

On the Power of Female Shamans: A Study Based upon Early Records in Two Japanese Mythologies

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1. Introduction

In the *Ryōjin hishō* (梁塵秘抄), which was edited by Emperor Goshirakawa at the end of the Heian period, there is a popular song which includes the following lyric: “In the East there are no female, only male shamans, therefore divine males become possessed (556 「東には女は無きか男巫、さればや神の男には憑く」).”¹⁾ As others such as Hori Ichirō (堀一郎) suggest, this is a song predicated on the rarity of male shamans, and accordingly it is presumable that it should have been usual that only female shamans experienced possession by deities or spirits.²⁾ Even without such examples, it is commonly known that female shamans are thoroughly dominant in shamanic phenomena in Japan from the ancient times of Himiko (or Pimiko) to the founders of new religions during the late nineteenth century and throughout the twentieth century. Himiko might have been a historical figure, since a person with her name is mentioned in two Chinese chronicles, among these *Wei chih* (魏志, “Records of Wei,” 297 AD), as female ruler in a state called Na (奴) in Japan during the second and third centuries. Japanese sources can so far not confirm this. Nevertheless, from the way this person is characterized she must at the minimum have been a figure of equivalent religious and political significance.

It is also well known that the phenomenon of possession, in which spirits or deities enter the mortal world, is overwhelmingly more common than that of mortals wandering in the other world. The relation between possession and femaleness can serve as a prototype for Japanese shamanism. But why? There are of course many studies related to this concept, and some experts have commented on this problem.

However, some of these cannot simply be accepted without critical thought. One of the best examples is that some authors explain the vocational aptitude of female shamans on psychological grounds such as hysterics, neurosis, instability and so on, which are namely considered to be female attributes.³⁾ Because many shamans fall into ecstasy during possession, it is, according to this theory, to be assumed that such female characteristics were put to practical use in the community in this way.⁴⁾ But upon closer consideration, a question arises as to the appropriateness of this theory, that is, whether one may draw a conclusion thusly in this matter from so-called conventional wisdom.

The other good example is the concept that the phenomenon of possession takes place via sexual relations with deities or spirits. In fact, in the idea of *Marebito*, or “visiting deities,” rituals symbolizing sexual hospitality are observed in which female sha-

mans play the role of wife to a visiting deity for the night. If we also take fertility rites into account, it is possible to draw the conclusion that a sexual view of the shaman role is valid. Many cases in which children are the objects of possession can also be accounted for by such an understanding.

However, how can we explain other cases? In Japanese mythology there is a scene in which the princess Yamato-hime becomes possessed by the goddess Amaterasu-ōmikami. And since the primeval ages, there has been an idea that disease is caused through possession by spirits.⁵⁾ In these cases, people become possessed irrespective of age or sex. Even if we can explain this with the idea of bisexuality in shamans,⁶⁾ this would not clarify the reason for the dominance of female shamans in Japan. Therefore, when it comes to the power of female shamans, we should also think about the reason for the sacredness inherent in the female, that is, which aspect of the female can be regarded as sacred?

In this paper, we go back to the origin of this concept by way of the two famous Japanese chronicles *Kojiki* (古事記) and *Nihon shoki* (日本書紀), which tell us about the foundation, not to mention creation, as well as the early history of Japan. These chronicles were compiled by imperial order in the early eighth century. It is the mythology in regard to its heavenly beginnings which arouses our interest, above all the preface of the *Kojiki* handed down by Hieda no Are (稗田阿礼), a (female?) person who is thought by some scholars to have experienced possession, thus providing us with clues to this issue.⁷⁾

Before we go on into analyzing these mythologies, some comments on the characters who appear therein should be still taken. Because these mythologies were edited by imperial mandate, their stories were constructed with political intentions in mind. Additionally, as some experts indicate, the theme and plot were mostly likely produced under the influence of Chinese works like *Enanji* (*Huainan zi* 淮南子), *Sango rekiki* (*San wu li ji* 三五曆紀), *Shūeki hongī* (*Zhou yi ben yi* 周易本義) and *Resshi* (*Lie zi* 列子)⁸⁾ and from tales originating in other regional cultures.⁹⁾ Both of the mythologies under consideration are also based on Japanese works such as *Teiki* (“Imperial Chronicles” 帝紀) or *Kuji* (“Ancient Dicta” 旧辭), which originated during the sixth century but unfortunately have not survived into the present day. It is thought that many episodes come from works in the sixth century and that both mythologies involve ancient folk tradition from the fifth century and earlier.¹⁰⁾ For this reason, we cannot consider these mythologies to be pure historical materials. However, as material telling us of the earliest forms of Japanese religion, we can gather some clues. In this paper we will firstly pay attention to the practices of female shamanic figures and of male diviners in these mythologies and investigate the gradual building of a boundary in the practices of female shamans and male diviners. Secondly, we will consider the relationship between the practices and the sexuality of these figures and how this can be analyzed and interpreted. We will then go on to analyze the background of dominance by females of the phenomena of possession and of worship. The penultimate section will introduce my hypothesis relating to the power of female shamans. In conclusion I will give a summary and suggest further possible avenues of investigation into these issues.

In order to avoid misunderstandings of the term “Shamans,” I define them in brief; shamans are individuals who have the ability to make direct contact with deities or

spirits. Diviners, on the other hand, can be defined as religious figures having the privilege to hold rituals and interpret the results.

2. Female Shamans, Male Diviners, and Their Practices

As is commonly known, there are differences in the stories of the *Kojiki* (712) and the *Nihon shoki* (720). There are scenes that are depicted only in the *Kojiki* and not in the *Nihon shoki*, and vice versa. Further, it is also frequently indicated, often drawing upon the interpretation of Motoori Norinaga (本居宣長) that the *Nihon shoki* has more Chinese elements and that the *Kojiki* represents the simplicity of Japanese culture. Because it is not primarily this paper's intention to compare those differences, episodes will be discussed only as they appear in one of the two works. If the other one has also the same episode, one can find the relevant pages at the end of this paper in the section "Notes." The translations which are adopted in this paper are as follows: William George Aston, trans., *Nihongi: Chronicles of Japan from the Earliest Times to A.D. 697*, 2 vols., (London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trübner & Co., Ltd., 1896; new edition: Rutland, Vermont & Tokyo: Charles E. Tuttle Company, 1972) and Donald L. Philippi, trans., *Kojiki*, (Tokyo: Princeton University Press & University of Tokyo Press, 1969).

Firstly, let us take a look at female shamans. If one analyses these mythologies as a symbolic system, for example, from the perspective of mythology (or mythography), it is possible to find more figures than will be here analyzed. However, here I deal solely with figures whose acts are clearly described as religious. At least four figures will be indicated as being female shamans; 1. Ame-no-uzume, 2. Yamato-toto-bi-momo-so-hime, 3. Yamato-hime and 4. Okinagatarashi-hime. In addition, Amaterasu-ōmikami will sometimes also be counted as such a shamanic figure,¹¹⁾ but we will wait to explore this idea until later.

Starting with Ame-no-uzume, we can point out three shamanic practices. One of them is possession, which can be seen from a scene in which Ame-no-uzume takes Amaterasu-ōmikami out from a rock cave in heaven using a dance where she strips herself naked.

(...) AMĒ-NŌ-TA-DIKARA-WO-NŌ-KAMĪ stood concealed beside the door, while AMĒ-NŌ-UZUME-NŌ-MIKŌTŌ bound up her sleeves with a cord of heavenly PI-KAGĒ vine, tied around her head a head-band of the heavenly MA-SAKI vine, bound together bundles of SASA leaves to hold in her hands, and overturning a bucket before the heavenly rock-cave door, stamped resoundingly upon it. Then she became divinely possessed, exposed her breasts, and pushes her skirt-band down to her genitals. (...).¹²⁾

The second is a meeting with the god Saruta-hiko. In this scene, it is significant that Ame-no-uzume appeals to her sexuality baring her chest and showing it to him.

(...) So Ame no Uzume forthwith bared her breasts and, pushing down the band of her garment below her navel, confronted him with a mocking laugh. Then the God of the cross-ways (= Saruta-hiko) asked her, saying: —'Ame no Uzume! What meanest thou by this behaviour?' She answered and said: —'I venture to

ask who art thou that dost thus remain in the road by which the child of Amaterasu no Oho-kami is to make his progress?" (...).¹³⁾

The third is Ame-no-uzume's role as a messenger of the Divine. She gives an order of the Divine to sea creatures and gets them to swear their loyalty to the deities.

(...) Then, after accompanying SARUTA-BIKO-NÖ-KAMĪ on his return, (Amë-nö-uzume-nö-mikötö) returned; and, chasing together all the wide-finned and the narrow-finned (fish), she inquired: "Are you willing to serve the offspring of the heavenly deities?" Then all of the fish said as one: "We will serve." (...).¹⁴⁾

In these examples, we see the practices of possession, contact with deities, and transmitting between deities and other creatures. We should also not forget that Ame-no-uzume makes use of her sexuality by two of these acts.

As for Yamato-toto-bi-momo-so-hime, she consulted a prophecy granted via possession obeying the order of the emperor Sujin. Afterwards, she became the wife of Ōmono-nushi. However, because she broke her promise never to open the toilet-case where Ōmono-nushi rested, she "stabbed herself in the pudenda with a chopstick so that she died."

(...) Accordingly, the Emperor hereupon proceeded to the plain of Kami-Asachi, where he assembled the 80 myriads of Deities, and inquired of them by means of divination. At this time the Gods inspired Yamato-toto-hi-momoso-hime no Mikoto to say as follows: "Why is the Emperor grieved at the disordered state of the country? (...) The Emperor inquired, saying: —"What God is it that thus instructs me?" The answer was: —"I am the God who dwells within the borders of the land of Yamato, and my name is Oho-mono-nushi no Kami." (...).¹⁵⁾

(...) After this Yamato-toto-hi-momo-so-bime no Mikoto became the wife of Oho-mono-nushi no Kami. This God, however, was never seen in the day-time, but came at night. Yamato-toto-hime no Mikoto said to her husband: —"As my Lord is never seen in the day-time. (...) I beseech him therefore to delay a while, that in the morning I may look upon the majesty of his beauty." The Great God answered and said: —"(...) Tomorrow morning I will enter thy toilet-case and stay there. I pray thee be not alarmed at my form." Yamato-toto-hime no Mikoto wondered secretly in her heart at this. Waiting until daybreak, she looked into her toilet-case. There was there a beautiful snake (...). Thereupon she was frightened, and uttered an exclamation. The Great God was ashamed, and changing suddenly into human form, spoke to his wife, and said: —"Thou didst not contain thyself, but hast caused me shame: I will in my turn put thee to shame." So treading the Great Void, he ascended to Mount Mimoro. (...) She (= Yamato-toto-bi-momo-so-hime) flopped down on a seat and with a chopstick stabbed herself in the pudenda so that she died. (...).¹⁶⁾

Thus, in the case of Yamato-toto-bi-momoso-hime, we see the granting of oracles or

visions via possession and the marriage to a deity.

The third figure, Yamato-hime, is a person who is possessed by Amaterasu-ōmikami and receives visions. She wanders everywhere in Japan in order to find a sacred place for Amaterasu-ōmikami.

(...) 3rd month, 10th day. Ama-terasu no Oho-kami was taken from Toyo-suki-iri-hime no Mikoto, and entrusted to Yamato-hime no Mikoto. Now Yamato-hime no Mikoto sought for a place where she might enshrine the Great Goddess. So she proceeded to Sasahata in Uda. Then turning back from thence, she entered the land of Ohomi, and went round eastwards to Mino, whence she arrived in the province of Ise. Now Ama-terasu no Oho-kami instructed Yamato-hime no Mikoto, saying: —“The province of Ise, of the divine wind, is the land whither repair the waves from the eternal world, the successive waves. It is a secluded and pleasant land. In this land I wish to dwell.” (...).¹⁷⁾

Moreover, Tanigawa Kenichi (谷川健一) asserts that Yamato-hime may be seen as a prototype of the wandering shaman, or *Aruki-miko* (歩き巫女).¹⁸⁾ At any rate, we see here the phenomenon of possession.

About Okinagatarashi-hime, also known as Empress Jingū, there is a scene in which Emperor Chūai prays for a vision of the future and then Empress Jingū, in the presence of Takeuchi-no-sukune, is possessed by a deity. Since the emperor did not obey this vision, he passed away and Takeuchi-no-sukune consulted an oracle and asked the god possessing Empress Jingū his name.

In those days the Empress OKINAGA-TARASI-PIME-NÖ-MIKÖTÖ often became divinely possessed. (It was) at the time when the emperor dwelt at the palace of KASIPi in TUKUSI and was about to attack the land of the KUMASÖ. The emperor was playing the cither, and the OPO-OMI TAKESUI-UTI-NÖ-SUKUNE abode in the ceremonial place in order to seek the divine will. Then the empress became divinely possessed and spoke these words of instruction: “(...).” Hereupon the emperor replied: “(...).” Saying (that this was) a deceiving deity, he pushes away the cither and sat silent without playing it. Then the deity, greatly enraged, said: “(...).” At this time, the OPO-OMI TAKESUI-UTI-NÖ-SUKUNE said: “This is a dreadful thing. My lord, continue to play the cither!” Finally, then, he drew the cither to him and began to play reluctantly. After a while, the sound of the cither stopped. When they raised the lights, they saw that he was dead.¹⁹⁾

(...) Then again TAKESUI-UTI-NÖ-SUKUNE abode in the ceremonial place in order to seek the divine will. The instructions given then were exactly as (those given) previously, (namely): (...) Then he inquired specially: “I should like to know the name of the great deity who is now giving such instructions.” The answer was: “This is the will of AMA-TERASU-OPO-MI-KAMĪ, also of the three great deities SÖKÖ-DUTU-NÖ-WO, NAKA-DUTU-NÖ-WO, and ÜPA-DUTU-NÖ-WO. (...).”²⁰⁾

Here we see also the phenomenon of possession, but the difference from the other

cases is that Okinagatarashi-hime has a male attendant called *Saniwa* (審神者), and the attendant plays the role of interpreting the visions respectively oracles granted by the deity.

To summarize, we can say for certain that the common practices of female shamanic figures are characterized by possession and that their practices are related to their physicality or sexuality whether directly or indirectly.

Next we will consider the male figures, specifically Kotoshiro-nushi, Ōtataneko and Takeuchi-no-sukune. Kotoshiro-nushi is one of Ōkuni-nushi's sons. He represents his father and offers the Central Land of Reed-Plains as subjects of Amaterasu-ōmikami.

(...) “We have been dispatched by the command of AMA-TERASU-OPO-MI-KAMI to inquire: ‘the Central Land of the Reed Plains, over which you hold sway, is a land entrusted to the rule of my offspring; what is your intention with regard to this?’” Then he replied: “I cannot say. My son YA-PE-KŌTŌ-SIRŌ-NUSI-NŌ-KAMI will say. However, he has gone out to amuse himself (hunting for) birds and fishing at the Cape of MIPO, and has not yet returned.” Hereupon AMĒ-NO-TŌRI-PUNE-NŌ-KAMI, who, when inquiry was made of him, spoke to his father the great deity, saying: “With fearful reverence let us present this land to the offspring of the heavenly deities.” (...).²¹⁾

This act is considered to be intermediary among deities or is interpreted as a symbol of magical-religious influence.²²⁾ It is also clear when one considers the meanings of the Chinese characters that the name “Kotoshiro” means “delivering of words” (辭代)²³⁾ or “delivering of things” (事代). In brief, Kotoshiro-nushi is depicted as the symbol of an oracle itself.

The second figure is Ōtataneko. Ōtataneko is a priest who worships Ōmononushi. He was appointed by Emperor Sujin, who has a vision of Ōmononushi in his dreams and was told that Ōtataneko is a son of Ōmononushi and that if he makes Ōtataneko serve Ōmononushi, the land will be restful and peaceful.

During the reign of this emperor, many epidemics occurred, and (so many) people died (that the whole population seemed to be) on the verge of extinction. The emperor sorrowed and grieved, and at night, while he was upon the divine bed, OPO-MŌNŌ-NUSI-NŌ-OPO-KAMI appeared to him in a dream and said: “This is my will. But if OPO-TATA-NEKO is made to worship before me, then the divine wrath will be averted, and the land will be peaceful and at ease.” Because of this, messengers were sent out urgently in all directions to look for someone named OPO-TATA-NEKO. Then in the village of MINO in KAPUTI, the man was found and presented (to the Emperor). Hereupon the emperor asked him: “Whose child are you?” He answered: “(...) (whose) child was TAKE-MIKA-DUTI-NŌ-MIKŌTŌ²⁴⁾; (whose) child am I, OPO-TATA-NEKO.” Hereupon the emperor rejoiced greatly and said: “The kingdom will be peaceful, and the people will flourish.” Then OPO-TATA-NEKO-NŌ-MIKŌTŌ became a priest and worshipped before (the deity) OPO-MIWA-NŌ-OPO-KAMI at Mount MI-MŌRŌ. (...).²⁵⁾

It should be noted that Sujin-emperor received his visions not through possession, but in dreams, and Ōtataneko is designated a priest. Whether Ōtataneko himself receives visions through possession is not stated. As described in the text, his work is “to conduct the worship at the shrine.” At least we can say that Ōtataneko is a figure having been chosen by a God and having the privilege of performing rituals.

The last person whom we will consider is Takeuchi-no-sukune. As we have learned already in our discussion of Okinagatarashi-hime, he is a figure who serves as an interpreter of the visions granted by the deity possessing Okinagatarashi-hime. Takeuchi-no-sukune is a figure who communicates with the spirit world through the possession of Okinagatarashi-hime and speaks with the deity by interpreting her visions.

In summary, these three male figures do not experience possession. If they receive visions, this takes place in their dreams or via the possession of female shamanic figures. That is to say, their religious acts involve not physical acts, but rather the invocation of other abilities such as comprehension or the privilege of observing rituals.

3. Relation between Practices and Sexuality of Figures

From the above we can point out two characteristics. Firstly, female shamanic figures communicate with the spirit world while in the state of possession. Male figures, on the other hand, perform this act not possessed, rather indirectly, in dreams or with the help of female shamanic figures. That is, female figures experience deities through their own physical body, but male figures meet with them indirectly. Secondly, as we have seen in the case of cooperation between Okinagatarashi-hime and Takeuchi-no-sukune, the female figures being possessed are identified with the deity who possesses them, and an attendant male figure speaks with the possessing deity. This never occurs in the case of male figures. Thus there is a clear boundary between possessed female shamans and non possessed male figures like diviners.

Our first question in discussing this phenomenon is: “What is the basis of this distinction?” As already mentioned, because of discrepancies between the various sources, it is not clear what era’s shamanism is recorded, or which phenomena may have influenced the production of these mythologies. In fact, if we take into consideration of the then current situation at the time of compiling these mythologies, we will find that the phenomenon of female shamanism was already entering a period of decline, which continued into the Heian period.

For instance, according to the *Taihō Codes* (大宝令, 702), the *Yōrō Codes* (養老令, 718) or the *Engishiki* (延喜式, 967—a collection of religious and ceremonial regulations albeit its late date of compilation describing trustworthy traditions originating from the Nara period), it might have been usual until the eighth century that rituals were carried out by a male–female pair.²⁶⁾ But already in the “Edict for officials” (職員令) in *Ryō no gige* (令義解, 833) female shamans were positioned under the male diviner. Concerning the transformations in the system of *Uneme* (采女) and the foundation of *Sai-in* (齋院) at that time, which is related to this concern, Kuratsuka Akiko (倉塚暉子) suggests in her book *Miko no bunka* (巫女の文化) that the change of character of the *Uneme* from the role of the sacred wife of a god to a secular servant and the foundation of *Sai-in* at the time of Emperor Tenmu (reigned 673–686) can be interpreted as signaling the beginning of separation of Yamato court from female spiritual charisma or

powers.²⁷⁾ That is, at the latest since the eighth and ninth century, female shamans have been in decline.²⁸⁾ We will learn about this decline more thoroughly in section 4. Nevertheless, in both mythologies we see that female shamanic figures still take an active part in religious scenes. For example, in the scene in which both of Okinagatarashi-hime and Takeuchi-no-sukune appear, Okinagatarashi-hime is not described as inferior to Takeuchi-no-sukune, but rather plays the central role. Even in the *Nihon shoki*, Okinagatarashi-hime is portrayed as a leader in her role as recipient of prophecies.²⁹⁾ Further, the way in which Yamato-hime is possessed by Amaterasu-ōmikami is a kind of pilgrimage. The phenomenon of possession is still characterized as sacred, and the central figure in scenes of divinely inspired visions is that of the possessed female. That means that there is a distance between the described shamanism and the actual situation at that time these mythologies were compiled. The described shamanism in these mythologies should be accepted as accurate up to the time of the decline of female shamans, namely before the reign of the Yamato court under Emperor Tenmu.

The figure to be discussed in this context is Himiko, primarily for two reasons. The first reason is that the shamanism described is attributed to Himiko, since the cooperation of Empress Jingū and Takeuchi-no-sukune (possibly dating to the fourth century) seems to be similar to the manner of rule carried out by Himiko and her brother (who preceded the before mentioned pair by approximately one century), in this combination commonly called as “Hime–Hiko-System.” And the other reason is that one supposes that the tomb of Yamato-toto-bi-momo-so-hime, the “Chopstick Tomb,” reflects the grave of Himiko.³⁰⁾ Himiko was the ruler of the political federation Yamatai in southern Japan, who was described in the Chinese chronicle *Wei chih* with this characterization: “She occupied herself with magic and sorcery, bewitching the people.”³¹⁾ Based on this record, she is considered as a shaman elected to the position of empress, governing approximately thirty countries in a state of war. According to the *Wei chih*, during her rule “(...) there were few who saw her. She had one thousand women as attendants, but only one man. He served her food and drink and acted as a medium of communication.”³²⁾ The “only one man” is supposed to be her younger brother who carried out political affairs. Immediately after her death, a male figure succeeded the throne. However, since wars broke out continuously again, her niece Iyo (彗与 or Toyo 台与), a female shaman, ascended the throne. It is recorded that peace returned after she became ruler. The fact that such female figures were elected by other male rulers was based on very political intentions, but it should be stressed that their high position was based on their religious role.

This idea seems to have obtained approval from many scholars. We should, however, at least take into account that there are differences, for example, that Himiko is thought to have remained unmarried throughout her life, different from the married empress Jingū, or that Himiko had not committed suicide, different from Yamato-toto-bi-momo-so-hime. We may not easily ignore such conditions which decide the character of one’s life. However, even if it is uncertain whether Himiko was really adopted as a model of female shamanic figures in the mythologies, it might be at least assured that the described shamanism is that of the time, as females had more rights or power in the ancient agricultural society until the end of the Yayoi period and most certainly

also beyond.

Then our question is, what was the basis for the described boundary between male and female shamans in those ages? What could have been the reason that the phenomenon of female possession and worship of the female form were in such demand according to the mythologies? In the following section, we will investigate this issue.

4. The Worship of the Female and the Power of Female Shamans in Ancient Agricultural Society

First of all, it should be noted that the reason behind the great demand for the possession is relatively easy to explain, but the reason for the worship of the female remains ambiguous. Firstly, we will look at the reason for the overwhelming dominance of the phenomenon of possession as opposed to that of mortals traveling into the spirit realm. Relating to this, there are two major points to be discussed. First is the fact that gods were frequently portrayed and imagined as “visitors.” It does not matter whether one images a vertical or horizontal cosmos. From the ritual sites of the Yayoi period, there are rock sites called *Iwakura* (磐座), at many of which a ritual was observed whose purpose was the summoning of spirits or gods. *Hitsu-ishi* (櫃石) on Mount Akashiro (赤城山) in Gunma prefecture and *Mikura-ishi* (御座石) on Mount Tateshina (蓼科山) in Nagano prefecture are good examples of such sites.

From evidence of artifacts excavated at such sites, the methodology of these rituals is surmised to be as follows: One chooses a place for a sacred place and places a *sakaki* branch (榊, *Cleyera japonica*), also known as a *himorogi* (神籬) there, or ties a sacred straw festooned around a rock, in order to prepare the location for the god’s descent. These ritual instruments were destroyed after the rituals had been performed and no permanent structures were constructed because it was believed that deities descended only during the ritual and afterwards returned to their world. Ōmiwa Shrine (大神神社) in Nara prefecture is an example of the old form of shrine having no *shaden* (社殿) or building intended to be the residence of a god. In this case the *shintai* (神体) as object of worship in which the spirit of the deity is traditionally believed to dwell is Mount Miwa (三輪山) itself. Hori Ichirō theorizes regarding the characteristic “visiting” nature of deities that people settled down in a closed agricultural society and did not move, therefore the supernatural plane was forced to visit from the outside.³³⁾ The idea of *Marebito*, or “visiting deities,” could be imagined in this way. In brief, one can say that it was necessary that the phenomenon of possession was more dominant than the phenomenon of wandering in the other world because of the image of deities as “visitors.”

The second point is the characteristic of spirits that they tend to float. One seems to have had already an idea that life (*mi*) begins through the entry of a spirit (*tama*) into a body (*kara*),³⁴⁾ and because the spirit is apt to go out from the body, there is a ritual to return the spirit (*chin kon* 鎮魂) which form is later realized in festivals such as the Niname Festival (*Niname-sai* 新嘗祭). If one’s spirit leaves one’s body without returning, one dies. *Mogari* (殯) is a ritual in which people wait for the return of a dead person’s spirit, in the hopes that this will cause the deceased to come back to life. This ritual is based on the belief that the death of the body releases a spirit which continues to exist in the mortal world. Such wandering spirits were believed even to occasional-

ly possess others' bodies, which was thought to cause illness.³⁵⁾ Addressing the issue of these beliefs and images of the mortal and spiritual worlds, and the *Mogari* ritual more specifically, Yamaori Tetsuo (山折哲雄) analyses the Buddhist tales *Nihon ryōiki* (日本靈異記) in his book *Nihonjin no reikon-kan* (日本人の靈魂観), focusing especially on the coexistence of *Mogari* and the idea of a Buddhist other world, which reflects the transition period to the Buddhist other world. According to this belief system, the wandering of a spirit should not be believed to be caused by the use of psychic powers, but rather is a representation of death and is thus portrayed negatively. In summary, being possessed could have been regarded as a more psychological act than the wandering of the spirit into the other world, and there were certainly demand for possession and its perceived role as offering welcome to a descending deity.

The second issue is the worship of the female. Although it is said that people observed rituals and worshiped the fertility of the female sex, the exact way in which this occurred unclear, with the exception of rituals which obviously characterize eroticism by using a pair of male and female figures or objects depicting sexual organs. For instance, the way in which clay figurines of the female form were used is still not completely understood. Clays, partly and intentionally destroyed, were perhaps used as effigies of those suffering from illness.³⁶⁾ It may have for example been believed that if one was experiencing pain in one's arm, this pain could be cured by removing the corresponding portion of a clay effigy. But it is still unclear why these figures should have been female. And there are of course male clay figures. How were they used aside from the manner described above? These facts demonstrate that there are many fields in which we can easily reach the conclusion that rituals having to do with fertility were connected with the female sex, however, the precise nature of this connection remains unclear.

It is evident that the field of study related to fertility worship and the female sex is imprecise, and it is a large leap from the physical characteristics such as faculty of childbirth to the concept of sexual relationships with deities and the female's "innate ability for incantation"³⁷⁾ or "magical charisma"³⁸⁾ without further analyzing the relation between religiousness and such physical faculties. Although one often describes some kind of their religious privilege simply as "magical," what kind of magic could female religious figures command in the mortal realm, especially using these physical characteristics? These physical features could be a source of wonderment, but not, for example, be even a part of a belief in curse-placing. The time should come namely earliest in the seventh or eighth century.³⁹⁾

It was the fascination for another, persuasive command developed in China to make influence on spirits or cosmos. Exactly this was the reason for the popularity of *yin-yang* diviners, mountain ascetics, and esoteric monks, which brought into the field of shamanism three new dimensions, which Yamaori Tetsuo calls "to possess (憑く)–making possession (憑ける)–being possessed (憑けられる)."⁴⁰⁾ If we describe this relationship during the Heian period as being a correlation between male diviners and deities, that of earlier times is a one-sided adaptation on the side of shamans to those deities. In other words, even if the acts of female religious figures were superhuman acts, they still were not active, but rather passive, and the relation between religiousness and worship in their physicality is in fact not clear.

With regard to this, the high position of the female in the agricultural society in ancient Japan and her decline in the following ages is suggestive, a transformation both within social as well as religious roles. One good example is the marriage system, providing the female up to then an influential position. In the earlier times, matrilineal marriage was predominant, which resulted in matrilineal succession, and females still participated in production activity. This came to change under the influence of Chinese culture. The succession came to be carried out according to the patrilineal line. After the Taika Reform (大化の改新), the female lost her equal status and patrilineal succession was instead as part of new laws governing the allocation of farmland (班田収授法). Through the introduction and popularization of male dominated Chinese culture beginning in the sixth century and because of social changes corresponding to more turbulent times, the male assumed greater prominence than the female in the social sphere. At the same time in the religious sphere, males fulfilling religious functions such as *yin-yang* diviners, mountain ascetics and esoteric monks came to the forefront and female religious figures retreated gradually from their high position. In the encyclopedia *Wamyō ruijushō* (倭名類聚鈔) from the tenth century, female shamans are described as ranking equal to prostitutes, beggars, and thieves. This is said to be due for example to the influence of Buddhism, which opposes sexuality, especially that of females, and, further, considers women to be impure. This was also due to the belief that male diviners possessed greater magical powers, surpassing those of female shamans. In contrast to female shamans, who are granted visions and express oracles via possession or greet deities with sexual hospitality such as in the ritual of *Marebito*, male diviners are not possessed, but rather employ guardian spirits through asceticism and cause spirits or deities to possess others such as female shamans. The most typical example of this is the ritual practiced by mountain ascetics called *Yorigitō* (憑り祈祷).⁴¹⁾ To summarize these religious attitudes, the spirit was regarded as superior to physical body, and males, regarded as superior to females, employed asceticism in order to overcome physicality and cultivate the spirit.

However, we should pay attention to the fact that the possession of female shamans was not absolutely denied and continued to be a part of rituals such as *Yorigitō* carried out in cooperation with mountain ascetics and that there was still demand for necromancy or magic, which was met by the introduction of foreign religions in the Heian period, during which people feared the curses of avenging spirits (*Goryō shinkō* 御霊信仰). This shows that the decline of female shamans meant neither the complete denial of shamanism or female religious faculty, but rather that the role of the female shaman came to be valued less. That is, female shamans were repressed if not defeated by Chinese cultural influences. Aside from the Buddhist disparagement of femaleness and contempt of (female) physicality, what else could have caused the decline of female shamans in such ways? We may well attribute that to the introduction and popularization of the belief in stars or planets especially within the concept of *yin-yang* and also esoteric Buddhism, since there is, putting sun and moon aside, not one episode to be traced in both mythologies. There was no need for it. The new cosmology now offered “better,” more sophisticated ways for direct contact with spirits or deities than those provided by the previous female religious faculty of possession. This leads us to the question to which extent the power of female shamans was exposed to the increase

of astronomical knowledge and in what way their doings were part of their connection to cosmic cycles.

5. Solidarity with Cosmic Cycles as Source of Power for Female Shamans

What is meant by “connection” is the fact that females experience cycles, especially menstruation and pregnancy, corresponding to cosmic movement. This correspondence can be interpreted as the female having a direct connection to the cosmos or to the deities who are in control of these cosmic rhythms. Is it possible that this connection functioned not only as a source of mystical power but also as a source of fear for the male? From this viewpoint, even the physical extraordinariness of the woman could be understood as a mark of being chosen.

This leads us to the relation between agriculture and the female. Mircea Eliade, in his *Traité d'histoire des religions*, describes an interesting idea:

No one doubts that agriculture was discovered by women. Man was almost always in pursuit of game, or pasturing his flocks. Woman, on the other hand, with her keen, though circumscribed, powers of observation, was in a position to watch the natural phenomena of seeds falling and growing, and to try and reproduce those phenomena artificially. And then too, because she was linked up with the other centers of cosmic fertility—Earth and the Moon—woman also became endowed with the prerogative of being able to influence and distribute fertility. That is the reason for the dominant role played by women when agriculture was in its infancy (...).⁴²⁾

In the following chapter, he argues further that the time and the rhythm of the seasons is extremely important in the religious experience of agricultural societies⁴³⁾ and that one learned only after the discovery of agriculture “the fundamental oneness of organic life.”⁴⁴⁾ About the relation with Earth and the Moon, he says that the moon, because it “waxes, wanes and disappears” represents existence, which is subject to “the universal law of becoming”⁴⁵⁾ and plays the role of “the universal measuring gauge.”⁴⁶⁾ And because the menstrual cycle is linked with the cycles of the moon which are identified with snakes and “can be personified as reptile and masculine,”⁴⁷⁾ there is also a belief that “the moon is the first mate of all women.”⁴⁸⁾ When a woman is menstruating, this means that she is “under the moon’s influence.”⁴⁹⁾ Describing the reason for the relation between Earth and woman, Eliade writes as follows:

One of the first theophanies of the earth as such, and particularly of the earth as soil, was its “motherhood,” its inexhaustible power of fruitfulness. Before becoming a mother goddess, or divinity of fertility, the earth presented itself to men as a Mother, *Tellus mater*. The later growth of agricultural cults, forming a gradually clearer and clearer notion of a Great Goddess of vegetation and harvesting, finally destroyed all trace of the Earth-Mother. (...).⁵⁰⁾

In brief, one can summarize Eliade’s opinion as follows: Woman stands in the center of the rhythm of agricultural societies because of her relationship with the Moon,

based upon the connection of the menstrual cycle and because of her relationship with Earth, based upon the analogy of fertility.

It is very unlikely that agriculture was invented by women in Japan because rice cultivation was most likely imported by Chinese immigrants to North Kyushu or South Kyushu, instead of being developed by women as Eliade argues. And it is also not certain whether there was a way of thinking about the relation between the Moon and female such as that which he describes, even if one can interpret the deity Tsukuyomi in the mythologies a belief in the Moon. However, the fact that the female experiences a cycle in her own physiology during both menstruation and pregnancy, could be interpreted as meaning that the female's existence is directly connected with or influenced by the cosmos especially the cycle respectively movement of the Sun and the Moon, or by deities who govern such cosmic cycles. If we come to the conclusion that the power of female shamans was derived from the worship of female physicality, and that this worship derived from the analogous cycles of woman and cosmos during menstruation and pregnancy, we can explain the aptitude of female for possession. The sacredness of the female exists in the relationship between their own physical cycle and that of the cosmos.

The religious significance of the woman was thus presumably eroded by the introduction of statistical astronomy, the calendar and more structured religions from China. Through the introduction of these ideas, the above mentioned privilege of female shamans was relegated to the role of a lower-positioned religious belief, surpassed by magical rituals based on belief in stars or planets which won obvious popularity since the ninth century. However, since the decline of female shamans occurred only on this point, the structure of shamanism remained and was carried out in a more sophisticated way. That could be the reason why it is frequently said that shamanism is the basic layer of Japanese religion, and that foreign religions—above all Buddhism—form the outer layer.⁵¹⁾ Interestingly, Hayami Tasuku (速水侑) argues in his book *Heian kizoku-shakai to bukkyō* (平安貴族社会と仏教) that the Buddhist idea of hell (地獄) as one of the other world was not taken seriously among the aristocrats,⁵²⁾ concluding that the religious interest of the then Japanese people would have been mostly to make the best use of practical aspects of religion, in other words the practice of astronomical knowledge was such a shift in the way of meeting their spiritual demand. The transformation of the main role of *yin-yang* diviners in the Heian period from that of astronomer to that of sorcerer could also be because of such religious tendency. The decline of ancient shamanism centered on female shamans was therefore only the defeat of older religious beliefs based on communal life corresponding to cosmic cycles opposite new, not to say fashionable revelations from China representing also a different style in social life and politics. It is only through the Ritsuryō-system that we come to understand the way the Fujiwara family exerted its influence on the imperial house by establishing systematically kinship and making use of hereditary positions as regents for the sovereign.

The female shaman's relationship with cosmic cycles explains the reason for the historical transition to their decline and for the fact that demand for direct contacts with deities remained in spite of the introduction of foreign religions, which seems to build a character of Japanese religiousness. The revival of female shamanism in new

religions since the nineteenth century could also be based on the fact that they belong to the sex which corresponds to cosmic movements, since the physical extraordinariness of the woman still functions as an explanation of her sacredness.

6. Conclusion

The discussion of the influence and power of female shamans in Japan's early history, and to some extent within new religions in recent times, has often simply been characterized as stemming from psychological factors such as a special aptitude on the part of women for experiencing ecstasy, certainly a phenomenon associated with possession, or from physical characteristics connected to prayer for fertility. However, both of these hypotheses are based on so-called conventional wisdom and lack further analysis of concrete relationships between the factors under discussion. Through an investigation of two mythological narratives recorded in two Japanese chronicles from the early eighth century, we have learned about the earliest religions of Japanese people. From these chronicles we can ascertain that there was already a boundary between possessed female shamans and non-possessed male diviners at that time. It was in Japan's ancient rice growing society of the Yayoi and early Kofun period when females occupied a higher position because of their social and religious role in their community. The process of the female shamans' decline started after the introduction of Chinese culture and Chinese institutions as opposed to the previously existing agricultural society, when commonality with cosmic movements was a simple fact of life for man. Within this context, female physicality had corresponded with such cosmic periods via the analogy of menstruation and pregnancy. Thus the main source of the female aptitude for possession was the female body's direct connection to the cosmos or the deities ruling it.

Adoption of Chinese culture thereafter was a political decision, certainly of religious consequence, but now popularizing Buddhist concepts, extending also to *yin-yang* diviners, esoteric monks and mountain ascetics who commanded sophisticated magic and rituals to meet the demands of people fearful of avenging spirits. It is during the Heian period that the decline of female shamans becomes clearly evident, though this does not mean the decline of shamanism itself. Rather, the position of the female was subordinated to that of the male. During this development, the advanced, intricate astronomical knowledge and structured religions from China surpassed the power of female shamans. It may well be hypothesized that this phenomenon occurred through the introduction and popularization of the belief that stars or planets are central factors. For example, within *yin-yang*, opposite female physical faculties who became part of this new concept and thus lost its former influence. Research on this issue should be continued, in order to clarify the character and phenomenal transformation of shamanism in Japan, which will also give us a further clue to the relationship between the Japanese people's idea of luck and auspicious manifestations as well as Japan's religious structure throughout history.

Notes

- 1) *Ryōjin hishō* [梁塵秘抄], in *Nihon koten zensho* [日本古典全書], (Tokyo: Asahi shinbunsha, 1962), 157.
- 2) Horii Ichirō 堀一郎, *Minkan shinkō-shi no shomondai* [民間信仰史の諸問題], (Tokyo: Miraisha, 1973),

- 179.
- 3) Ibid., 179–195.
 - 4) See Sakurai Tokutarō 桜井徳太郎, *Reikon-kan no keifu* [靈魂観の系譜], (Tokyo: Chikuma shobō, 1977), 105.
 - 5) Ibid., 121.
 - 6) See Yamakami Izumo 山上伊豆母, *Miko no rekishi* [巫女の歴史], (Tokyo: Yūzankaku shuppan, 1980), 36 and 107.
 - 7) See Yamakami, *ibid.*, 12.
 - 8) Ueda Masaaki 上田正昭, *Nihon shinwa* [日本神話], (Tokyo: Iwanami shoten, 1970), 87.
 - 9) See Ōbayashi Taryō 大林太良, *Nihon shinwa no kigen* [日本神話の起源], (Tokyo: Kadokawa shoten, 1961), 239.
 - 10) Ienaga Saburō 家永三郎, *Nihon bunka-shi* [日本文化史], (Tokyo: Iwanami shoten, 1992), 34–35.
 - 11) See Ueda, *Nihon shinwa*, 122; Yamakami, *Miko no rekishi*, 92; Helen Hardacre, “The Shaman and her Transformations: The Construction of Gender in Motifs of Religious Action,” in Wakita Haruko et al. eds., *Gender and Japanese History*, vol. 1, *Religion and Customs / The Body and Sexuality*, (Osaka: Osaka University Press, 1999), 93–94.
 - 12) *Kojiki*: Book One, Chapter 17, 84. See also *Nihongi*: Book I, Age of the Gods Part I, 44.
 - 13) *Nihongi*: Book II, Age of the Gods Part II, 77. See also *Kojiki*: Book One, Chapter 38, 138.
 - 14) *Kojiki*: Book One, Chapter 40, 143.
 - 15) *Nihongi*: Book V, Sūjin Tennō, 152.
 - 16) *Nihongi*: Book V, Sūjin Tennō, 158–159.
 - 17) *Nihongi*: Book VI, Suinin Tennō, 176. See also *Kojiki*: Book Two, Chapter 69, 212.
 - 18) Tanigawa Kenichi 谷川健一, *Nihon no kamigami* [日本の神々], (Tokyo: Iwanami shoten, 1999), 121.
 - 19) *Kojiki*: Book Two, Chapter 92, 257–258. See also *Nihongi*: Book VIII, Chūai, 221–223.
 - 20) *Kojiki*: Book Two, Chapter 93, 260. See also *Nihongi*: IX, Jingō Kōgo, 224–225.
 - 21) *Kojiki*: Book One, Chapter 35, 130–131. See also *Nihongi*: Book II, The Age of the Gods Part II, 76.
 - 22) See Kurano Kenji 倉野憲司, *Kojiki* [古事記], (Tokyo: Iwanami shoten, 1991), 61.
 - 23) Ueda, *Nihon shinwa*, 182–184.
 - 24) In *Nihon shoki* the deity which is stated as his father, is Ōmononushi: “ (...) If thou wilt cause me to be worshipped by my child, Oho-tata-neko, then will there be peace at once. (...) He (= The emperor) then inquired of Oho-tata-neko, saying: —“Whose child art thou?” He answered and said: —“My father’s name is Oho-mono-nushi no Ohokami. (...)” (*Nihongi*: Book V, Sūjin Tennō, 153).
 - 25) *Kojiki*: Book Two, Chapter 65, 201–202. See also *Nihongi*: Book V, Sūjin Tennō, 152–153.
 - 26) See Hardacre, *ibid.*, 93.
 - 27) Kuratsuka Akiko 倉塚暁子, *Miko no bunka* [巫女の文化], (Tokyo: Heibonsha, 1979), 280–281.
 - 28) Nishiguchi Junko 西口順子, *Onna no chikara: Kodai no josei to Bukkyō* [女の力: 古代の女性と仏教], (Tokyo: Heibonsha, 1987), 247.
 - 29) See *Nihongi*: Book VIII, Chūai, IX, Jingū, 221–226. However, in *Nihon shoki*, *Saniwa* is not Takeuchino-sukune, but “Nakatomi, Igatsu no Omi” (225).
 - 30) See Yamakami, *Miko no rekishi*, 42–44.
 - 31) Tsunoda Ryūsaku et al., *Sources of Japanese Tradition*, vol. 1, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1958), 6. “(...) 鬼道に事え、能く衆を惑わす。年已に長大なるも、夫婦なく、男弟あり、佐けて国を治む。王となりしより以来、見るある者少なく、婢千人を以て自ら侍せしむ。ただ男子一人あり、飲食を給し、辞を伝え居処に出入す。 (...)” Ishihara Michihiro 石原道博 ed., *Shintei Gishi wajin den* [新訂 魏志倭人伝 他三篇], Iwanami bunko 青401-1, (Tokyo: Iwanami shoten, 2007), 49. “(...) 鬼道能惑衆年已長大無夫婦有男弟佐治國自為王以来少有見者以婢千人自侍唯有男子一人給飲食傳辭出入居処 (...)” *ibid.*, 112.
 - 32) Ibid.
 - 33) Hori, *Minkan shinkō-shi no shomondai*, 59.
 - 34) See Yasuda Yukiko 安田夕希子, *Kegare kō: Nihon ni okeru kegare no shisō to sono tenkai* [穢れ考: 日本における穢れの思想とその展開], (Tokyo: ICU Hikaku Bunka Kenkyūkai, 2000), 22.
 - 35) See Sakurai, *Reikon-kan no keifu*, 121.
 - 36) Ibid.

- 37) Ibid., 163.
- 38) Hori, *Minkan shinkō-shi no shomondai*, 156.
- 39) See Sakurai, *Reikon-kan no keifu*, 112–124.
- 40) Yamaori Tetsuo 山折哲雄, *Nihonjin no reikon-kan* [日本人の靈魂観], (Tokyo: Kawade shobō, 1976), 205.
- 41) See Miyake Hitoshi 宮家準, “Shugendō to shāmanizumu” [修験道とシャーマニズム] in Kato Kyūzō 加藤九祚 ed., *Nihon no shāmanizumu to sono shūhen* [日本のシャーマニズムとその周辺], (Tokyo: Nihon hōsō shuppan kyōkai, 1984), 51–67.
- 42) Mircea Eliade, *Patterns in Comparative Religion*, translated by Rosemary Sheed, (London & New York: Sheed and Ward, 1958), 257.
- 43) Ibid., 331.
- 44) Ibid., 361.
- 45) Ibid., 154.
- 46) Ibid., 155.
- 47) Ibid., 167.
- 48) Ibid., 166.
- 49) Ibid., 168.
- 50) Ibid., 245.
- 51) See Hagiwara Tatsuo 萩原龍夫, *Miko to Bukkyō-shi: Kumano bikuni no shimei to tenkai* [巫女と仏教史: 熊野比丘尼の使命と展開], (Tokyo: Yoshikawa kōbunkan, 1983), 2.
- 52) Hayami Tasuku 速水侑, *Heian kizoku-shakai to bukyō* [平安貴族社会と仏教], (Tokyo: Yoshikawa kōbunkan, 1975), 256.