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# The Miko and the Itako: The Role of Women in Contemporary Shinto Ritual

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*The Miko and the Itako*  
The Role of the Women in Contemporary Shinto Ritual

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Asian Studies Bachelor's Thesis

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## Introduction

Like many modern civilizations, Japan has a patriarchal past still evident in its contemporary society. In the case of Shinto—Japan’s so-called ‘indigenous’ religion, though this does not adequately describe the reality—gender roles are often reinforced through objectification and the targeted use of sight. Male sight, specifically, occupies a privileged position in everything from ancient myths to the modern wedding ritual and continually exerts an oppressive influence on the lives of women, monitoring and impeding their public movements. The twin themes of men dominating women through sight and women building social as well as literal shelters from that sight cut across time and space in ritual practice. To further explore this topic I will approach it from two angles: the first looks at the theological and historical framework that guides Shinto practice with regards to gender; the second examines how contemporary women choose to or are forced to interact with that framework in various capacities. I will trace throughout how the physical act of sight becomes a social phenomenon which has been used to demean women by labeling them as somehow “impure” and thus excluding them from the social order. The result has been that in some cases women reject that social order and the sight of men and in others embrace the role of visual object for the sake of complete integration into society.

The *Kojiki*, a text completed in 712 CE (Philippi, 3) is an important part of this discussion because it is the canonical text of Shinto myths and forms the backbone of organized Shinto theology. Modern priests are tested on their knowledge of the *Kojiki* and its interpretations in order to advance in the shrine hierarchy (Nelson *Enduring Identities*, 139-140), so although it is a historical text, it is still relevant to the practice of Shinto today. The text takes a firm stance on the subordination of women via sight which sets the stage for the social developments to follow.

Another relevant topic is the idea of “pollution” in Shinto ritual, which has been used in the past to justify discrimination against a variety of groups, including women (Namihara, 65). Embedded in the idea of pollution, however, is what a society finds threatening and dangerous to its social order (Douglas, 126); the categorization of women as polluting, therefore, might speak to the fear of women even in a patriarchal society (176) as well as being a remnant of ancient practices where women were revered for their unique spiritual powers (Smyers, 12). Nevertheless, women have historically been pushed out of the public eye and out of public religious spaces because of their supposed impurity (340) and to this day women are haunted by the belief in their inherent pollution (Namihara, 68).

How, then, do modern women engage with the centuries of Shinto practice and mythology regarding their gender? Women have participated in Japanese religion as shamans and mediums since before the *Kojiki* was written (Blacker, 104-105), but one modern path is to become a priest, an option that has only been open to women since 1946 (Kobayashi, 81). Many women embark on this path to carry on a family legacy (Nelson, *A Year in the Life* 124), but they can be hindered by the hypervisibility of their gender in the predominately male environment of Shinto shrines (125). As a result, they conceptualize themselves as continuing the spiritual lineage of powerful, pre-*Kojiki* female shamans, which they lament is overlooked by modern Japanese people (128).

Another form of spiritual practice specific to women is that of the *itako*, a type of shaman which has a unique relationship to sight because they are always blind or visually impaired. Their initiation ceremony echoes many of the same themes as those found in the *Kojiki* (Kuwamura, 266) and their pairing with a male spirit speaks to the presence of patriarchal influences even within a female-exclusive religious practice.

Finally, as a bride—a role occupied by most women at some point in their lives—women are expected to completely efface their individuality for the visual pleasure of others (Goldstein-Gidoni, 120). Through makeup, restrictive clothing, and enforced passivity, women are introduced to their new public role as a wife, which is to provide visual pleasure and emotional support to men.

All of these avenues of religious practice showcase the ways in which men and women are culturally conditioned to interact, but they also illuminate possible paths of resistance to the status quo rooted in Japan's own culture and history. Many of the roles carved out for women in Shinto emphasize their passivity or subordination to men, but they also exemplify ways in which female practitioners of Shinto draw strength from the spiritual history of their country and strive to make their presence known.

## 1. The Feminine in the *Kojiki*

When the *Kojiki* was compiled beginning in the 7th century CE almost a century had passed since the arrival of Buddhism into Japan from Korea (Holcombe, 78). The completion of the *Kojiki* followed a century-long period of increased adoption of Chinese culture and political tools as the Soga Clan seized power and tried to unify the clans of Japan under the government of their puppet emperor (Brown, 163). After the Soga Clan was overthrown, however, during the reign of Emperor Temmu (CE 673-686)—when the bulk of the *Kojiki* was completed—this trend continued and Japan looked to the contemporaneous Tang Dynasty for a model of "national unification under a strong emperor ruling through a bureaucracy" (Philippi, 16). The Taika reforms, initiated in 645 by the Soga in order to solidify the power of the central government (Holcombe, 115-116), and Taihō and Yōrō Codes of law initiated at the turn of the 8<sup>th</sup> century all contributed to the character of the period (117). Temmu "eagerly adopted the culture of Tang China" (Philippi, 16) and, as a result, both the Buddhist and Confucian influence of this era contributed to the codifying of societal sexism (Smyers, 12). For instance the Taihō Code of 701 not only established an imperial bureaucracy based on the Chinese model, but also dismantled the previously matriarchal clan organization and "established a patriarchal system, called for the subjugation of women in the Confucian manner, and discriminated against women in matters of property, marriage, and divorce." Furthermore, the Buddhist sects which held sway in Japan at the time clearly stated that women were incapable of attaining enlightenment without first being reborn as a man (Paulson qtd. in Smyers, 12). Despite frequent reference to the patriarchal cultural influence of China, however (Smyers, 12; Nelson 1996, 123; Philippi, 52), the stance on

gender roles outlined in the *Kojiki* cannot be laid entirely at China's feet. As the political purpose of the *Kojiki* was to establish a hierarchy of the existing clans based on their relationship to the Emperor as well as cement the power of the imperial line, the compiler of the *Kojiki* was working from documents of imperial lineage and from anecdotal sources of folk myth (Philippi, 11) which can be assumed to reflect primarily native Japanese views. Thus, the theology and politics of the time were all pushing for the diminished power of women and this is reflected in what subsequently became the ultimate text of Shinto theology.

Although it includes a creation myth and plenty of social commentary, the overarching theme of the *Kojiki* is the divine origin of the Emperor, whose bloodline can be traced back to Amaterasu, the sun goddess and the principle god in the Japanese pantheon. In fact, Emperor Temmu sponsored the compilation of the *Kojiki* specifically to correct the existing genealogies and establish the rank of all the existing clans (Philippi, 6). Thus, it served as the ultimate rebuttal to any opponents of the imperial bloodline and justified the strong governmental actions of the era—such as the formation of an imperial army and imperial oversight of local clan affairs (Brown, 232)—which could otherwise be characterized as petty power grabs. As a result, the text must be viewed critically as one with a specific political goal, a goal that, as previously discussed, allowed the emperor to dictate questions of gender as well as politics. It is a text which was intended to prop up the existing status quo and—although it may not have been out of place at the time—a modern reader will find a rather shocking indictment of femininity, which would appear to be at odds with the worship of a supreme goddess. The sun goddess Amaterasu's exalted position notwithstanding, the *Kojiki* depicts femininity as an unstable force with the potential to bring both life and death that must be controlled by a civilizing male influence.

Furthermore, the female force often exerts its power through concealment and the opposing male force brings her into line with the power of his sight.

The first of these gendered struggles occurs within the first fifteen chapters of the *Kojiki* between the sibling-spouses Izanami-no-mikoto and Izanagi-no-mikoto. Izanami (the wife) and Izanagi (the husband) follow a long lineage of gods starting from the creation of the universe. While they only appear after many generations of gods are described in the *Kojiki*, they are the first to be depicted as having personality and physical form:<sup>1</sup> most of the previous gods are referenced in name only, performing no individual actions and with indications of their specific domain being either vague or completely absent. As a result, the story of the *Kojiki* as interpersonal drama really begins with Izanami and Izanagi.

This couple is tasked by the “heavenly deities”—most likely a reference to the generations of gods who preceded them—(Philippi, 49) with creating the islands of Japan. Having solidified an initial island with the Heavenly Jeweled Spear, Izanami and Izanagi descend to the newly-created land and raise a “heavenly pillar and a spacious place”(50)—most likely elements of an ancient wedding ceremony (398). At this time the two notice their respective sex organs and Izanagi proposes the idea of sexual intercourse. He says to Izanami:

“My body, formed though it be formed, has one place which is formed to excess. Therefore, I would like to take that place in my body which is formed to excess and insert it into that place in your body which is formed insufficiently, and [thus] give birth to the land. How would this be?” (50)

Izanami simply replies, “That will be good”(50). Izanagi phrases his question as a mere logical response to biological fact, but, as foreshadowed by the trappings of a wedding ceremony, the

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<sup>1</sup> In fact, Izanami and Izanagi were probably the first gods to appear in the folk version of this creation myth, and the compilers merely wished to create a longer, more ‘rational’ genealogy in order to appeal to the Chinese-influenced sensibilities of the time (Philippi, 397).

situation immediately becomes more complex when the physical act becomes conceptualized as a social ritual with unequal roles for the two participants (Grapard, 8). In fact, as soon as Izanagi poses a question to Izanami, the act of sex is recognized as a social ritual which requires the consent of both participants. He is also establishing the model of the man as the asker and the woman as the one who is asked—in other words, of sexual desire as masculine.

The result of this ritual of asking and answering is that both participants agree that they will pass in opposite directions around the pillar and then call out to one another before they have sex; trouble arises, however, when Izanami, the woman, is the first to speak. Izanagi warns her that “It is not proper that the woman speak first”(Philippi, 51), but they nevertheless proceed to procreate and Izanami gives birth to a “leech-child” and a small island. They dispose of the leech-child in a reed basket and neither of the products of that first attempt at procreation are counted in the official lineage as their children (51). When consulted, the Heavenly Elders perform a divination which reiterates Izanagi's original assessment that “Because the woman spoke first, [the child] was not good”(52). Izanami and Izanagi then perform the same ritual of walking around the pillar, only Izanagi speaks first when they reach the far side and their children are the islands of Japan and thirty-five additional gods and goddesses, which are all considered members of their proper offspring (57).

This episode clearly advances and normalizes a patriarchal social structure. Paradoxically, however, it also hints at the arbitrary nature of the social roles which it so staunchly supports: no reason is given for the man to be the initiator besides Izanagi's gut feeling and a divination; rather, it is merely assumed that the reader understands the correctness of placing the male partner in the dominant position. Nevertheless, as Allan Grapard points out, this first conceptualization of the feminine in the *Kojiki* is as a passive sexual partner (Grapard, 8)

and that is explicitly stated as the correct social role for women: not only did Izanagi propose the idea of sex in the first place, but also had to initiate the ritual leading up to it. Furthermore, the phrase used to initiate the encounter is significant. The words “*Ana-ni-yasi*,<sup>2</sup> how good a lad/maiden”(Philippi, 51), used on both occasions, indicate the sense of sight: what was hidden has now come into view and it is a pleasing vision. Not only does the social order advanced by the *Kojiki* demand that Izanagi take the role of the initial speaker or actor, but also that he act as the initial seer between the two. This in turn diminishes the sexual agency of Izanami, who, now, instead of openly approaching a man and expressing her pleasure (sexual arousal) upon seeing him, is merely reflecting back his display of feeling. Appropriate to the overarching theme of sight, it is as if the purpose of the woman is to be a mirror, echoing the man’s thoughts and desires back at him, rather than an independent entity.

The idea of sight as a male tool is developed further following this episode, when Izanami dies giving birth to her last child, a god of fire, and travels to Yomi, or the land of the dead, a dark and uninviting place. Izanagi, missing her, follows her to the land of Yomi and approaches her there. He entreats her with the plea “O, my beloved spouse, the lands which you and I were making have not yet been completed; you must come back!”(Philippi, 61), which leads Allan Grapard to speculate that it was sexual frustration rather than conjugal devotion which led Izanagi to the halls of the dead (Grapard, 9). In any case, Izanagi appears to be reducing his wife merely to the birth-giving capabilities which he himself lacks. Izanami informs him that she cannot leave because she has “eaten at the hearth of Yomi,” but that she will consult with the gods of Yomi about leaving and that in the mean time, begs Izanagi “Pray do not look upon me!”(Philippi, 62). Izanami takes so long to return, however, that eventually Izanagi ignores her restriction and lights a tooth of a comb in order to follow his wife. To his horror,

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<sup>2</sup> “An exclamation of wonder and delight”(Philippi, 51)

what he finds is a living corpse, complete with squirming maggots (62). Panicking, he flees Yomi towards the land of the living. Izanami is enraged and shouts: "He has shamed me"(64). She then sends vengeful hags chasing after him. Izanagi drops various objects which transform into food in order to distract the hags and eventually escapes through a tunnel which he then blocks with a huge boulder (65). Izanami, now unable to pursue him, vows, "O my beloved husband, if you do thus, I will each day strangle to death one thousand of the populace of your country [humans]," to which Izanagi responds, "O my beloved spouse, if you do thus, I will each day build one thousand five hundred parturition huts"(66)—that is, cause one thousand five hundred humans to be born. Izanami then acquires the names Yomo-tsu-ō-kami, or God of the Yomi—reflecting her new domain and her new status as a bringer of death as opposed to life—and Chi-shiki-no-ō-kami, or "Pursuing Deity."

This encounter further elaborates on the previously established social meanings attached to gender: instead of simple active and passive roles, here the concepts of death, darkness, and infertility—as well as their opposites of life, light, and virility—are introduced. After giving birth to her last child, Izanami "dies" and thus her physical body becomes a site of decay both through the food of Yomi which she eats and through the maggots that infest her. Furthermore, she has command over a group of "hags of Yomi"(64). This part of the narrative reflects a somewhat uncharitable view in particular of women past childbearing age as vengeful creatures hungry for any sign of life and identifies the land of the dead as their domain.

Besides the few lines that describe it in the *Kojiki*, not much is known about this version of the land of the dead except that it is dark and probably underground.<sup>3</sup> The physical separation enforced by Izanagi, however, is significant. The division of physical space simultaneously protects Izanami from further intrusion by Izanagi and thwarts her in her revenge. The land of

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<sup>3</sup> For a more in-depth discussion on the exact nature of the land of the dead in Shinto mythology, see Blacker, 69-84

the dead, with its new ruler is now (as far as the reader can tell) an exclusively female space, but was only allowed to be so after it had been violated by a man and confirmed as a “a most unpleasant land, a horrible, unclean land”(68), as Izanagi later describes it.<sup>4</sup> The conflict between the two opposing forces of male and female is then used to explain the human reality of birth and mortality rates, with the male securing the upper hand and his position as the benefactor of human civilization.

This last point in particular suggests an identification of the masculine with culture and the feminine with nature. Despite the existence of several common mediators of purification in nature such as salt, fire and water, Grapard argues that Nature is in itself polluting (10) and through its association with Izanami, an idea that he refers to as the “bio-degraded feminine” is achieved (9). In short, while the source of female creativity is the womb, which decays over time, male creativity is located in cultural artifacts and so does not decay with age—or at least not in the same way (10). As a further example of this point, Izanagi, once he has returned to the surface, proceeds to "give birth" to several other gods as he undresses and washes away the impurities of Yomi (Philippi, 68-70). One of those is Amaterasu, the chief goddess of the Shinto pantheon, born from the left eye of Izanagi; thus, the source of the gaze which so shamed his wife also gives birth to the most revered god in Shinto. It would therefore not be an overstatement to say that the male eye reigns supreme, at least in this parable. Seeing, in this case, acquires a dimension of social understanding which in some ways changes the object of sight, as when Izanagi sees Izanami, identifies her as polluted, and thereby shames her. This cultural understanding does not degrade in the same way biological objects do and similarly Izanagi remains active in the *Kojiki*, holding sway over his godly children while Izanami,

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<sup>4</sup> Reference is made in this section to other rulers of the dead, but following her change of name Izanami seems to be cemented in that position

conversely, takes no direct action thereafter and is mentioned only once in later chapters. She dwells outside the realm of human endeavors merely as an implied fact of nature. Thus, although their chief god is female, institutionalized Shinto itself is presented as the result of a male effort to ritually remove the impurities suffered from interacting with the “bio-degraded feminine.”

The themes of sight and female seclusion resurface once again in the myth of Amaterasu and the Cave, also from the *Kojiki*. The story begins when Amaterasu’s brother, Take-haya-susa-no-o-no-mikoto (or simply Susa-no-o) wins a competition against Amaterasu that involves the mutual bearing of children and “rages with victory,” throwing feces and destroying her rice paddies (Philippi, 79). Amaterasu calmly endures this behavior until Susa-no-o throws a flayed horse into “the sacred weaving hall” in front of her and one of her attendants is so shocked that she “struck her genitals against the shuttle and died”(80). Thereafter, Amaterasu seals herself in a cave and, given that she is the god of the sun, all sorts of life suffer without her presence (81). In order to remedy the situation, the gods gather and enact the plan proposed by one of their number: they hang a mirror in a tree while one goddess, Ame-no-uzume-no-mikoto, is divinely possessed and exposes herself in front of the other gods, which causes quite an uproar outside of Amaterasu’s cave (83-84). Amaterasu becomes curious what all the commotion is about and Ame-no-uzume informs her that “We rejoice and dance because there is here a deity superior to you”(85). Amaterasu peeks out of the cave, sees her reflection in the mirror and, even more baffled by the situation she exits the cave only to have the opening blocked behind her. The episode ends with light returning to the world and Susa-no-o being fined and exiled from the land of the gods (85-86).

Amaterasu’s story certainly ends more happily than Izanami’s, but there are still many complex social dynamics to explore. As Grapard points out, there are many sexual elements to

the story, from implied incestuous relations between Amaterasu and Susa-no-o to the maiden piercing herself with a shuttle to Ame-no-uzume performing a shamanic striptease outside the cave where Amaterasu is hiding (Grapard, 13). Throughout the myth female bodies are attacked, viewed, laughed at, coaxed out, and trapped by men. Amaterasu's case follows Izanami's to a certain extent in that a polluting event befalls her, she chooses to seclude herself and remain unseen but she is needed in some way by those still out in the world. Eventually the woman is seen against her will, a barrier is put in place to maintain the status quo most beneficial to the men involved, and order is restored to the world. Unlike Izanami, however, Amaterasu expresses no rage or shame at being seen; although she was subjected to the humiliating attacks of Susa-no-o, none of the pollution seems to have transferred to her. Amaterasu also receives restitution for the wrongs done against her, while when Izanami tries to seek revenge she is confined to the land of the dead. As a result, Amaterasu's story does not play out as the battle of two opposing gendered forces, but is much more focused on the stresses and coercions placed upon Amaterasu. Even the fact that she is regarded as morally in the right does not protect Amaterasu from sight—her own and others'—being used against her.

In this myth Amaterasu is conflated with the physical sun, an entity whose function in a human-centered universe is to provide light, the medium of sight. Since Amaterasu was apparently frightened by the death of the weaving maiden and the attacks of her brother (Philippi, 81), she chose to deny him that light as well as physical access to her (since they amount to the same thing in this case) and seclude herself for an unspecified amount of time. The reader is not told, however, what effect, if any, this act had on Susa-no-o: his later capture and punishment seem largely irrelevant to Amaterasu's seclusion and subsequent retrieval. As a result, Amaterasu's act of sealing herself in the cave seems childish and vindictive or merely

pointless. Alternatively this retreat could be interpreted as an act of self-care which might be appropriate as Amaterasu was a woman who had been subjected to the pollution of death and excrement and needed a place inaccessible to her brother.<sup>5</sup> Nevertheless, regardless of Amaterasu's intentions in secluding herself, the other gods were anxious to reclaim their use of her light as soon as possible.

The plan concocted by Omoikane-no-kami, a male deity known for his clever plans (Philippi, 82) hinges on the use of the bodies of two women—Ame-no-uzume and, paradoxically, Amaterasu herself—to create enough of a distraction to lure Amaterasu out of her cave. Interestingly, although Ame-no-uzume exposes herself to the sexual gaze of the surrounding gods, she entices Amaterasu herself out entirely through sounds: first the sound of her stamping on an overturned bucket and then the laughter of the other gods and, when Amaterasu expresses her confusion, a direct verbal message (84). Ame-no-uzume's actions heavily reference shamanic practices (84) and provide a working alternative to the male method of violation and coercion via sight.

Amaterasu, on the other hand, has her sense of sight used against her. When she peeks out the entrance of the cave where she is hiding, she is deliberately shown a mirror which Omoikane had crafted earlier and as Donald Philippi clarifies in his translation, "Either she saw her reflection in the mirror and thought that the reflected image was another deity; or seeing the mirror, a symbol of the sun-deity, she thought that there was another sun-deity besides herself"(Philippi, 85). In either case, she is fooled by the sight presented to her and leaves the sanctuary of the cave. Even though the trickery brought light back into the land, it still amounts to forced control over a female deity's body and space of seclusion. For the sake of social order

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<sup>5</sup> Compare to the later discussion of the *ubuya*, or parturition hut.

and avoiding “all manner of calamities”(81), a woman’s movement is restricted by male deities. Using Amaterasu as an object of sight is, in fact, the basis of a functioning universe.

Sight thus plays an important role in the story of Izanami and Izanagi as well as in several other myths recounted in the *Kojiki*. Allan Grapard argues that sight resurfaces again and again in the *Kojiki* as a tool of male transgression on female space (17). Izanami and Amaterasu both took steps to hide themselves from view, precautions which went unheeded by the deities around them. In the *Kojiki*, women repeatedly seal themselves in a cave, which in itself can be seen as invoking female sexuality, but they are denied an exclusively female space through the visual intrusion of a man. Although this may reflect a jealousy on the part of the male towards the power of the female (16), the previous taboos on the mystical feminine are apparently overridden by the simple power of human sight. The feminine—whether it be Izanami or Amaterasu herself, can then be overpowered and subordinated to the larger male purpose.

While these myths may seem like harmless stories far removed from the social reality of the present, according to Roland Barthes myth is both “a type of speech defined by its intention”(Barthes, 124), and one which “transforms history into nature”(129). I have done my best to contextualize the writing of the *Kojiki* within the social environment of the time, but the nature of myth itself works against historicization and contextualization: “in it, things lose the memory that they once were made”(142). In other words, despite the reality that the stories in the *Kojiki* were selectively compiled from genealogies and mythic song sequences to accomplish a specific political purpose (Philippi, 8), the status of the text as myth naturalizes the values embedded within. At the same time, the images used to tell the myth are drained of their specific meaning and repurposed in order to serve the broad needs of the storyteller (Barthes, 119); thus, Izanami and Amaterasu lose some of their identity as folk goddesses and individuals and instead

represent the divine lineage of the emperor and the proper role of a woman. Both of these ideas were used to justify the role of an absolute male leader in a Chinese-style centralized government, but the latter has a clear relevance for modern gender relations. Since the *Kojiki* has become foundational to the modern practice of Shinto, the mythic value placed on subordinating the dangerous feminine has been naturalized and continually threatens to bleed into the modern era.

Even from its first myths the *Kojiki* presents an ambiguous view of gender relations. On the one hand, it is made very clear that complementary gender roles must be respected in order to ensure the proper workings of the universe (and the proper production of children), but on the other it depicts the female as dangerous and ultimately unnecessary for the continuation of society, as in the birth of Amaterasu from Izanagi's left eye (Philippi, 70). On a societal level, Japan certainly became more patriarchal and restrictive of women in the time when the *Kojiki* was being compiled (Smyers, 13) and, while the *Kojiki* does not encapsulate the entirety of Shinto practice, its tone on the subject of gender is detrimental for women wishing to participate in Shinto institutions, past or present.

## 2. *Aka Fujo*: Feminine Pollution

The association of pollution with women and purity with men appears in the myth of Izanami and Izanagi and has resurfaced at various points at Japanese history. A deeper analysis of the social impact of this association, however, requires first a more nuanced discussion of what, exactly, terms like “pollution” really mean.

The distinction between pollution (*kegare*) and its opposite, purity (*hare*), is the basis for a wide variety of ritual behavior both in the context of the home and at Shinto shrines, historically and in the present. The avoidance of any form of ritual pollution has even been described as “virtually [Shinto’s] only tenet”(Smith, 31). Although it takes on a principal role in Shinto ritual, pollution is a common concept across many religions. Mary Douglas undertakes a cross-cultural survey concerning ideas of pollution in her book *Purity and Danger*, where she argues that, in a sense, religious order and impurity are two sides of the same coin or, stated differently, “a rule of avoiding anomalous things affirms and strengthens the definitions to which they do not conform. So where Leviticus abhors crawling things, we should see the abomination as the negative side of the pattern of things approved”(49). Douglas writes that “ideas about separating, purifying, demarcating, and punishing transgressions have as their main function to impose system on an inherently untidy experience”(5). Therefore, “pollutions are used as analogies for expressing a general view of the social order”(4). Although pollution is a widespread cultural concept, what individual cultures classify as polluting can tell an observer what societal divisions are held to be important and where there is danger of social boundaries being crossed.

Since societal order is beset on all sides by corresponding disorder, in Shinto practice, total avoidance of pollution is virtually impossible; pollution is associated with a wide variety of events such as death, natural disaster, childbirth, and crime. In Douglas's view these events would all symbolize a breakdown of the normal order of society or liminal conditions in which the rules themselves are unclear. Eriko Namihara supports Douglas's generalization in her paper, "Pollution in the Folk Belief System," where she writes that "in the Japanese cognitive system physiological phenomena, especially death, adversity and misfortune, and disorder or irregularity in the social or natural environment are all interconnected, with the notion of pollution as their axis"(65). The idea of pollution is intimately associated with boundaries: crossing bodily boundaries, boundaries of life and death, societal boundaries, and "the boundaries of space and time and of other categories are thought of as states of pollution"(65). Thus, concepts as disparate as childbirth and crime are classed together as dangerous acts which blur or cross normal social boundaries—in other words, polluting occurrences.

It is interesting to note that several of the bodily states which Douglas cites refer specifically to women, while none of them refer specifically to men. The same is true of the list of items generally held as polluting in Shinto (Namihara, 65). It would appear, given Douglas's previous argument, that Shinto theology has constructed a social system where male bodily functions are regarded as natural and within the bounds of society, whereas childbirth and female fertility are somehow anomalous or dangerous to the existing system even while they are necessary for its continuation.

Purity, on the other hand, is provided by rituals and allows an individual or a household to be protected by the gods (Namihara, 65), for "the gods appear under conditions of extreme purity"(66). Although it is typically mediated by concrete substances such as fire, water, and salt

(Grapard, 10), those objects are not the source of purity and purity itself is an abstract concept that must be accumulated through the intentional use of ritual (Namihara, 66). It is the lack of pollution through which the gods, the guardians of Shinto social order, can operate freely and they are therefore constructed as maintaining the status quo, shunning all who do not respect the taboos and social hierarchies (which are related concepts) already in place.

Although these general mechanisms of pollution and purity have remained fairly constant in Shinto practice, what exactly is considered polluting—and to what degree—has varied over time and has historically enabled discrimination along lines of gender and occupation (Namihara, 65). Namihara argues that the explicit theological beliefs underlying the ideological framework of pollution/purity may be on the decline, but they are still invoked in many common taboos and superstitions, even in modern times. For instance, while a modern family in Tokyo might not use the term *kegare*, they might still place a quilt upside-down over a dead body and reverse the placement of table settings at a funeral and consider it bad luck not to do so (66). Thus, while some of the most discriminatory practices based on this framework have been discontinued (Miyazaki, 339), the concept of respecting societal norms in order to avoid pollution is still present today.

Along with death, blood is one of the most polluting natural substances in Shinto practice (Smith, 31). This applies to menstrual blood in particular as well as to blood produced in childbirth, which has led to a broad association of women with pollution (Namihara, 68). This “red uncleanness” (*aka fujō*) has historically served as a justification for *nyonin kinsei* and *nyonin kekkai* (both meaning “prohibition against women”), which refer to the restriction of women from sacred mountains and other sacred spaces, respectively, practices which lasted until 1872, several years into the Meiji period (Miyazaki, 340). These practices were reinforced by the

Buddhist “Blood Pond Sutra,” which stated that “women were damned to the Blood Pond Hell because of their sin of polluting sacred objects with their blood”(342), but many local legends were also circulated at the time about women who ventured into restricted areas and died because of their inherent blood-related pollution (343). *Nyonin kinsei* and *nyonin kekkai* were not only restrictions on the physical movement of women, but also on their spiritual practice, as many of the restricted sites were famous pilgrimage destinations (339). As a result, many sacred sites were constructed as exclusively male spaces (346), further reinforcing the societal and religious disenfranchisement of women which began in the eighth century (342).

Although this specific practice may have ended, the idea of women as permanently polluted by their menstrual blood persists to this day. For instance, there are areas where women are forbidden from entering construction sites such as tunnels, dams, and underground railways because it is believed that the goddesses of the mountains and boats are averse to pollution and will cause an accident for the men working there should any women venture near (Namihara, 68). In contrast to the myths of Izanami, here women are portrayed as the invaders, violating sacred areas with their pollution. Nevertheless, the outcome is the same in that women are restricted to physical areas of lesser purity, staying out of sight and allowing men to continue their task of culture creation.

Women were not only restricted from accessing public spaces: until the early Meiji Period even the private movements of menstruating or pregnant women were restricted by the ideology of *kegare*, or pollution. In some areas the meals of pregnant or menstruating women would be prepared and eaten separately from food for the rest of the family so as not to spread pollution to others in the household (Namihara, 68). In some mountain or island villages *ubuya*, or temporary parturition huts erected separately from dwelling places, were even used to

sequester pregnant women in terrible, isolating conditions on the grounds of preventing the pollution of childbirth from spreading (Tonomura, 7).

Part of the reason for the severity of the restrictions on both pregnant and menstruating women is the association of birth and death, which was perhaps implicitly present at least from the Heian Period (Tonomura, 18) and was explicitly stated in a compendium of rules published by Ise Shrine in the late thirteenth or early fourteenth century: “The [polluted] condition of a matter that has the *kegare* of death results from the fact that it has the *kegare* of birth”(22). The connection between the twin destabilizers of birth and death is illustrated neatly in the myth of Izanami and Izanagi: giving birth brings one closer to death—for it was by giving birth to a fire deity that Izanami met her end. A woman giving birth risks leaving her husband without a procreative partner or even turning into a monstrous influence. To further interpret this myth, this pollution is only dangerous when it is seen. That is, just as Izanami only attacked her husband when he tried to get a better view of her, the pollution of feminine fertility can be controlled by avoiding direct contact with it. Furthermore, just as Izanagi sealed Izanami into the land of the dead, the social order erects barriers between menstruating women and others in order to protect men from their pollution. This is the constant through-line in analysis of *aka fujo*: the protection of men. Women are isolated into their own areas of lesser purity so that men can get on with their work from construction sites to pilgrimage sites. This line of reasoning led to a gradual increase in the number of restrictions placed on pregnant women up to the Tokugawa Period, when “killing people outdoors was an act that was far less polluting than giving birth to a baby”(28).

Despite this social stigma, however, there is some evidence that the *ubuya* also served as a refuge for women. In fact, the *ubuya* is mentioned in the *Kojiki*, where Toyotama-hime, a sea

goddess, requests that her husband build her one so that she might have privacy while she gives birth. When her husband discovers that she has turned into a crocodile, she cries, “I am exceedingly shamed” and crawls back into the ocean (Philippi, 156-7). It appears, therefore, that the *ubuya* was not just a tool of male control, even if it isolated the pollution of childbirth chiefly in order to protect men (Tonomura, 10). In these all-female spaces of the *ubuya*, women would have sexual liaisons or even commit infanticide (Miyazaki, 1). Young girls may have even hidden in the *ubuya* to keep from being killed in times of famine. As a result, the officials of the Edo and Meiji Periods periodically banned the construction of *ubuya* ( Namihara, 68). This case reveals an interesting dynamic where women take advantage of taboo in order to participate in socially unacceptable behavior.

The effect of all of these restrictions is to render women “unseen” in both public and private spheres. They are restricted from public spiritual practice and from their own homes. While women have their lives interrupted by proscriptions on their movement, men are able to continue on unhindered and pretend as if those women do not exist. Thus, not only are men able to determine when women will be seen, as in the cases of Amaterasu and Izanami, but also when women will remain unseen and unacknowledged. The case of the *ubuya* is an abuse, in a sense, of that unseen status because people do not exist cannot commit crimes and taboos and to acknowledge the existence of one would be to bring to light the existence of the other. As a result, the *ubuya* is a female space seated in the cracks of society where men have resolved that they will not look.

Although the practices surrounding “female pollution” primarily serve to restrict the movement of women, they derives from the vulnerability of men and of spaces occupied by men to the pollution of menstruation and childbirth. According to Mary Douglas, this sort of belief

regarding feminine pollution often arises from patriarchal societies where women still have some room to manipulate men (185). One example was that of the Mae Enga, a culture in Papua New Guinea which engages in intense inter-clan competition as well as inter-clan marriage. Thus, the woman a Mae Enga man marries is almost always the daughter or sister of one of his competitors. He has nominal control over his wife, but he still views her as an enemy or competitor in some sense and the Mae Enga have corresponding beliefs on the potent negative power of feminine pollution (181). In fact, they believe that menstrual blood causes decay and death to men, resembling the associations which Izanami bears after her transformation into a goddess of death. It is possible that the early Japanese social structure made up of competing clans led to similar beliefs regarding menstrual blood: even when the country was nominally unified, neighboring clans would continually vie for power and territory (Brown, 134-137), but they would intermarry with their competitors (161) and marry their daughters to the emperor in order to gain political leverage (30). As evidenced by the female emperors in Japanese history (258-260), women had some political power despite the usual predominance of men. Thus, men may have come to fear their wives to a certain extent and built up a belief system marking signs of womanhood as polluting and dangerous. Social repercussions for violating these taboos (i.e., shame) also seem to be on the side of the woman, rather than that of the man, as in the cases of Izanami and Toyotama-hime. Since the pollution could be transferred by sight, women were encouraged to keep out of the public eye and were thus less of a political threat to men. Thus, government could conform to the vision of the *Kojiki* of society as a male endeavor.

Despite a modern association of menstruation and childbirth with pollution (Namihara, 68), there is evidence to suggest that while menstruation has always been taboo, it has not always been considered polluting. Karen Smyers argues that “[t]he concept of taboo includes two

seemingly contrary feelings: extreme reverence and extreme horror”(9) and that early Shinto attitudes towards menstruation consisted of the former. This belief is exemplified in the saying that “When a woman is menstruating she is purified, becoming the wife of the kami”(10). Thus, a woman’s spiritual ability was still tied to her fertility, but in this case it is in a much more positive light. A menstruating woman was always regarded as taboo, but the emotion surrounding that taboo has changed dramatically from ancient to modern Japan. This more positive interpretation also goes hand in hand with a less literal interpretation of “pollution” in ancient Japan, which stressed internal purity over physical purity. With the introduction of Confucianism and Buddhism into Japan, however, menstruation came to occupy the other meaning of “taboo” (as in the Blood Pond Sutra) and thus became a cause of discrimination (13).

Menstruation and childbirth are viewed as taboo in many cultures because of the presence of blood and “because they were seen as the source of women’s magic powers”(Smyers, 9). Indeed restrictions on interaction with menstruating women are also present in the Bible (*New International Version*, Leviticus 15:19) declaring a menstruating women ritually impure for seven days in much the same way as the restrictions laid out by many Shinto shrines (Tonomura, 22). Nevertheless, Japan has a unique history of reverence and restriction towards menstruating women which to this day affects their relationship to Shintoism. The physical movement of women in public spaces has historically been restricted and is, to some extent, even today. Based on that movement, the internal state of women was made clear to the eyes of men, mirroring the ocular violation and subordination of Izanami by Izanagi. In this way, what was once a source of extreme power for women was turned into a source of shame and discrimination and subsequently into something merely to be ignored in order to facilitate the a smooth continuation of the preexisting system. Yet, the power of the taboo has not disappeared.

As a result of this history, modern Shinto women are left with a rather ambivalent image of fertility and menstruation. When the ban on female priests was first lifted during World War II, the association of Shinto shrines instructed women to disregard the pollution that had historically been associated with them, but some female priests were dissatisfied with this simplistic dismissal of a complex issue. At a roundtable discussion among female priests in 1981, a variety of views emerged: some women felt that menstruation was a gift from a *kami* because of its indication of fertility, some regarded it as a sign of their health, and some—particularly younger women—tended to regard it as a spiritually insignificant event (Smyers, 16). There was a trend, however, among the female priests of carry purifying charms during their menses (16), which undermines their positive portrayal. Despite the empowering interpretations of menstruation given, there is still the underlying belief that it is inherently polluting and modern interpretations are nowhere near as positive as those present in pre-Buddhist Japan. In addition, the modern interpretations regard menstruation as a bodily phenomenon outside the spiritual powers of women, a drastic change from earlier interpretations. Despite the relaxation of official restrictions, women feel as if they are a danger to the men around them. Even if no one else knows that they are in a polluted state, they feel pressure to protect the purity of the public space, bowing to the male fear of menstruation.

Just as the act of seeing has adopted a social dimension in the subordination of women, the biological phenomenon of menstruation has been inflected with various social meanings. Although menstruation was once regarded as a source of spiritual power, it has also been used to keep women out of public spaces, both secular and spiritual. Contemporary Japanese women are visible in a number of religious roles, but they must still contend with a society that sees their womanhood before their spiritual and social potential.

### 3. Female Priests, Brides, and *Itako*

Although there are many gendered themes embedded in the theological and historical underpinnings of Shinto, it may still remain unclear what influence they have on modern Shinto practice outside of an academic context. To answer that question requires a more in-depth discussion of the ways in which contemporary women can engage with Shinto practice. The three examples I have chosen—as a female priest, as an *itako*, or blind shaman, and as a bride—by no means provide an exhaustive picture of the interactions between Shinto practice and femininity, but they illuminate a varied cross-section including rural and urban practices, lay and ordained women, and new and old traditions.

Perhaps the most obvious role is that of a Shinto priest, officiating rituals in one of the tens of thousands of Shrines in Japan (Hirai, “History of Shrines”). There are also specifically female attendants called *miko*, who are usually recent high school graduates and are “relegated to a variety of important, yet subordinate, roles in relation to the predominately male priests (Nelson, *A Year in the Life* 124-125). Unfortunately, however, as there is very little English language literature surrounding modern *miko* (a lack which itself may speak to the marginalization of female Shinto practitioners), I will be focusing on female priests and their place in Shrine Shinto. The second role is that of the *itako*, a blind female shaman mostly found in Northeastern Japan. These women are connected to Shinto both through the idea of the *kami* or gods whom they interact with and the shamanistic tradition of Shinto which has existed since long before the *Kojiki* was penned (Smyers, 10). The third is the role of the bride, a much more passive one compared to the previous two which focuses on a woman’s status as a visual

spectacle (Goldstein-Gidoni, 111). Despite their differences, these roles all have a unique and gendered relationship to the sense of sight and multifaceted interactions with the history of Shinto.

### *Female Priests*

Female shamans and mediums are hardly a new phenomenon in the history of Shinto (Smyers, 10), but female priests were prohibited until after World War II. As a result of this discrepancy and many other factors, there are multiple narratives informing a female priest about her place in the larger society. In particular I will examine three descriptive notions of what defines a female priestess. One is the institutional narrative, including both the Jinja Honchō, or official Association of Shinto Shrines, as well as individual family shrines, which views female priests as necessary for the continuation of the institution of Shinto, but ultimately interchangeable with their male counterparts. The second is largely the view of elderly male heads of shrines, which equates female priests to the *miko*, or female shrine attendants because of their gender, which, in turn, aggravates female priests into constructing a narrative of anti-solidarity with their fellow female ritualists. The third is produced by the female priests themselves, and constructs an almost dichotomous relationship between the identities, "woman" and "priestess," which they bridge through the application of religious history and a redefinition of what it means to be a "modern" woman.

The official institutional approach to female priesthood—which had previously been one of total exclusion—changed in the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. WWII was a time of labor shortages around the globe and Shinto shrines were no exception: these shrines suffered from a shortage of priests in the post-WWII period and women were allowed to enter the priesthood in order to fill

out its ranks (Kobayashi, 81). Despite theoretical equal opportunity, however, female priests are still vastly outnumbered by their male counterparts. According to the Association of Shinto Shrines, in 1993 about 9.8% of Shinto priests were women (Nobutaka, “Rates of Women”) and that number had increased to about 13% of Japan’s 28,000 Shinto priests in 2000 (Kobayashi, 81). Although these gender ratios are comparable to those of older religions such as Tendai Buddhism, they are very different from so-called “New Religions,” which vary from even numbers of men and women to overwhelming female majorities (Nobutaka, “Rates of Women”). While these data do illuminate the minority status of female priests, they do not paint the whole picture. Even the female priests themselves disagree on whether or not there is a “sufficient” number of female priests (Kobayashi, 81)(Nelson 1996, 125), and comparing Shinto with the so-called New Religions has a very different effect than comparing it to Christian denominations which allow no female clergy at all. They also disagree on the relative difficulty and benefits of being a female Shinto priest, but an outside observer can grasp some of the pressures placed on them by viewing the institution of the shrine as a workplace or small business.

As previously mentioned, the activities of female Shinto ritualists were severely restricted by the Meiji government in order to promote a “purer” form of Shinto (Blacker, 127). Women were also prohibited from serving as priests, leaving the subordinate *miko* role as the only official avenue for women to participate in Shinto shrine rituals. During WWII, however, many Shinto priests were among the men drafted to fight in the Japanese army, which left local shrines without a priest who could conduct the rituals of everyday life. Instead of accepting an unfamiliar, transplanted priest, community members often encouraged the priest’s wife to fill the role because of her preexisting knowledge of the community which an outsider would not have (Nelson, 124).

Indeed, smaller shrines are often overseen by a particular family and priesthood therefore becomes something of a family business (Nelson 1996, 124). As opposed to the popular middle-class image of the office worker, Japan also has a distinct culture of small businesses rooted in the traditional *ie* (literally “household”) system.

Rather than a kinship group based on ties of descent, however, *ie* are best understood as *corporate groups* that hold property (for example, land, a reputation, or “cultural capital”) in perpetuity. They are units of production/and/or consumption, encompassing the roles of corporation/enterprise/household.

(Kondo, 122)

Although not applicable to larger companies, the *ie* model still operates where the boundaries of “family” and “business” closely overlap, as in a shrine where priesthood is passed down in one family for generations. When the concepts of “family” and “business” are thus intertwined, gender roles can be subverted in a number of ways in order for the *ie* to survive.

In her ethnography on family-owned businesses in Japan, Dorinne Kondo expanded on the *ie* model and how it can be used both to reinforce and subvert patriarchal power structures. In essence, primacy is given to continuation of the *ie* and while preference for inheritance is given to firstborn sons, competence is also a factor for consideration and women can become *ie* head because of it (Kondo, 125). As a result, while the *ie* is by default a male-dominated system, there is some room for flexibility in the name of the continuation of an *ie*: as Japanese feminist Takie Lebra writes, “[A] household occupation is often taken over by a widow after her husband dies, even when the business is of a masculine type, such as a lumber business or plumbing. In such cases she is accepted by her male ‘peers’ as one of the boys”(179). Thus, the general cultural precedent for a female business head exists even if it was not specifically applied to Shinto

priesthood before WWII (at least in modern Japan). Standard practice, however, for *ie* with no male inheritor is to bring in a husband to marry one of the family's daughters, a practice known in Japanese as *muko yōshi* (Kondo, 125). Since operating a shrine requires formal training and specialized knowledge, it would already be difficult for a family running a shrine to locate a suitable son-in-law, who would almost certainly not be local to the area. Adding in the depleted post-war male population and community concerns that their priest be someone familiar to them, it seems only natural to allow the daughter or widow of a shrine family to take the place of a male relative. This lack of male successor has been a continuing trend even up to the present, possibly because of the falling Japanese birth rates (Harney, "Without Babies"), and it is increasingly likely for women to enter the priesthood to follow in the footsteps of a male relative (Nelson, *Enduring Identities* 133). In fact, both of the case studies I examined follow this pattern (Kobayashi, 83; Nelson, *A Year in the Life* 125). Thus, while the sudden relaxation of gender restrictions was a matter of necessity, it has its roots in traditional Japanese family/business practice. The reasoning behind the inclusion of female priests, however, is not the advancement or increased representation of women, but rather a self-serving move on the part of Shinto institutions. This increased visibility of women was not on their own terms, but as interchangeable participants in a male-dominated field.

There are also parallels between priests at larger shrines and the salary-man archetype which is often used to characterize middle-class labor in Japan. John Nelson dedicates a chapter of his book *Enduring Identities* to the similarities between a shrine and a typical company, from institutional hierarchies to office organization. For example, like most companies, there was a spatial hierarchy evident in the placement of employees' desks at Kamigamo Shrine, where the ethnography for his book was conducted. In short, the lower-ranking employees were closer to

the door and therefore more easily accessible to the general public. As there were no female priests at this particular shrine, the lowest tier of this hierarchy—the row of desks closest to the door—is occupied entirely by the shrine’s female employees: the *miko* (145). In this case their visibility marks them as closer to an ordinary person as opposed to the senior priests, who are as far as possible from the office door: once again, women are differentiated by increased visual access given to outsiders. As the shrine is at some levels a company and a business, despite its religious nature Nelson draws many comparisons to secular companies, particularly regarding the manner in which employees relate to one another. The hierarchies and office politics line up with the trends reported by other scholars; therefore, it seems prudent to examine gender dynamics in a modern office setting, as well.

According to Takie Lebra, there has been significant difficulty for women attempting to achieve high positions in most companies, including government bureaus and academic institutions (183). Nevertheless, the strict hierarchical structure can work in a woman’s favor once she has achieved even a middle management position because regardless of gender a superior has authority over their subordinates. As a result, even if women are undervalued as a group, a position of authority will override the gender of that authority. In addition, there is a general rule in most Japanese companies of promotion by seniority, which means that women are unafraid to file a complaint when men who entered the company the same year they did are promoted before them (184). Thus, there is the prevailing notion that entry into a given industry as a woman is difficult and that top executive positions are almost impossible to achieve, but to a certain extent the preexisting system will carry company employees upward regardless of gender (185). Once again, the system occasionally works in women’s favor, but this is despite their

gender rather than because of it and beneficial systems are those that minimize the importance of gender.

Large Shinto shrines, however, apparently lack some of these institutional protections for female workers. For instance, priests who will take over a small family shrine must first serve as apprentices at a larger, urban shrine in order to learn rituals as well as other facets of being a priest. This period of apprenticeship can be very stressful because the newly trained priest has a very low position in the shrine's hierarchy (Nelson *Enduring Identities*, 141). Some protection can be ensured if the apprentice priest can secure a mentor at the shrine where they are placed (142). Women, however, are at a disadvantage because senior priests are most likely men and patronage, a common concept in the Japanese workplace, does not cross gender boundaries (Lebra, 186). These difficulties are compounded by the fact that, although there are formal ranks for priests which determine responsibilities, an apprentice will not achieve a high rank during their period of study and assignments for particular rituals are decided to a certain extent by the whim of the head priest. Thus, the complaint of a female priest apprenticing at Suwa Shrine in Nagasaki: "It just seems that the other priests, the men, who are licensed the same as me and of my rank do much more than I do"(Nelson *A Year in the Life*, 128). As in other large companies, this female priest uses seniority to gauge her progress against that of her male colleagues, but unlike some other women she notices a distinct disparity: while she is assigned to "juvenile tasks" "similar to pouring tea or making copies in an office"(128), others are actually taking part in rituals. She expected the same treatment as her male colleagues because of their identical qualifications and time of entry into the "company," but she suffered unfair treatment because of her gender. Furthermore, she felt that there was no higher authority for her to complain to because her superiors were the very ones mistreating her in the first place: "I can't do anything

about it because the senior priest in charge of deciding who participates in what ritual is an older man”(128). Resentment among junior priests towards their superiors is a common occurrence, but male priests tend to lament the institutional power that only comes with age, complaining, “If only I were fifteen years older...I might be able to get something done around here”(Nelson 2000, 137). The female priest, however, has no guarantee that her situation would be improved by increased age.

There is the consolation, however, that apprenticeship is only temporary and eventually she will be able to return to her family’s shrine where she will be will assume a role of authority. She seems resigned to merely endure her period at Suwa Shrine, “I’ve decided that since this is a big shrine and there are many priests, maybe I should just study other things until I return to my own shrine and learn about festivals from my grandfather. Which is something I’ll have to do anyway: learn the way it is done at Aino and not the Suwa Shrine way”(Nelson, *A Year in the Life* 128). She will wait patiently for a time when she can submerge herself in the narrative of carrying on the family legacy and her community and family ties are more important than her gender. Frustratingly, however, she will need to relearn many of the rituals that she studied in Suwa shrine because although she is required to learn how the larger, urban shrines handle rituals, her apprenticeship (even if she was allowed to participate regularly in rituals) would not prepare her fully for conducting rituals in her family shrine.

There are several power dynamics at play in the frustration of this young female priest: age vs. youth, city shrines vs. rural shrines, and male vs. female. Although other young priests frequently express their dissatisfaction in the existing hierarchy, this young woman was especially disempowered by the influence of older male priests. Women seem to suffer most in these institutional settings when their gender—not rank or position—is the most noticeable or the

most visible thing about them. Thus, it appears that while the company system of Shinto may situationally benefit certain women, it overall encourages the erasure of femininity and conformity to assumed masculine ranks and roles.

Finally, we have the internal narratives of two female priests, admittedly inferred from their two very distinct testimonies. One, referred to as “Ms. Mine” by John Nelson, was an apprentice at Suwa Shrine at the time of his interview with her. As previously discussed, she expressed some dissatisfaction with her position at the shrine, particularly with regard to how the senior priests treated her as the only female priest at the temple (Nelson, *A Year in the Life* 128). The other, Akiko Kobayashi, has been performing rituals on her own for over twenty years and sees no problem with the position of female priests in Shinto and in fact compares it favorably to the position of women in other religions. She even goes so far as to say, regarding the number of female priests, “a major feature of Shintoism is that, compared to other religions, a large number of its priesthood consisted of priestesses, about 13% or 2000 in all”(Kobayashi, 81). In terms of their treatment, she asserts that “in the case of Shintoism, there is no opposition to priestesses from the male priests or the parishioners. They are welcomed in the priesthood, and they are equal”(81). Although these women apparently adhere to strongly differing views, much can be accounted for by differing power dynamics and they do hold similar views of their relationship with Shinto’s ancient history and a frustration with modern societal attitudes towards female spirituality.

One crucial difference between these two women is their current stage in the life cycle of priesthood at the time of their testimony, with Ms. Mine currently experiencing apprenticeship and Akiko Kobayashi having completed that stage over two decades ago. Ms. Mine, along with her male colleagues, dedicated herself to the study of Shinto at Kokugakuin University,

occasionally suffering through harsh water purification rituals and cleaning duties (Nelson, *A Year in the Life* 126-127). Then, upon graduation, Ms. Mine found herself placed firmly on the sidelines of the shrine's operation in favor of those male colleagues (128). She was right in the period where gender discrimination is perhaps most apparent, whereas Kobayashi had been her own boss for many years at the time she wrote her article. It is possible that Ms. Mine's experience is specific to the period of apprenticeship and she will experience much less sexism once she is established at her family shrine. It is also true, however, that Kobayashi, as the head of her own shrine, would not have had to deal with the office politics of a larger shrine for several decades. Her experience of sexism in Shinto might have been different if she was attempting to advance in the ranks of a larger shrine, but, perhaps for that very reason, few female priests follow that career path (Smyers, 16).

In addition, it is worth considering the position of these two women with regard to Western scholarship of Shinto. Although Ms. Mine gave her testimony directly to a foreign researcher, the interview took place in Japan in Japanese and was reproduced using a pseudonym, which may have encouraged her to be more candid and casual. She had to be conscious of speaking to a cultural outsider, but this particular outsider was an established scholar with ample background knowledge and interest in Shinto. Kobayashi, on the other hand, wrote her article in English in a book about "world religions" probably targeted towards a more general western audience. She included a very bare-bones definition of Shinto in the first section—defining it simply as "a Japanese folk religion"—evidently targeting an audience which may lack any previous knowledge of Shinto. Thus, while Mine was speaking to someone she may have considered sympathetic to her cause, Kobayashi may have felt more compelled to defend her religion to a Western audience. Additionally, while it might not be difficult for those

within the shrine organization to deduce Ms. Mine's identity, she would not be directly connected to any criticism she leveled against Shinto or Suwa Shrine, especially by Americans reading John Nelson's book years after its publishing. Akiko Kobayashi, on the other hand, is adopting a position of high visibility as a sort of spokeswoman for the Shinto faith and it is unclear how much she would suffer if she were to generate negative publicity for her religion or its priesthood. These are but two cases of the several thousand registered female Shinto priests, but they reveal some common characteristics as well as the complicated ways in which native practitioners can relate to Western scholarship.

Both women claim the spiritual lineage of the shaman in Japan as a sign of the legitimacy of female Shinto priests. Most of Kobayashi's article, in fact, consists of recounting the history of women both as ritualists and figures of myth in ancient Shinto, from her section on "Priestesses in Ancient Japan," (Kobayashi, 82), to those entitled, "Izanami no mikoto" and "The Unsung Role of Women" (95). After a brief section on how female priests emerged in the modern era, she spends the entire article recounting the spiritual lineage of women in Japan. She does say that "today the Shinto-like energy and spirituality of the housewives, who acted as the high priestess of the home, have been weakened" (97) and continues: "spiritual attitudes and aptitudes are being neglected by the people... I place my hopes for coexistence of the religions of the world on the wisdom and intelligence of the women of today" (98). Thus, while women make up a numerical minority of Shinto priests today, Kobayashi sees them represented in the history of Shinto and sees even mundane "feminine" tasks as repositories of "Shinto-like" spiritual power.

Mine lectured her interviewer in a similar vein:

But you know, women have always had an important role in Shinto, right from the very beginning, whenever that was. The first priests were not men but women.

Have you heard of Himiko? She was very powerful, not only as a priestess, but also as one of the first rulers of Japan. (Nelson, *A Year in the Life* 128)

Clearly aware of the long history of women in Japanese religion, she expressed frustration that not everyone shares this awareness. “The problem,” she explained, “is that most people outside the shrine don’t know these facts, and that people within the shrine tend to be patriarchal because of their age and education”(128). She concludes that while the history of Shinto provides ample legitimacy for female priests, that history is either unknown or discounted, enabling the discriminatory policies to which she was subjected. Kobayashi, however, positions Shinto as a leader among world religions for allowing women to be priests at all (Kobayashi, 81). Although they approach it from very different angles, both women argue for their own legitimacy based on cultural history rather than personal achievement and take pride in the way their gender makes them qualified to be priests.

Finally, Ms. Mine addresses the public perception of women in her profession. When she graduated high school and decided to attend Kokugakuin University and study Shinto, people around her started telling her “What a strange thing you are!”(Nelson, *A Year in the Life* 126). Her job is significantly outside the norm for most people, let alone a woman, and a common reaction to her career choice is a simple, “Incredible!”(127). Nevertheless, she states that “I see myself as a thoroughly modern Japanese woman and not as some traditionalist”(129). Despite the perception of Shinto as a repository of cultural elements of “old” Japan, and the fact that she herself is carrying on a family legacy that stretches back for generations, Ms. Mine does not see that as interfering with her self-conception as a “modern woman.” Interestingly, Shinto priests, unlike Buddhist monks, or nuns, do not wear their ceremonial garments outside of the shrine (Nelson, *Enduring Identities* 136); they can therefore go fairly anonymously through their

everyday lives without others knowing their profession. This fact perhaps contributes to one of Ms. Mine's positive experiences as a female priest: "I like the feeling of being able to walk down the street, looking just like any other woman my age, and to have this little secret that I'm a Shinto priestess. I guess everyone in Japan wants to have something that makes him or her unique"(Nelson, *A Year in the Life* 125). Later, she reiterates, "it's still exciting to be here in Nagasaki, walking down the street just like anyone else, and to wear my mask which hides my role as a priestess. No one can guess! (129). Although being a female priest can be an inconvenience in her everyday life, it is nevertheless a source of pride when it is concealed, or unseen (literally because of the absence of ceremonial garb). This act of concealing is evidently a powerful one for Ms. Mine, as it was for Izanami and Amaterasu before her. Pursuing a profession where her gender is extraneous or a liability, Ms. Mine takes pleasure out of concealing her career in public, perhaps as a way to counteract the hypervisibility of her gender or as a way to participate in the larger, "unseen" history of women in Shinto.

Although this somewhat gender essentialist view may be limiting in the future, it is still a tool which women are actively using to subvert the dominant patriarchal narrative of Shinto, solidified during the Meiji Era. Even while institutionally, female priests are regarded as cogs in a greater mechanism, indistinguishable from their male counterparts, these women are crafting their own narratives of femininity out of a historical Shinto that has remained largely unseen since the *Kojiki* cemented a patriarchal model of gender in Shinto practice. These narratives help them to cope with the relative invisibility of women in larger Shinto institutions. Male-dominated Shrine Shinto, differs greatly from less organized shamanic practice in Japan. In contrast to the uncommon, but more urban, role of the female priest, there is that of the *itako*, a type of blind female medium common in more rural areas of northeastern Japan.

## *Itako*

Although their rituals are heavily influenced by Buddhism and reference many Buddhist deities, the *itako* are thought to predate the introduction of Buddhism to Japan and represent ancient Japanese shamanistic practices (Fairchild, 65). They also mention Shinto gods by name and use elements of other Shinto practices in their rituals (66-67). *Itako* are particularly known for channeling the spirits of the dead and giving closure to families of the deceased; for instance, many *itako* experienced a business boom following World War II with wives and children asking about family members who had died on the front lines (Blacker, 140). Although they are able to monetize their alleged supernatural abilities and are a common feature of local religious festivals (Hori, 237), their wandering lifestyle also makes them a somewhat vulnerable population and their activities have been restricted and discriminated against in the past (Blacker, 161). Even the fact that the *itako* is an exclusively female role is not necessarily an indication of female empowerment because their powers still originate from association with male spirits. Nevertheless, as opposed to the female priests who must contend with the male-dominated institutions of shrine Shinto, the *itako* act as free agents largely controlling their own spiritual practice, complicating our view of the social dynamics governing women's interaction with Shinto.

*Itako* training begins when an older *itako* takes on a blind or visually impaired girl as her apprentice—or, rather, negotiates with her parents to take her on. This is because the training begins early in life, specifically before puberty (Blacker, 141). There are many reasons given for this practice: one is that young children are more adept at memorization and are regarded as more able to endure the harsh training regimen (Kuwamura, 265). Beyond these mental and

physical attributes, however, there is also the belief that sexual desire interferes with spirit possession (Blacker, 142) while younger girls “become easily possessed by the kami”(Kuwamura, 265). As a result, *itako* training usually begins “before one becomes a woman,” in other words before a girl has had her first period (265). *Itako* who began their training after this period are consequently regarded by their communities as less reliable mediums and will gradually lose their customers (Blacker, 142). Even among blind practitioners, therefore, it is still unacceptable for women to “see” others as sexually attractive, echoing the precedent set by the myth of Izanami.

Already there are telling notions about female sexuality at play. Even in this female-driven practice a high value is placed on virginity (implied because young *itako*-in-training have not had their first period) and sexual desire is assessed as interfering with both her training and the initiation ritual. Admittedly, sexual activity is considered polluting regardless of gender (Nelson, *A Year in the Life* 68), but in women there is a strict divide imposed around menarche between a pure, receptive youth and a polluted, unreceptive adulthood.

The training that the young *itako* then undergoes is harsh and relies heavily on rote memorization of sutras. Many prospective *itako* even run away from their masters before their training period has elapsed (Blacker, 142). When the master feels that her apprentice is ready, usually after about four to five years of apprenticeship, the training intensifies with cold water purifications and intense prayer for a period of one hundred days. During this time the apprentice lives in a hut, undergoes a series of fasts, avoids sunlight, and “has to strive to avoid any type of pollution” (Kuwamura, 265-266). As is common in many cultures, the apprentice who is about to go through a momentous transformation must distance herself from the rest of society as an expression of her marginal condition (Douglas, 120). She must also maintain a state of utmost

purity until she is possessed by a spirit. After this period is completed, the initiation ceremony is held.

This ceremony, known as *kami-tsuke*, or “attaching of the god”(Kuwamura, 265) occurs over the course of two days, with varying levels of secrecy: the first portion of the ritual is open and the apprentice’s family and neighbors may observe. The rest of the rite, however, is performed a secret location where only the initiated are allowed to participate (266). Thus, in the most important ritual of the *itako*’s initiation, there is total rejection of the sense of sight: these women are no one’s visual object. This is, perhaps, a unique experience in female Shinto practice.

For this ritual, the apprentice dresses entirely in white, or “the attire of a corpse,” and first enters her master’s house, seats herself in front of the altar, and is embraced from behind by her master. “Being clad in a corpse’s attire and embraced by her master, the [apprentice] can be understood as undergoing a symbolic transition from a dead person to an embryo and being reborn”(Kuwamura, 266). The attending *itako* then walk around the room chanting Buddhist sutras until the apprentice is possessed by a spirit. The apprentice announces the name of the spirit, which will be the spirit that possesses her from then on, and loses consciousness, strengthening the comparisons to a death and rebirth. After passing a few more tests, the new *itako* receives the instruments of her trade, crafted by her master (267).

These tools specifically consist of a rosary and a pair of wooden dolls, one male and one female, called *oshira-sama*, which are used in various rituals. The story associated with the dolls is that a young girl once fell in love with and married her father’s horse. Enraged, her father flayed the horse, but the skin wrapped itself around the girl and flew up into the sky, from which rained down the first silkworms. The dolls which the *itako* use are made out of the wood of the

mulberry tree, which is essential for silkworm production, and represent the horse and the girl (Miller, 344). This story exemplifies the magical creative power of the union between a divine being and a human woman and provides a model for the *itako*'s power, which comes not from within her, but from the correctly executed union between herself and a male spirit.

The day following the *kami-tsuke* ritual is a festive occasion, called the *goshūgi*, or “wedding feast,” where the new *itako* dresses as a bride and is treated as newly wedded to her possessing kami (Kuwamura, 267). This ceremony serves to finally reintegrate the young woman as a productive member of society with some spiritual authority (268). This intermingled imagery of marriage, birth, and death reads almost like the reverse of the Izanami myth: in a way the apprentice has “died,” “been reborn,” and “married” a god, as opposed to how Izanami was married, died and traveled to the land of the dead, and was reborn as a god of death. While Izanami was cut off from her generative power of fertility and could only tear down the work of civilization from her dark home in Yomi, the apprentice by dint of great effort makes her way from darkness to possessing a creative power through the union with her guardian spirit. A girl who would have once been referred to only by the derogatory term, *mekura*, or, “dark eyes,” now deserves respect and is believed to possess powers beyond that of an ordinary human.

This is not to say that the *itako* a life of ease: they, along with other traveling female spiritualists, have been discriminated against in the past and their activities were forbidden by law from 1873 until 1945 (Blacker, 127). They are also looked down upon by scholars of religion as not being “a true shaman,” or even being “a sham” because they do not go into a trance or ecstatic state when they channel the spirits of the dead (161). Nevertheless, they continue to perform their craft, which is one of the only ways for blind women to find work in rural Japan (161). They even fill in for certain rituals where a male medium is usually required

when the village does not have one (256). This is very similar to the way in which female priests entered the workforce: while female spiritualists may have been forced to the sidelines of society, they jump to fill the roles which men cannot and perpetuate Shinto from city shrines to country villages.

As in the case of the *ubuya*, one societal marginalization allows other taboos to be broken: unlike other female mediums, who might feel some sort of calling or have an epileptic condition as a child, *itako* are qualified to converse with the dead based purely on the fact that they are blind. As a result of this attribute which would otherwise leave them cast out from society, they are able to blur the boundaries between life and death, a dangerous prospect for most people. Thus, they derive power, as a lineage of mediums, from the rejections of sight and even their husbands, should they marry, are blind men. Although male power and influence is never absent, women can find power in the dark places where normal societal rules do not apply.

### *Brides in Japan*

As opposed to the previous two roles, which were uncommon, but very deliberate interactions with Shinto practice, in the case of weddings, the Shinto ritual is almost incidental to the larger social phenomenon. Nevertheless, it is a nearly universal part of the Japanese wedding and serves to reinforce the same ideas about gender that have been part of the Shinto canon since the writing of the *Kojiki*. Furthermore, the presence of the Shinto ceremony reinforces the solemnity and “Japanese-ness” of these gendered ideals.

As in America, Japanese weddings are occasions laden with tradition and complex social dynamics. Adding to the complexity is the modern practice of adding “Western” elements to both the reception and the ceremony itself (Goldstein-Gidoni, 11), but I will restrict my discussion

here to parts of the ceremony held as “traditional” and distinctly “Japanese.” The entire wedding process, however, places the bride in a unique position as both the primary consumer of the couple and as a visual “product” that is marketed as part of the package for a once-in-a-lifetime wedding. It also encourages her to fulfill the role of the perfect, dutiful bride which is, in practice, both physically and mentally restrictive. These ideals have strong ties to non-religious cultural norms, but they are exemplified in the Shinto wedding ceremony and the wedding celebration as a whole.

Despite the necessity of a groom for the occasion to take place, the large majority of the pomp, planning, and advertisement surrounding weddings is aimed specifically at women (Goldstein-Gidoni, 118). Much effort is spent on choosing the *uchikake*, or bridal kimono, as well as the western-style wedding dress which will be worn during the reception and this has become a very profitable and competitive area for wedding parlors and clothing companies (115). The advertisements put out by wedding parlors also place an emphasis on the bride being seen, or “attract[ing] the attention of all the participants”(118). What occurs, however, is not a display of the bride in question, as much as an effort to display the most perfect bride possible, up to and including the practice of “correcting” the bride’s body under the *uchikake* (121) and of obscuring as much of *jibun no kao* (“one’s own face”) as possible with the traditional makeup. In fact, brides often remark that they don’t recognize themselves in their bridal attire (120). Even more revealingly, the bride’s ears cheeks are painted red to exude a *hazukashii kanji* (or “feeling of embarrassment) (119). Thus, the perfect bride is not only supposed to keep all eyes on her, but to appear emotionally hurt by the presence of those eyes. These features combined with the passivity of the bride’s role (122) suggest the image of a doll more than that of a person. Adding even more to this sense of the bride being a prop on her own wedding day is the practice of

frequent costume changes during the reception, which remove the bride from the festivities, which continue in her absence (136). All told, the Japanese bride appears to be a mere sight object necessary for the proper completion of the ceremony. Not only is the ideal bride adopting an extremely passive role, but she is expected to go through enormous effort to present the perfect womanly image. The weight of the public eye rests much more heavily on her than it does her future husband.

Although the Shinto wedding ceremony is a “traditional practice” and is frequently advertised as such, public ceremonies, rather than private weddings held in the home of the bride’s or the groom’s family, only gained popularity following World War II. In fact, the first official Shinto wedding ceremony only dates back to the imperial wedding in 1900, during the late Meiji period (Goldstein-Gidoni, 136). The practice, therefore, is a fairly recent interpretation of Shinto values which has been shaped by the rise of the lucrative wedding industry (136) and the shift from private to public ceremonies is what placed the increased emphasis on the appearance of the bride; in a home wedding she would need to be able to move freely in order to serve her guests, but the public ceremony transformed the bride from hostess into visual spectacle, allowing for a much more physically restrictive bridal costume (139). Although it is a recent invention, the Shinto wedding ritual brings a sense of cultural continuity to the proceedings and conveys a familiar message about the role of the new wife.

The wedding ceremony is typically carried out by a priest and two *miko*, or “shrine maidens,” all employed by the hall where the wedding takes place (Edwards, 16). Although the priests are specially certified by a shrine, the women who act as the *miko* are actually regular office workers who are recruited for the part and have no special religious training (150). As a result, although they are crucial to the proper functioning of the wedding ceremony, they have no

religious authority and are probably paid very little for their efforts. The priest recites the various prayers that occur throughout the ceremony, but the *miko* carry the necessary props around the room and direct the bride and groom with “stylized movements” (17). As in the case of Amaterasu, the *miko* are women who benefit others via their bodily movements: they illuminate the proper course of action for the participants. Although there is also an employee who does not participate in the ceremony giving verbal instructions and cues (17), the specific use of these women is deemed necessary in the ritual context. This hints at not only the use of women’s bodies as ritual tools, but at the systematized reliance on that usage, just as the gods of *Kojiki* relied on the light of the sun and coerced Amaterasu into providing it. These *miko*, however, gain no social status from their religious participation because they are not officially trained or affiliated with a shrine. Like many women, despite being integral to the proper functioning of social ritual, they receive very little recognition or benefit from their own actions: paradoxically, society demands that they be both physically seen and socially “unseen,” or unrecognized.

The ceremony includes many familiar Shinto elements including purification rituals, an offering to the gods, and a *norito*, or invocation of the gods of the shrine (Edwards, 17). One element which clearly draws upon the established Shinto canon is the list of gods who are invoked at the start of the ceremony, which includes Izanami and Izanagi (17). They are the originators of marriage but the rift in their relationship also resulted in the phenomenon of human death, so one is forced to wonder why they are addressed in this ritual.

The answer probably lies in the morals conveyed in the first half Izanami’s story: she is told to speak second, to only react to the desires of her husband. She is taught to be dependent, rather than independent. Even when the bride signs the wedding contract, where the husband uses both his given and family names, she uses only her given name, leaving a part of her

identity literally invisible and subordinate to that of her husband (Edwards, 18). Furthermore, after the Shinto ceremony has ended, this wifely ideal is repeated throughout the wedding reception. When friends relatives and coworkers make their congratulatory speeches, they emphasize that the new wife's job is now to support her husband and to depend on him (Edwards, 24). Perhaps there is so much emphasis placed on the bride's perfection to ensure that she will *not* become like Izanami and that the inherent danger of femininity will remain controlled. Both the bride's and groom's families bear witness to her docility and submission to her husband, restricting her to the bounds of propriety by their very act of observation. Furthermore, the entire ceremony is recorded on video by the wedding hall, adding to the numerous eyes already watching her and immortalizing her performance as the perfect bride. Thus, Izanami may serve as both a partial role model and a cautionary tale, reminding the participants of a danger which must be constantly controlled by the targeted use of sight.

Despite the fact that less than 3% of Japanese people actively identify as Shinto (Kawachi, 78), over 90% of Japanese weddings (at least out of those held in wedding halls) include a Shinto ceremony, even when it is not included in the standard wedding reception fee (Edwards, 47). Something about it must speak to the typical conception of what constitutes a wedding. Young couples think of the ceremony as a serious event laden with cultural history and are often surprised to find out that it is only about a hundred years old (105). They describe the *uchikake* as "traditional" and "Japanese-like" (Goldstein-Gidoni, 43). As a result, not only are Shinto ideas surrounding gender roles reproduced in the present, but they are given extra weight because they are seen as representative of something ancient and uniquely Japanese. Even if the traditions reproduced in the wedding ceremony are recently invented, they meet a need among today's couples and speak to a consistent idea regarding the public role of a bride. The mention

of Izanami and the emphasis on the purity and desirability of the bride keeps even this recent tradition will in line with the majority of Shinto practice.

Despite the wide variance in these three feminine roles, a few things remain constant in all of them. One is the specter of male domination, even in the case of the *itako*, an all-female lineage of shamans. Just as Izanami was ultimately defeated by Izanagi, even powerful women are expected to pair themselves sexually with or at least subordinate themselves socially to men because, as has been restated throughout Japanese history, women are innately impure and men are therefore allowed closer to godly power. All of the women mentioned have suffered social or political oppression because of the influence of a patriarchal society. Often this occurs via the sense of sight, from the critical gaze of male priests to the virtual eye of the video camera, and it is from the unseen places—both historically and physically—that women draw their power. These women find ways to thrive in the disadvantaged roles left open to them by society. They should not necessarily have to perform under these adverse conditions, but they do so for the good of their families, their businesses, and their livelihoods even while these achievements are minimized or kept “out of sight” of the public sphere.

## Conclusion

Starting from the 8<sup>th</sup> century CE men in positions of power in Japan began chipping away at the social structures which granted women religious, social, and political power. This effort took many forms, from legislation to mythology, but one of the most powerful appears to be that of the ideological seed planted by the *Kojiki*. Despite over a thousand years of intervening history, the same themes are still playing themselves out in modern Shinto: women are still regarded on some level as impure and they are still treated as visual objects rather than legitimate contributors to the religion like their male colleagues. From the streets of Nagasaki to the villages of Aomori Prefecture women are seen as dependent on male power and they must use all of the tools at their disposal to survive even if they are degraded by their peers or by scholars for doing so.

The dominant mode of this degradation is the sense of sight, whether it is the wedding industry reducing all brides to an interchangeable perfect face or male priests discounting a female priest's credentials because she, like the shrine's untrained attendants, is a woman. Sight is a biological phenomenon, but like the sexual differences of Izanami and Izanagi it has become a social tool that is used differently toward different genders. Also as in the case of Izanami, the act of observation invokes shame for all women who dare to transgress societal norms. This social sense of sight is selective, however, in that it renders certain women "unseen" and unacknowledged by society, women including the historical ruler Himiko as well as the "polluted" inhabitants of the *ubuya*. Overlooking these women strengthens the image of the

public sphere as a man's world, participation in which, for women, is both temporary and conditional.

There are also, however, pockets of resistance that spring up by rejecting the sight of others, such as the same *ubuya*, which served as a site for secret liaisons, and the *itako* who base their financial and social independence on their lack of sight by communicating with forces which normal humans cannot see and marrying men who are also blind. In both cases women in a marginalized condition use it to break social taboos: being marginal and not seen as a full member of society, they are not bound by the social restrictions imposed by sight. Even the construction of strictly female spaces, however, does not free women from the dominating influence of men: women in the *ubuya* must one day return to their families and even the *itako* must answer to a male deity.

I do not suggest totally dismantling the theology of the *Kojiki*, but rather taking a cue from Ms. Mine, who integrates her priestly training with her knowledge of the crucial role that women played in the history of Japanese religion; while women stand out as priests in modern shrines, they have acted as mediums and shamans in Japan for thousands of years. Yet, their spiritual abilities have been minimized or even demonized in the case of menstruation and childbirth. In light of the complicated history of women in Shinto practice, rather than simply declaring gender irrelevant, it is necessary to examine the unique roles that women are required to play and how those reflect the prejudices of the secular sphere as well as the centuries of accumulated history of Shinto ritual. Like all cultural dynamics, this one will take time to change, but people like Ms. Mine are already noticing the imbalances of the system and have the chance to change it from the inside out. One can only hope that as time passes women will be welcomed into and celebrated in all aspects of Shinto as active participants rather than visual

spectacles or vessels of male power. Perhaps one day it will not be questioned when the woman sees and speaks first.

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