

KOBAYASHI Naoko

The Necessity of Gender Perspective in Folk Religious Studies

Focusing on Female Practitioners

It is difficult for women to undertake ascetic practices (*shugyō*) in Japanese society. First, traditional teachings such as the so-called five obstacles (*goshō*) and the notion of blood as pollution (*ketsue*) are mobilized to prevent women from entering sacred spaces and states. Second, if a woman is married, she will immediately encounter major barriers to the completion of her ascetic training. This creates the challenge of maintaining the role of housewife at home while also undertaking the training. In contrast, male practitioners (*gyōja*) are less likely to encounter such problems, even if they have a family. There is an asymmetry at play based on gender differences: this becomes clear through an analysis of gender dynamics. This paper critically examines how folk studies (*minzokugaku*) and folk religious studies (*minzoku shūkyō kenkyū*) have depicted female religious practitioners. It will then discuss the need to cultivate an awareness of gender dynamics by researchers and religious authorities, and will explore the possibility of achieving gender equality in religious groups.

KEYWORDS: gender—folk studies—*minzokugaku*—mountain devotion—female practitioners—patriarchal systems

KOBAYASHI Naoko is an Associate Professor in the Department of Religious Culture and Faculty of Letters at Aichi Gakuen University. Her research interests include mountain religions, gender, and ethnography.

ONE DAY in the summer of 2018 a confraternity devoted to the mountain Kiso Ontake 木曾御嶽 and based in Aichi Prefecture announced the name of a new person—a woman—who would enter a special ascetic path. It was also on this day that a memorial service (*kuyōsai* 供養祭) was held for Tengyoku Reijin 天玉靈神, who had presided over the organization from the end of World War II until 1975. Tengyoku Reijin was apotheosized as a numinous spirit (*reijin* 靈神) following her death and has been worshipped down to the present as the confraternity's most revered ancestral deity. During her lifetime, she served the role of the *nakaza* 中座 (spirit medium) in the Ontake confraternity's *oza* 御座 ritual (in which a deity descends into the body of a medium). After her death, she became a spirit who descended into the body of the *nakaza* and provided oracles. On this day, Tengyoku Reijin descended to the seat of the *oza* and provided the following oracle through the woman who had just been introduced as the new *nakaza*.

As for the woman whose body serves the kami, I will respond to her request for assistance. Nevertheless, practice for a woman (*onago* おなご) is sevenfold that of a man (*onoko* おのこ). It is a chosen path of hardship and suffering....

A woman's ascetic practice requires the difficult task of severing herself from everything ... thus we cannot overlook our experience as female practitioners.

This oracle concerned the severity and guardianship of this particular role, transmitted from one woman who chose another woman for this path. The words, “practice for a woman is sevenfold that of a man” alongside “a woman's practice requires the difficult task of severing herself from everything,” speak to that hardship and suffering. In other words, one's gender significantly determines the level of difficulty in practice.

What does this sevenfold amount of “hardship and suffering,” alongside the act of severing oneself from everything, refer to? When I later asked the president of the organization (a male guide, or *sendatsu* 先達, in his fifties), he replied, “The challenge for women begins with the ‘five obstacles’ and the difficulty of achieving buddhahood.” As an Ontakekyō 御嶽教 confraternity, this organization was formerly one of the thirteen modern sects of sectarian Shinto (Kyōha Shintō 教派神道) and thus performs Shinto-style rituals. That said, for him the greatest challenge facing women was premised on a Buddhist reference to the so-called five obstacles, namely the teaching that those born as women cannot become Brahma kings, incarnations of the god Śakra, Māra kings, wheel-

turning sage kings (*tenrin jōō* 転輪聖王; Skt. *cakravartin*), or buddhas.¹ He then noted an added challenge for female practitioners: “The stress of being unable to engage with the gods during their time of red impurity (menstruation)—cumulatively seventy to eighty days out of the year, or two years out of every ten—in which they cannot perform the duties of their practice (which includes private rituals at home).”

What other obstacles exist? In considering the life of Tengenoku Reijin, we can postulate several. When she chose the ascetic path, she personally decided to not marry or have a family. In contrast, the woman selected for this event had a family and was raising children. I interpret the impossibility of “severing oneself from everything” as a reference to keeping a household and family, alongside the various Confucian-based obligations of a woman (as wife, daughter, and mother). It is difficult for a woman with such commitments to undergo numerous training sessions at night, spend long periods of seclusion in the mountains, and perform any number of duties and ritual ceremonies every month, all the while maintaining a household and raising children. I have met a number of female practitioners, but given the demands that this lifestyle places on one’s family, many opt out, making the number of them who pursue life-long devotion small (KOBAYASHI 2007).

In contrast, what is it like for male practitioners? Rarely have I encountered one who deliberately chose to stay single for the purpose of his religious practice. Furthermore, I often hear male practitioners lament over lost family time in the face of training sessions that include weekends, holidays, and sometimes extend through the night.² Yet I rarely hear of them “suffering” over having to

1. Translator’s note: The five obstacles (*goshō* 五障) refers to a passage in the “Devadatta” chapter of the *Lotus Sūtra* when the daughter of a dragon king announces her aim to attain buddhahood. The buddha’s disciple Śāriputra responds by declaring that a woman cannot reach five pinnacles of existence. While she ultimately proves him wrong (transforming into a buddha in front of him), the narrative was widely invoked in Japan as evidence of women’s inferiority. Before the disassociation of buddhas and kami (*shinbutsu bunri* 神仏分離) in 1868, Ontake confraternities were not designated as Shinto. They drew heavily from Buddhist rituals and concepts, and this influence remained after the confraternities’ official designation changed to sectarian Shinto.

2. Male practitioners who were active in the Ontake confraternities of western Aichi Prefecture from the Meiji through Showa eras were known for “discarding their families” in order to exclusively pursue their practice (*shugyō* 修行) of helping others. On the other hand, suppose the wife of the male practitioners, in hoping to better understand his practice, followed her husband in the performance of pouring water on oneself (a type of water ritual intended to assist others outside of their family). If he entered the river to perform the ritual and she followed by doing the same, he would most likely scold her for it. Moreover, men who fully devoted themselves to practice at the expense of their families (following the ascetic ideal of discarding the family) were forever revered and praised as highly virtuous ascetics, while their wives were forgotten to history.

maintain both a family and their religious practice. If we apply this issue to general society, many women struggle to maintain household tasks, childcare, and possibly parental elderly care on top of a career (that many ultimately give up as a result). This is rarely the case for men. In Japanese society, a woman who chooses the ascetic path immediately faces the double bind of a gendered expectation that she will also continue as the principal caregiver in her family.

An additional cause of this “hardship and suffering” resides within the male-centered social sphere of practitioners. Female practitioners on the same level as their male counterparts find themselves on the receiving end of discriminatory treatment and suffer as a result of the inferior position they are placed in. While Tengyoku Reijin did serve a long tenure as the second president of the organization, many members initially argued that a man should lead them. Restricting their options to men, they proposed male disciples who had limited experience in actual practice. Tengyoku Reijin strongly opposed this and ultimately succeeded in taking the position.

It is noteworthy that Tengyoku Reijin was the premier disciple of the previous president. Should she have been male, one can expect that her accession to president would have gone unimpeded. As a woman, moreover, if she had been married or had a family at the time, she would have most likely removed herself (or been removed) from the field of possible successors. In fact, that happened to a female practitioner known as Kakusuehime Reijin 覚末媛靈神 (1893–1975) who had served as Tengyoku Reijin’s *maeza* 前座 (the one who ritually manages the descent of a spirit into the *nakaza*). Kakusuehime Reijin, who was married, demonstrated extraordinary powers in recovering lost objects and performing healing rituals during her lifetime. She had a great number of devotees, yet despite their support as well as her renowned abilities, Kakusuehime Reijin was not called on to become the organization’s president on the basis of her gender and expected family obligations. In other words, it became a typical example of a broader pattern in religious organizations whereby male practitioners dominate the outward public sphere (ROSALDO 1974, 23).

Facing beliefs about the five obstacles and blood impurity alongside the household expectations of women, all within a male-centered social sphere of practitioners, Tengyoku Reijin’s oracle points to the fact that acute elements of suffering and hardship not experienced by her male counterparts would shape her experience. Yet a hint of resignation was audible in the oracle in that the suffering and hardship endured by women that came before her in the Meiji 明治 (1868–1912) and Showa 昭和 (1926–89) periods continues for women down to the present.

This article explores the realm of mountain worship and activities of practitioners within the scope of Japan’s field of folk studies, giving special consideration to the historical circumstances of female practitioners through the

perspective of gender. Male centrism remains deeply rooted within the patriarchal structures and customs of mountain devotion (*sangaku shinkō* 山岳信仰). I will investigate the problems and inherent biases that arise from gender difference and asymmetry within the realm of mountain worship by considering how power structures are produced out of such gendered relations. Moreover, I wish to critically examine the scholarly depiction and treatment of women in this religious sphere by taking into account the position of the researcher and the methods used by ethnologists who have shaped the study of mountain worship and its practitioners. Finally, while reflecting on my own position as a scholar, I will reflect on the necessity for scholars and practitioners to reexamine how religious groups might achieve gender equality.

The Problem of Sexuality for Female Practitioners

There continues to be a deeply held conviction that female practitioners have special abilities and experiences that differ from ordinary people simply by being women. Yanagita Kunio's 柳田国男 (1875–1962) explanations of “women’s spiritual power” (*onna no reiryoku* 女の靈力) and “female spiritual superiority” (*josei no reiteki yūisei* 女性の靈的優位性) have long been taken as self-evident in the field of folk studies. Furthermore, it is widely believed that this ability is based on women’s reproductive capacity and that this physiology is somehow fundamental to womanhood. The same is true in religious studies, which adopted ethnological research methods.

In regard to female ritualists, Yanagita Kunio theorized that *onari* オナリ worship in Ryūkyū 琉球, whereby sisters spiritually protect their brothers, and their relative superiority in these religious rituals, served as the foundation of ancient forms of worship in Japan. He proposed that women’s “unique physiology” in regard to bearing and raising children “made them especially suitable to “seeing and listening to the kami” (YANAGITA 1998, 254, 269). Inheriting these ideas, many scholars have coupled women’s physical ability to bear children with their spiritual power and channeling of kami (*kami gakari* 神がかり).

Yanagita’s student, Orikuchi Shinobu 折口信夫 (1887–1953), likewise regarded female mediums (*miko* 巫女) as wives of the kami and viewed “menstruation as a sign of the kami’s voice,” thereby linking female ritualists to women’s physiology (ORIKUCHI 1985, 466; 1970, 143). Orikuchi’s contemporary Nakayama Tarō 中山太郎 (1876–1947) remarked that “menstrual blood was treated as taboo material that should not be handled or approached” but also used by “a great many female mediums” in their incantatory rituals (*jujutsu* 呪術). Further, “it goes without saying that most women have highly receptive and sensitive (*shinkei-teki* 神經的; glossed as “hysterical”) dispositions in comparison to men and are thus more likely to be spirit mediums” (NAKAYAMA [1930]2012, 163, 75).

Indeed, there was widespread discourse at the time linking women's hysteria to menstruation by claiming the latter itself was the cause (ŌTA 2008).

Postwar folk studies have continued to speak about women in essentialized terms. Miyata Noburu attempted to revise the discriminatory notion of pollution (*kegare*) in Yanagita Kunio's theory of "sister power" yet ended up proposing that menstruation "aligns with women's productive nature ... signifying its high cultural value" and that "a mother's ability to birth and raise children demonstrates an unusual power" (MIYATA 2006, 26). In his chapter, "What Was the State of Existence for Women in Ancient Times?," NISHIGAI Kenji (2012, 11) more recently argues that "if we look to primordial worship in respect to Japan's ancient cultural foundation (*kisō bunka* 基層文化), menstruation was not viewed as impure (with the colors red and white symbolizing impurity), yet we must recognize other special qualities of women besides this characteristic." Taking the examples of *miko* 神女 and *itako* イタコ (blind spirit mediums), these theories link together a woman's ability to bear children with "the female medium's unification with the kami."

In contrast to these views on the reproductive capability and spiritual power of women, the notion of "female practitioners" seeking marriage or raising children is met with surprise and incredulity. Do married male practitioners with children face the same sort of reaction? Most male clergy are married with families, yet the majority of female clergy remain single (often compelled to do so) in ways that resemble the historical norms once maintained by established Buddhist organizations.³ Furthermore, there is an image of celibate life as virginal and pure, and the *rejection* of married life as romanticized and admired. If either image becomes fractured, however, the woman is the object of criticism. The Sōtō Zen nun, Iijima Keidō 飯島恵道, who was raised in a convent, has written that she unconsciously absorbed the refrains that "nuns cannot marry," "married nuns are defiled," and "nuns who marry should return to lay life" to the extent that she believed that marriage for her as a nun was out of the question (IIJIMA 2017, 83).

In similar fashion, many female *nakaza* (who receive divine spirits into their bodies) in Ontake confraternities (like the aforementioned Tengyoku Reijin) remain unmarried. The reason lies in the ideal that they must remain single and protect their chastity if they are to receive kami into their bodies. In contrast, it is deemed neither negative nor compromising for men performing the role of *nakaza* to marry and maintain a sex life.

Up through the twenty-first century, there were female practitioners serving as *nakaza* for the spirit of Kōbō Daishi 弘法大師 (Kūkai 空海; 774–835) for a

3. Translator's note: Legalization of clerical marriage in the Meiji period led to an increase in married clerics, and Shin Buddhist priests have long married.

Kōbō confraternity in the Chūbu region, but their performance of these possession rituals was also enlisted by Ontake confraternities in the area (KOBAYASHI 2013, 274). Women born between approximately the latter half of the Meiji through the early Taishō 大正 period (1890s–1910s) were especially prominent in this role. The majority of them remained single and resided in Shingon temples for nuns (*andera* 庵寺). One woman whom I studied resided in one such temple in the Nakagawa 中川 district of Nagoya City where she worked with the Kōbō and Ontake confraternities. As a female practitioner, she lived from the early Taishō period until her death in 2006 and never married. She received the spirit of Kōbō Daishi and acted as a medium for conversations between her followers and his spirit.

The English feminist scholar of religion Ursula King has argued that women rarely abandon normative familial roles (wife, mother, and so on) in order to pursue religious lives or alternatively, commit to marriage and children if they are already religious ritualists (KING 1995, 16). However, it is well known that men regularly act as ritualists and religious specialists while simultaneously maintaining their roles as husbands and fathers.

As discussed above, some female religious specialists remain single for the purpose of their ascetic practice, while others feel no choice but to marry in response to certain social expectations. As another example, one female ritualist (1928–2009) in my field observations served as a *nakaza* in the northwestern region of Aichi Prefecture. She remained single for many years in order to fully carry out her practice. However, when a younger man eventually became her disciple, she was told that “it would be frowned upon to have a younger man frequenting the home of an unmarried woman.” As a result, she ended up marrying for the purpose of outward appearances.

Female Practitioners Within a “Patriarchal Society”

I have shown how narratives of hardship, misfortune, and sorrow within the family and household are treated as the essence of the female practitioner’s circumstances and that her rigorous ascetism is often romanticized as a response to those circumstances (KOBAYASHI 2016, 43–68). Within a male-centered and patriarchal society, however, it should be apparent that it is not the qualification of practitioner (*gyōja* 行者) that coincides with misfortune and sorrow but rather that of gender, namely female, where the majority of these cases arise.

Following from Yanagita’s notions of “women’s spiritual power” and “sister power,” Okinawa ethnologist Iha Fuyū 伊波普猷 argues that the figure of the mother possesses great spiritual acumen and can thus communicate the affairs of the gods. While Iha held Yanagita in great esteem, constitutional scholar Wakao Noriko has countered that their theories about women are pointedly

antagonistic (WAKAO 1994, 3). She notes that Yanagita idealized women as, in his own words, “matrons to the *ie* [patriarchal institution of the family] of the past generations of society,” remarking that “women’s existence centered within the *ie* in ancient times” and that “behind every prosperous household was a powerful woman” (YANAGITA 1963, 325). In sum, he felt that women served the patriarch of the *ie* by, as WAKAO (1989, 192) puts it, “managing the household with their entire being,” and fulfilling “the core duties of housework and raising children that intimately tied them to the *ie*.” If Yanagita idealized women as matrons to the *ie* and mothers as possessors of great spiritual ability, Iha took these ideas one step further. Pressing the case beyond Okinawan women, he attributed a woman’s spiritual ability to the philandering behavior of the husband. As WAKAO (1994, 11) recounts, Iha argued that “ignoring the wife’s personhood and inflicting such pain” enabled the kami to descend into her. Under such logic, “the basis of a woman’s religious capabilities reside in the lived pain of her personhood, which is defined by her gender,” and in practical terms, “this reveals the true face of the actual problems experienced by Okinawan women.” In sum, for Yanagita, a woman’s personhood was based on their role as ideal homemakers for patriarchal heads, while for Iha, it was a question of “how a woman’s personhood related to her sense of self” and this rested on “her limited range of individual authority” (WAKAO 1994, 3; 1989, 201).

Iha’s explanation of the mother is telling when we turn to the issue of female practitioners in mountain worship. Although some female practitioners are married, many turned to ascetic practice as a means to either escape the oppression and violence they suffered from their husbands or the problems stemming from their husbands’ financial debts and philandering. In other words, we cannot assume that women simply enter ascetic practice for religious reasons but are often attempting to unburden themselves of the various problems they face in their male-dominated households.

I recently gained a telling revelation in my fieldwork. The research concerned a female practitioner who, born at the end of the Meiji era in the western district of Nagoya City, had led a confraternity in the area that was connected to Kōbō Daishi and Ontake confraternities. I was interviewing her descendants, who reside in the same house where she spent her life. Impressed by all of the records in the sanctuary within their home attesting to her mountain worship, I asked, “What was the driving motivation behind your grandmother’s devotion and practice?” to which one turned to the other and remarked, “Well, I suppose that our grandfather’s philandering was a factor.” For a moment, I was perplexed by this unexpected response, though this was not the first time I had heard of female practitioners from this era with similar circumstances. After all, this was a time in which men regularly engaged in prostitution within the same urban space they co-inhabited with their mothers, wives, and daughters

(YOKOTA 2014, 164).⁴ One cannot overlook the circumstances in which real suffering caused by their husbands may have increased their perserverance in religious life. Moreover, this suffering most likely extended beyond just female practitioners to many other women of that era.

The popularization of prostitution and the solicitation of sex in the modern era was deeply entangled with another emergent concept: a new model for women as “good wives and wise mothers” with an emphasis on biological reproduction for the sake of the modern family and *ie* (YOKOTA 2016). Many middle-aged men in modern Japan held the “double-standard notion that they should seek good wives who will serve as wise mothers, as they simultaneously—and unproblematically—engage with prostitutes” (YOKOTA 2014, 165–66). Iha also found the prostitution to be interwoven into the modern family structure (IHA 1975, 52–53), yet as the head of the household during this time, the man oversaw the lifestyles of his female family members and regulated their sexual conduct in ways that did not apply to his own sexual freedom.

Citing the legendary accounts of mountain-based communities in Yanagita Kunio’s *Tōno monogatari* 遠野物語 (1910), cultural anthropologist Funabiki Takeo 船曳建夫 has suggested alternative readings to stories from “deep in the mountains” that seemingly reflect “tragedies of abduction” and “variant marriages’ (*irui kon* 異類婚) with beings from a ‘strange realm’ (*ikai* 異界) that make return home impossible” (FUNABIKI 2000, 23). Instead, if we change the orientation of the story away from the mountains and to the plains, we can detect other motives driving women from their homes into the mountains. Indeed, women in the nineteenth century held “little authority in the home, endured difficult labor conditions,” and “could not escape abusive marriages.” In particular, in the eighth tale from *Tōno monogatari* on the “Old woman from Samuto 寒戸,” a “young daughter loses her whereabouts after removing her sandals under a pear tree.” This can be read as an “account of escape” by a girl fleeing a painful life, giving the tale a “modern” shade of a Meiji-era incident. “Taking the words literally, she realized her own departure from the home (*shukke* 出家)” (all quotes from FUNABIKI 2000, 24). In other words, *Tōno monogatari* is not simply a collection of strange and mysterious tales about *yuki onna* 雪女, *kappa* 河童, and *tengu* 天狗 passed down in the Tōno 遠野 region of Iwate Prefecture. We might

4. Yokota’s study of male patrons in the modern-era pleasure industry examines patron lists from brothels. These lists included the names, addresses, ages, occupations, appearances, visiting hours, monetary amounts of consumption, and assigned prostitutes of the patrons. The results from these records reveal that the number of men soliciting prostitution in large cities rose dramatically in the 1910s and 1920s, with the trend extending to surrounding agricultural villages by the 1930s. He refers to this stage of expansion as one of “prostitution for the masses” (*taishū baishun shakai* 大衆買春社会), in other words, a society in which most middle-aged men patronized the pleasure industry on a monthly basis.

additionally think of them as offering a glimpse into the social conditions of Tōno's "flatlands," surrounded by mountains, at the time of its compilation. Funabiki advises us to look beyond the romanticized "story tale" (*monogatari*) to the "real talk" (*jissai no hanashi*) uttered in the background.

As mentioned above, female practitioners have not been the only women facing the uneven obligations to family and household. Their circumstances indicate a broader problem for women in male-dominated traditional family structures. This issue is not simply limited to the family but extends to regional associations and religious organizations, with influences that are deeply rooted in all aspects of life today.

In July of 2006, I met a female practitioner of Shugendō 修験道 (mountain asceticism) in her twenties during a period of ritual asceticism. Influenced by her grandfather, who had been a member of the group, she joined the group's practice of seclusion in the mountains. At the time of our meeting, it was her fourth year undertaking this practice. She explained to me that her father ruled over the family with violence, inflicting it upon her and her brothers. She had quit her job and left her home in order to take up mountain seclusionary practices and was certainly relieved to be freed from her father's abuse. Nonetheless, she found herself utterly exhausted during periods of seclusion. When asked about it, she confided,

I'm delighted when I face the kami and buddhas. Yet there are times when I wonder if I'm being exploited in my practice [by the group]. I'm so busy I barely have time to stand up—it's painful.... [It's like I came for the kami and buddhas but] can't overcome my suffering without feeling delusional.

The group is mostly comprised of male priests and practitioners, with a leadership of only men. When I attended the banquet following the entire ritual program, I observed her frantically pouring rounds of alcohol for the group's leaders. She bluntly told me that I should also pour them drinks. The reason, in her words, is that they "remember if you don't come and pour them alcohol" and will treat you coldly thereafter. Despite leaving her home to pursue this path, she could not escape the duty of pouring alcohol. In short, the conditions this Shugendō organization subjected her to in some ways mirrored the patriarchal family structure she had left. Incidentally, one of the male leaders asked me at the banquet, "How can we attract more female practitioners?" While I was tempted to respond that "no woman is pleased with a group that assumes she should pour alcohol for the male leadership," the experience gave me a glimpse into the patriarchal structure to which this Shugendō order was still bound. Speaking again later with the female practitioner, she continued to describe the joy she experienced from "facing the kami and buddhas," though I was concerned about her unusually high level of fatigue. Later, in a devastating update

from an older female practitioner in the group, I learned that she had taken her own life.

There are other women in that order who style themselves as female practitioners. While they do not undergo the austerities of mountain seclusion like her, they do participate in other rituals, memorial rites, and special events while maintaining a normal life at home. Among them are several women who have suffered from domestic violence by their husbands or divorced them as a result. It is not that women who are subjected to these forms of abuse gain some sort of spiritual elevation in the process, as Iha posited. These are simply the problems that many women experience in their daily lives.

The Static Image of Women in Folk Studies and the Need for Gender Perspective

As mentioned above, it is invalid to view female practitioners as preordained “strange others (*ishitsu no tasha* 異質な他者)” whose religious lives were somehow predetermined and distinct from other women. It is also undeniable that scholars—including me—who have made these women the object of their research, collected their stories, and described them, have unknowingly constructed a static image of female practitioners (KAWAHASHI 2012, 58). In order to move beyond this inaccurate depiction, it is essential for us, as scholars, to be aware of the power disparities that lie between researcher and interlocutor, alongside a gender perspective that encourages self-reflection.⁵ Furthermore, it is incumbent on us to “constantly look back at our work with reflexivity and ask ourselves what we are speaking about, from what standpoint, and for what purpose” (KAWAHASHI 2012, 60; KAWAHASHI 2019a, 20).

These challenges, of course, extend to the general public. What I observe as an ethnographer is the authority I am granted every time I present my business card. On countless occasions, I have noticed the response I receive when the recipient of my card reads my title of associate professor in contrast to my time as a graduate student. Moreover, the times in which I have observed a group of only men serving as the central performers in folk rituals and festivals in Japan are overwhelmingly prevalent. In order for fieldwork to proceed unhindered, one must receive recognition and approval by these men. Yet I have often overheard on my first visit words to the effect of, “I heard a researcher was coming, but it’s a woman?” A female acquaintance involved in editing a book on the folk history of a certain region that had been organized by the municipal government relayed a similarly painful experience. At the time of research, she

5. For example, Nagaoka Takashi notes in a response to my work that I lacked critical awareness over the authority inherent in my role as a researcher when working with female practitioners in the field (NAGAOKA 2018).

overheard the older male representatives of the site's shrine and temple parishioners bemoan the fact that a woman had come. Such experiences are rare for male university professors. And yet that cold reception disappears for me after introducing myself with my business card. At once, the atmosphere changes as I hear, "Ah, she is a university professor!" Each time, I am acutely aware of the authority and ability to conduct research that my business card and title bring.

Another issue concerns the advantages and disadvantages of a "woman's perspective" in ethnography. Compared with other fields of research, ethnologists in Japan early on paid significant attention to the lives of women. This is primarily because women were often situated at the margins of society instead of the centers of political and administrative authority. As a result, their lives became important vectors for understanding the history and traditions of quotidian life and culture. Yanagita Kunio himself encouraged women to enter folk studies, and in stressing the importance of a "women's perspective," contributed to the development of female scholars. A meeting between him and Segawa Kiyoko 瀬川清子 (1895–1984) led to the establishment of the Josei Minzoku Kenkyūkai 女性民俗研究会 (Women's Folk Studies Society of Japan), which continues to publish the journal *Josei to keiken* 女性と経験 (Women and Experience) today.

Segawa was born into a samurai family from a southern domain. Her family was on the decline, her ancestors having fought against the shogunate in the lead up to the Meiji Restoration. Without working men present at home, she learned how to earn a wage to help support her family from a young age. As a result of this upbringing, she came to take a great interest in the working women of mountain and fishing villages (OKADA 2012, 36). In her portrayal of the women of these rural areas, however, Segawa sentimentally described them as "healthy and wise"—an ideal type constructed in her time—in contrast with the wives of salaried men in the cities (HASEGAWA 2013, 31). In short, her writings leave the impression that she found the women (and their lifestyles) of villages to be superior to women in the cities. The ethnographer Tsuru Rieko 鶴理恵子, who takes a feminist stance and has argued for the need to address gender, points out that "while Japanese folk studies has been applauded as a liberal field for its early investigation of women," the image of women from mountain and fishing villages has been constructed out of a "bias of them as strong and hard-working" (TSURU 2013, 15–16). Nevertheless, neither Segawa nor Tsuru questioned why women were absent from village meetings and shrine committees that they themselves attended. Furthermore, neither reflected on why *nenbutsu* 念仏 and child-protecting sororities (*koyasu kō* 子安講) were comprised of only women (TSURU 2013, 16). In short, when it comes to research on women, even if a female scholar conducts her research from a so-called woman's perspective, it is difficult to erase the fixed image of women that has been depicted within folk

studies. This misperception ultimately ends up obscuring the marginalization and imbalance of gender issues that exist in the real world.

The volume *Onna no me de miru minzokugaku* 女の眼で見る民俗学 (Folk Studies Through the Eyes of Women), edited by Nakamura Hiroko 中村ひろ子 and others, was published in 1999. Its aim was to “reexamine the field of women’s folk studies through the lens of gender,” as co-editor MIYATA Noboru (1999, 216) put it. Nevertheless, the first chapter, titled “Onna ni naru” (Becoming a Woman), begins with female coming-of-age rituals before introducing the themes of marriage, childbirth, raising children, women’s finances, homemaking, and death as the main issues in the book—in other words, content no different from previous research on women in Japanese folk studies. The volume does contain discussions on issues of gender like asymmetry between men and women, but in its concluding remarks (*kaidai* 解題), Miyata describes its inception in the following light:

To some extent, there have been various attempts in folk studies to clarify the cultural significance of women’s lived experiences. Yet most women, especially young mothers, are unaware of these studies. Why not then create a field of folk studies with illuminating significance that is conducted by female ethnologists through their own eyes? (MIYATA 1999, 225)

In other words, the volume broaches the subject of gender in the study of women in order to present “women, especially young mothers,” with research that carries “illuminating significance,” by locking in fixed themes such as marriage, childbirth, and raising children. In that statement, one finds no sense of awareness in regard to the power relations between scholar and non-scholar or the possibility of women’s exploitation by other women (KAWAHASHI and KUROKI 2004, 42).

Moreover, the image of the “deeply devout woman,” with hands fervently clasped in prayer before the kami and buddhas, is entrenched in the study of folk religion (KOBAYASHI 2016, 48). Mark Rowe, an anthropologist of contemporary Japanese Buddhism, has noted that scholars tend to portray male priests as “innovative and outward-looking,” whereas studies of female priests “attempt to mark what makes them distinct, [focusing] narrowly on faith” (ROWE 2017, 97).

The issues raised above demonstrate the need to introduce gender perspective into folk studies and its methodology within the study of folk religion. Yet even as awareness of the necessity of gender perspective grows among other scholarly fields, it seems that many scholars in our field remain largely unaware.⁶

6. In the volume *Nihon shūkyōshi no kiwādo: Kindai shugi o koete* 日本宗教史のキーワード：近代主義を超えて (Keiō Gishuku Daigaku Shuppankai, 2018), co-editor KIKUCHI Akira (2018,

One can only hope that they increasingly recognize, as KAWAHASHI (2019b, 18) urges, “the need to cultivate relationships that do not exploit or oppress others.”

The Necessity for Conscious Changes Among Scholars and Practitioners

Taking the case of female practitioners in the ascetic rituals of mountain devotion, this article has outlined the need for gender perspective in the study of folk religion. In similar language, NAGAOKA Takashi (2018, 137) ended his review of *Shūkyō to jendā no poritikusu: Feminisuto jinruigaku no manazashi* (The Politics of Religion and Gender: The Feminist Gaze, 2016) with the following appeal: “In the wake of this book, do we continue reproducing an androcentric image as if nothing ever happened, or do we respond to its charge by embarking on a new way of conceptualizing religion? This is the question that all scholars of religion—including me—now face.” One can only hope that scholars increasingly come to grips with how issues of gender relate to themselves.

My grandfather was a member of a Kiso Ontake confraternity, and I have participated in ascetic practices at various mountains for the purpose of research, albeit not as a practitioner or inside actor. As an outsider, when I investigate “female practitioners” and conduct the act of “writing,” I always run the risk of misrepresenting or falsely portraying them in ways that essentialize and freeze their image. As someone who understands the field of mountain devotion with sufficient competency, I would like to overcome that risk with enough reflexivity in my research so that I can help to abolish the patriarchal and androcentric structures and conventions firmly rooted in mountain devotion, establish an equal playing field that includes all, and witness the blessings brought about through mountain devotion.

In order to aim for a gender inclusive realm of mountain devotion, Shugendō and other mountain-based organizations must first recognize the importance of gender perspective by conducting a reexamination of current institutional structures, mechanisms, and customs. For that to happen, it is imperative that the leadership (composed mostly of men) gains awareness of the problem. A large number of female practitioners (including teachers) are members of these

33–34) writes in his reflections on the pre-volume symposium (“Reconstructing the Image of Japanese Religious History”) that while “he has no objection to the importance of gender ... an image of Japanese religious history through the perspective of gender has yet to come forth,” and furthermore, “simply affixing the term ‘gender’ onto the existing research only inhibits real debate.” Incidentally, I was invited by the editors to write a short essay for this volume on women’s prohibition (*nyonin kinsei* 女人禁制) from sacred mountains through a gender perspective. My essay does not “affix the term ‘gender’ onto the existing research” in the way Kikuchi warns against. Gender perspective should not be viewed as an “addition” but as an indispensable theoretical framework that is a prerequisite for analysis.

organizations and the supporting Buddhist and Shinto institutions.⁷ Nevertheless, the decision-making bodies that conduct their organization's policy-making and operation are occupied almost exclusively by men. That imbalance must first be recognized in order for any form of self-scrutiny to follow. Gender perspective can lead to self-reflection for the male practitioners who belong to androcentric organizations (KAWAHASHI 2012, 42). To accomplish this, it is essential, first and foremost, to increase the ratio of female leadership who are directly involved in the policy-making and operation of these organizations.

It has further been pointed out that women hold lower ranks in Japanese religious organizations when compared to their female counterparts in other East Asian countries like Taiwan and China (REEVES 2011, 5). Women are not only placed in inferior positions within religious organizations but in Japanese society more broadly. Should it not be the duty of all practitioners in a religious organization to cultivate an environment that is not oppressive and discriminatory and treat its own female practitioners and priests as equal partners? KAWAHASHI (2019b, 15–16) notes that religious organizations have enthusiastically promoted their “support of the weak” and “cultivation of communal bonds” in light of recent popular discussion on the topic of “religion providing a public good for practitioners and social causes,” yet a deception lies in their continuing lack of unawareness about issues regarding gender status. Before the members of these organizations question why more female practitioners are not joining, they might consider taking a serious look at their organization's present conditions.

When the oracle that an *anago*'s practice is sevenfold that of an *onoko* was delivered, the teacher and followers at the site of the *oza* accepted it without hesitation. Yet why was that oracle made, and why did it distinguish between *anago* and *onoko*? Given the aging and declining number of practitioners in general, one can only hope that the members of that organization will pause to reflect on that oracle the next time a woman joins with the intention of embarking on the path.

(Translated by Caleb Carter)

7. As one example, a 2018 report from *Shūkyō nenkan* 宗教年鑑 (Almanac of Religion), edited by Japan's Agency of Cultural Affairs, reports percentages of female teachers as follows: 37 percent for Kiso Ontake Honkyō 木曾御嶽本教, 31 percent for Ontakekyō, 31 percent for the Honzan Shugen 本山修験 branch, 48 percent for the Kinpusenji Shugen 金峯山修験 branch, 31 percent for the Tendai Jimon 天台寺門 branch, 29 percent for the Shingon Daigoji 真言宗醍醐 branch, and 49 percent for the Shingon Inunaki 真言宗犬鳴 branch.

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