived in Calcutta on Jan.6, 1902 and his encounter with Vivekananda took place on the same day. Josephine MacLeod's biographies do not omit this "one of the happy moment of [her] life," when Vivekananda remarked that "It seems as if a long lost brother has come." And Okakura in his turn, qualified in his letter to Oda Tokunou, a Buddhist monk, that "the master [Vivekananda] is truly a distinguished person bestowed with surpassing spirit and wisdom and everybody here venerates him." (師は氣迫学識超然抜群一代の名士と相見え). Okakura's same letter also shows that an exciting philosophical discussion was exchanged between them and they reached in agreement on the two main issues: firstly on the Mahayana Buddhism's priority to the Hinayana Buddhism, secondly on the importance of the idea of Advaita. As we shall see, these two issues were of primary importance for the further development of the Oriental Ideals.

Josephine MacLeod was also closely related with Sister Nivedita, alias Elisabeth Margaret Noble (1867-1911). Born in Ireland, she was another devotee of Vivekananda and was going to write an important preface to Okakura's *The Ideals of the East*. In this preface we read: "it is of supreme value to show Asia, as Mr. Okakura does, not as the congeries of geographical fragments that we imagined, but as a united living organism, each part dependent on all the others, the whole breathing a single complete life." Evidently, Sister Nivedita's vision of Asia as a living organism reflects the metaphor of the thread in the Diamond Sutra as well as the idea of Advaita. And Okakura himself paraphrased the idea of Advaita as follows: "The word Advaita means the state of not being two, and is the name applied to the great Indian doctrine that all which exists, though apparently manifold, is really one. Hence all truth must be discoverable in any single differentiation, the whole universe involved in every detail" (C.E.W. vol.1:128). It is also self-evident that the famous opening phrase of Okakura's *The Ideals of the East*: "Asia is one" is nothing but a direct reflect of the idea of Advaita.

In his famous *The Book of Tea* (1906) Okakura highly appreciated Sister Nivedita with the following appraisal. “It is rarely that the chivalrous pen of a Lafcadio Hearn or that of the author of *The Web of Indian Life* enlivens the Oriental darkness with the torch of our own sentiment.” (1904:4) Sister Nivedita herself also mentioned, in one of her letters, *The Ideals of the East* by Okakura, of which she had helped the editing, for the sake of not “spoiling the whole music” of Okakura’s prose. And she placed this service to Okakura between her own books, i.e. *Kali the Mother* (1900) and *The Web of Indian Life* (1903), Okakura highly estimated. Despite these close relationships, no close cross-reading of the two authors has not yet been accomplished, as far as I know.

People had been wondering why Okakura, in his manuscript written in 1902 during his stay in India, to be published posthumously as *The Awakening of the East*, inserted here and there invocations to the Kali goddess. “Om to the Steel of honor! Om to the Strong! Om to the Invincible! True child of Siva art thou—icy because born of fire! Thou art silent like the forest that awaits the tempest India worships thee in Kali—dread mother of relentless mercy...” The easiest and the most convincing explanation of Okakura’s reference to Kali goddess may be his close relationship with Sister Nivedita, who had just published *Kali the Mother* in 1900. In a sense Okakura was initiated in the Indian Kali worship by the mediation of an Irish woman devoted to Hinduism.

2-1

How was Okakura’s awakening to the Oriental womanhood possible? On Oriental womanhood, especially in terms of social freedom, Sister Nivedita’s opinion show a particular similarity with Okakura’s thinking. “It is obviously absurd to constitute one’s own national customs an ideal standard, against which every other country is to be measured. Hindu and Mohammedan women are not seen much in public, either whopping or visiting. We [the Westerner] are: we enjoy our custom, and call it Freedom. Does it follow that the Eastern woman’s restrictions constitute a grievance?” (C.W.S.N. vol.4 pp.512-3)

As if to paraphrase Sister Nivedita, Okakura also declares in his manuscript for the *Awakening of the East*: “The West has often accused the East of a lack of Freedom. Truly we have not that crude notion of personal rights guarded by mutual assertions—that perpetual elbowing through the crowd—that constant snarling over the bones which seems to be the glory of the Occident. Our conception of liberty is far higher than these. (...) Real equality lies in the due fulfillment of the respective function. Oriental womanhood finds its freest scope in the Mother, the Wife, and the Daughter rather than in the doubtful privileges of an unnatural masculinity.” (S.E.W. vol.1:151) The word “Oriental womanhood” suddenly appears in the text and this abruptness may suggest Sister Nivedita’s shadow. Indeed, it is not easy, in the context, to understand the logic by which Okakura advances the superiority of the Oriental womanhood. Yet it would not be a simple coincidence that Sister Nivedita was putting emphasis on Oriental womanhood almost at the same period, i.e. October 1902, when Okakura was just leaving India: “I love India as the birth place of the highest and best of all religions; (...) where domestic happiness is most to be found; where the woman unselfishly, unobtrusively, ungrudgingly, serves the dear ones from early morn to dewy eve, where the mother and the grandmother studies, foresees and contributes to the comfort of her belongings, regardless of her own happiness, and in the unselfishness raises womanhood to its highest eminence.” (C.W.S.N. vol.3:461)

2-2

The question of Oriental womanhood is closely related with the notion of freedom and subordination. According to Sister Nivedita, the Oriental self-renunciation is not a subordination but a personal realization of freedom. In explaining this Oriental virtue Sister Nivedita evokes the self-abnegation by “a certain Bodhisattva”: “It is told of a certain Bodhisattva that (...) he was about to pass over into Nirvana. But as his feet touched the threshold of supreme blessedness there rose to his ears the sound of the sorrowful crying of humanity. Then turned that great soul back from Nirvana and entered again into life, declaring that till the last grain of dust in the universe had passed in before him, he would by no means go into salvation.” (vol.2:181). Here is a famous anecdote of Bodhisattva Mitreya. In *The Ideals of the East* (vol.1:130) we see almost the same phrase: “till the last atom of dust in the universe shall have passed in before to bliss...” of which Sister Nivedita may have made a paraphrase of her own.

These textual interrelations may allow us to present the following hypothesis: On the one hand, Sister Nivedita’s initiation was helpful for Okakura’s discovery of Oriental womanhood. On the other hand, Sister Nivedita for her turn, also took advantage of her proof reading of Okakura’s manuscript so as to reinforce her own conviction as for the superiority of Oriental collective morality over the Western individualism. In talking about a Bodhisattva’s

self-abnegation, Okakura was hinting at “that [Oriental] harmony that brings together Emperor and peasant; that sublime intuition of oneness which commands all sympathy, all courtesy, to be its fruit” (C.E.W. vol.1:130). It may be in reaction to this idealized (and over-emphasized) “one-ness” that Sister Nivedita confessed: “N. [Okakura] almost persuades me that sovereigns have not always and everywhere been vulgar and rich and self indulgent and grasping at the show of power” (to Josephine MacLeod, July 1902: L.S.N.vol.1. Nr.197).

2-3

While Okakura believed in the noblesse oblige of the Oriental sovereigns, the Japanese emperor to begin with, Sister Nivedita was skeptical about Western (and especially British) rulers. As Guha-Thakurta relevantly remarked the “patriotic fervour of a rejuvenated Japan” was the other side of “a deep crisis of self-identification at the denationalisation” of the Indian Subcontinent under British rule (*The Making of a New ‘Indian Art’* 1992). It is in this context that the idea of “Asia as a living organism” becomes problematical. By reshaping her own preface to *The Ideals of the East*, Sister Nivedita showed her vision of Asia as “a single immense organism, filled with the tide of one strong pulsating life from end to end, firm-rooted in the soil of common origins and common modes” (C.W.S.N.vol.2:147-8) The metaphor of breathing is replaced here by that of pulsation, echoing Okakura’s own formulation: “The history of Japanese art becomes thus the history of Asiatic ideals—the beach where each successive wave of Eastern thought has left its sand-nipple as I beat against the national consciousness” (C.E.W. vol.1:16). Though the metaphors are quite similar (“tide” and “wave”), the apparent similarity ends here. The underlying messages turn out to be divergent.

In her paper written in 1903 appealing for educational reform for Indian women (to be included in the chapter, “The Immediate Problems of the Oriental Woman” in *The Web of Indian Life*), Sister Nivedita concluded as follows. “The national idea cannot be imposed from without—it must develop from within. (C.W.S.N. vol.2:76-7). This conclusion cannot help evoking the final and impressive phrase of Okakura’s *The Ideals of the East*: “Victory from within, or mighty death without” (C.E.W.vol.1:132). Both Okakura and Sister Nivedita insist on the importance of auto-genetic development of Asia. And yet, if Okakura could perceive the “victory from within” as a historical fact, already fulfilled in the past Japanese art history, the same slogan was a political aim to be achieved as a national task in India at the beginning of the 20th Century.

Here lies the point of divergence between Okakura and Sister Nivedita. On the one hand Okakura could recast the notion of Advaita so as to apply it to the scheme of development of Japanese art history: “Japan is a museum of Asiatic civilisation; and yet more than a museum, because the singular genius of the race leads to dwell on all phrases of the ideals of the past, in that spirit of living Advaitism which welcomes the new without losing the old” (C.E.W. vol.1:16). Here reconciliation of antagonistic elements was not in need. Okakura’s optimism is evident when compared to Sister Nivedita’s forced effort to make up an (imaginary and politically anticipated) Indian unity. Looking back the Islamic invasion, Sister Nivedita was obliged to give such an idealized and rationalized interpretation: “there was no wide gap between Muslim conquerors and Hindu conquered; no gap in taste, or moral or style of thought and education. The newcomer settled down as a child of the land, in his own home. His children were first Indian, and only in the second place members of the Mohammedan confraternity” (C.W.S.N.vol.2:77). The forced idealization and baseless anticipation of the unified India reveal all the more clearly the difficulty of the national reconciliation, which Sister Nivedita’s was searching for in modernizing India.

3

Nothing is more revealing in this context than the implementation of the Bengal Partition on Oct 16, 1905, which administratively separated East Bengal from West Bengal. It provoked widespread protest and boycott of English products, known as Swadeshi movement, in which Sister Nivedita took an active role. It turns out that Okakura’s formulation “Asia is one” was to be re-interpreted as a political slogan in Bengal under the Bengal Partition: that Bengal and *a fortiori* India should be one. And this national awakening manifested itself especially in the art, both in art historical research and artistic creation. And in both of these two fields Sister Nivedita has been regarded as a champion, at least by those who were supported by her.

In the field of art historical research, such scholars as Ernest Binfield Havell (1861-1934) and Ananda K. Coomaraswamy (1877-1947) were going to propose highly nationalistic reinterpretations of Indian art. In plastic forms, they searched for formal manifestations of the “essential Indianness” incarnated in such classics as the Upanishads, and the Vedanta philosophy. Through such an idealistic and philological approach, they rejected foreign (and especially

Greco-Roman) influences as damage made against the unity and essence of Indian art. In consequence, the Gandhalian sculptures, which had been highly appreciated in the previous Western scholarship because of their aptitude to Greco-Roman proportions and aesthetic criteria, were to be depreciated in this new nationalistic perspective. As a reviewer, Sister Nivedita sustained and promoted Havell and Coomaraswamy's latest publications.

In artistic creation, Sister Nivedita is also known to have encouraged and promoted the Bengal school of new Indian national paintings. In my opinion Sister Nivedita's visual ideology is explained in her art appreciation better than anywhere else. Let us briefly examine three paintings under her review.

3-1

On *Bharata-mata* (1906?) executed by Abanindranath Tagore (1871-1951), Sister Nivedita remarked a birth of a new trend. "We have here a picture which bids fair to prove the beginning of a new age in Indian art." Comparison with contemporary Japanese Buddhist paintings executed by Hishida Shunsô (1874 -1911) or Yokoyama Taikan (1868-1958) during their stay in Bengal around 1903 allows us to suppose their mutual emulation in search of a new iconography, out of the yoke of traditional conventions. Sister Nivedita recognized these elements by insisting upon the use of "all the added means of expression which the modern period has bestowed upon him [A.Tagore]," while emphasizing nationalistic character of the achievement by saying that "the artist has given expression nevertheless to a purely Indian idea, in Indian form."

The four arms of the female figure convey allegorical meanings in such a mystical language that reminds us of the mystical symbolism of a, say, fra Angelico, in his wall painting at the San Marco Convent in Florence. Sister Nivedita recognized them "as the symbol of the divine multiplication of power," each arm symbolizing the idea of "giver of Faith and Learning, of Clothing and Food." Sister Nivedita's assertion is enthusiastic: "This is the first masterpiece, in which an Indian artist has actually succeeded in disengaging, as it were, the spirit of the motherhood," allegorically rendered by these four arms. She praised the figure as ""Spirit of the motherland, giver of all good, yet eternally virgin, eternally raft from human sense in prayer and gift." In this highly idealized view, Sister Nivedita's own ideology is condensed. The female figure appears here as a reversed *positive* image of the dreadful Kali goddess of which Sister Nivedita had dedicated a book in 1900, where she had declared: "Maya is false, Kali is its symbol." Therefore Kali must be "seen through, she has to be crossed over. What else should be thought of or worshipped—if not she?" (C.W.S.N.vol.2:431). It seems as if A. Tagore's *Bharata Mata*, the idealized incarnation of Indian motherhood, were the image which one can see by "crossing over" the *negative* image of the dreadful Kali goddess, which Sister Nivedita had qualified as the "ideal non-woman."

3-2

Second painting to be examined is *Sati* (ca.1907) by Nandalal Bose (1882-1966). The artist, closely related with Sister Nivedita, treated here a super-sensitive subject matter for Christian missionaries. Instead of regarding the self-sacrifice as a pure insanity and savage custom of inhuman and forced burning suicide, Sister Nivedita, as a convinced "hindu woman" had tried to justify the "ideal" of the practice against the European "prejudice." Refusing to interpret Sati as a proof of the female subordination and oppression, Sister Nivedita recognized in this practice a dignity of the Oriental woman:

"We see before us a woman, beautiful indeed, and adorned like a bride, with her whole mind set on the moment of triumph, yet without the slightest consciousness of her own glory. The form is pure Sattva, without one particle of Rjas [slightest mistake], as the Indian thinker might express it." Once again Sister Nivedita is evoking here the self-sacrifice of the Bodhisattva she already mentioned in her earlier work, and by comparing the woman in sati and Bodhisattva, she tries to convince the reader of the unselfishness and the dignity of the act. Further "She kneels throned on a summit of fire. Yet there is no fear. No farewell sob is mingled with her praying. Her eyes see nothing—neither the flames beneath, nor the loved ones she is leaving—nothing at all, save the sacred form of him whom she is about to rejoin. Her mind is quiet, flooded with peace. The moment is one of union. She knows nothing of separation" (C.W.S.N.vol.3:58). The description of the mental state in meditation (which lies beyond the level of physical pains) is combined here with the metaphorical use of the idea of Advaita. The doctrine of fundamental one-ness anticipates the ideal union by dissolving lamentable separation. It goes as if the practice of sati should have been legitimized so long as India should be united under the slogan of Asia is one.

In this practice of self-abnegation, Sister Nivedita finds a sign of Oriental superiority over the Occident in ethical matters. "In this perfect fearlessness, this absence of any self-consciousness, what a witness we find to the Indian Conception of the Glory of Woman!" And she proposes a parallel between Christian martyrdom and Indian

womanhood. “From the cloistered wifehood of the old Indian home to the martyr death of the Great Saint—was it not in truth a path of glory, on which each footprint should receive our salutation?” (*Ibid.*) Sister Nivedita thus tries to convince the Western readers of the holy and sacred nature of the practice of Sati in the mirror of Catholic (as well as Islamic) examples. (The sinister reminder of the same Oriental tradition of self sacrifice may be Japanese kamikaze suicide attack at the end of the second World War, which has recently found persistent spiritual successors among the so-called “terrorists.”)

3-3

The third and final painting to be treated is *The Flight of Lakshman Sen in 1207* (ca. 1907) by Surendranath Ganguly (1885 - 1909). In her review article on “Havell on Indian painting” (1908), first published in *The Modern Review* in Dec. 1909, Sister Nivedita explains the historical deed as follows:

There is no weakness in the final picture of the modern school reproduced by Mr. Havell. Whatever we may think historically of the Flight of Lakshman Sen in 1203[?], before the Mohammedans,—and I for one do not accept a word of the current non-sense that would make of him a coward!—this picture by Surendra Nath Ganguly, is magnificent, strong, nervous, full of energy and vigor. The escape of a discrowned king speaks in every line (C.W.S.N.vol.3:37).

Instead of accepting the current interpretation which makes the abdicated king a coward, Sister Nivedita proposes another interpretation: “And after all, is not the moment portrayed, one of promise, if also of regret? Sadness for the occasion, promise for the art? The picture speaks of both. The boat waits by the palace-step. But—the door is left open, and in the grim determination of the face of the fugitive king, hope still lives! It is a moment of withdrawal rather than flight. In some remote fastness of his kingdom, Lakshman Sen will still live and reign. When the hour strikes, he will return again.” (*Ibid.*)

At first sight Sister Nivedita’s interpretation is a mere non-sense. One may well be astonished and puzzled by her highly subjective interpretation. Indeed the fall and the end of the kingdom after the “flight” of Lakshman Sen was the historical fact already commonly recognized among contemporary historians. However, those who have read *The Web of Indian Life*, know the key to this enigma. At the end of the volume, in response to the question: “The road is clear, but has India strength to follow it? Is the mighty Mother not now exhausted?” Sister Nivedita replies by quoting from *Bhagavad-Gita*:

“[A]n indomitable hope wakes still in the heart of the Indian peasant. “That which is, shall pass; and that which has been, shall again be,” he mutters “to the end of time.” And we seem to catch his words the sound of a great prophecy, of which his is but the echo—/ “Whatever the Dharma decays, and Adharma prevails, then I manifest myself. For the protection of the good, for the destruction of the evil, for the firm establishment of The National Righteousness, I am born again and again”” (C.W.S.N.vol.1:243).

Undoubtedly, the historical flight of 1203[?] alludes to the present state of India under British rule, seven hundred years later, in 1907. Without explicitly declaring it, Sister Nivedita here is praying for the reestablishment of the Dharma, or the “national righteousness” in India. “When the hour strikes,” the ideal of India as unifying organic entity, as she perceived it “will return again!” For, as Sister Nivedita herself had remarked, “agitation against abuses has never been the method of Hinduism. Rather has the faith progressed by lifting repeatedly in moment of crisis the banner of the highest ideal.” (C.W.S.N.vol.2:140).

The ideal of Oriental womanhood, the ethical superiority of the Oriental self-abnegation and the promise or a prophecy of national unity in Asia—all these three ideals of the Orient found its political expression at the beginning of the 20th Century. And for the formation of these ideals, the spiritual collaboration and intellectual elaboration between Tenshin Okakura Kazuo and Sister Nivedita were indispensable. In this paper, I limited myself to demonstrate and restore the details of their mutual relationship in the refinement of their own ideas. To criticize the ideological outcome of this exchange may belong to the work to be done in the future, and which lies beyond the limit of the present paper.

ABBREVIATIONS

- C.W.S.N. *The Complete Works of Sister Nivedita*, ed. Pravrajika Atmaprana, in 5 vols. Calcutta: Advaita Ashrama, 1967-68 (vol. 1-vol. 4), 1975 (vol. 5) .
- C.E.W. Okakura Kazuo. *Collected English Writings*, ed. Sunao Nakamura, in 3 vols. Heibonsha, 1984.
- L.S.N. *Letters of Sister Nivedita*, ed. Sankra Prasad Basu, in 3 vols. Calcutta: Nababharat Publishers, 1967.