

The Okinawan New Religion Ijun Innovation and Diversity in the Gender of the Ritual Specialist

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IT IS GENERALLY ACKNOWLEDGED that the New Religions “represent amalgams of elements of...other...religions and philosophies” (NORBECK 1970, p. 10), often encompassing both “traditional and innovative elements” (INOUE 1991, p. 10). However, our understanding of the “general principle of combination” by which the New Religions integrate such elements has yet to take shape; we need more in-depth studies of these organizations, including their ritual components (INOUE 1991, p. 10). One striking feature of the New Religions is the high proportion of women among their founders, leaders, and followers, a phenomenon that calls for analysis of the “social significance of female religious leaders” (INOUE 1991, p. 12).

In this paper I analyze policy and popular conceptions concerning the gender of the ritual specialist in one new religion, in order to elucidate the general principle by which New Religions combine traditional and innovative features. In doing so I respond to INOUE’s call for comparison of “Japanese new religious movements with their counterparts in other countries” (1991, p. 12), as I compare the gender policy of the main church with that of branches overseas.

The gender of leadership in religious ritual is of interest because it provides one measure of the status of women in society. “In Okinawa the status of women generally has remained higher than in mainland Japan,” because “it is only the women who can mediate between the supernatural and human beings” (SASAKI 1984, p. 81). Women have been dominant in Okinawan religious life as a result of the belief that females are spiritually superior to males (LEBRA 1966, pp. 69–70; see also MABUCHI 1964). “Women command the chief positions in religious leadership, [while] men have never been associated with religious authority” (ROBINSON 1969, p. 15). LEBRA writes that “the major ritual functionaries of the traditional religion have been females, and

the spiritual superiority of females appears to be an implicit assumption of this culture” (1964, p. 93). Some have even suggested that this “non-subordinate role of women in religious-cultural life” is “unique in the religious history of humankind” (SASO 1990, p. 18).

Ijun 龍泉 is an Okinawan New Religion founded in 1972 by an Okinawan male named Takayasu Rokurō 高安六郎. The organization is estimated to have ten thousand adherents on the island of Okinawa, where the main church and dozens of branches are located, and on the island of Miyako in the south of Okinawa Prefecture. Overseas branches include one on the island of Hawaii, founded in 1989 after a decade of informal practice, and a sister-shrine (*shimai miya*) in Taiwan that enshrines Ijun deities. Ijun has also established a branch in Yokohama (Honshū), viewed by the founder as a reversal of the general pattern in which Japanese institutions dominate Okinawa.¹

The growth of Ijun has been due in part to a resurgence of Okinawan ethnicity. The use of Okinawan words and concepts in prayer encourages ethnic expression. Although many Japanese religions, both old and new, have branches in Okinawa, Ijun is the only religion developed by Okinawans primarily *for* Okinawans, insofar as it takes traditional Okinawan creation myth as a cornerstone of its theology (SHIMAMURA 1992). Ijun has corporate status (*shūkyō hōjin*), and is backed by the wealthy and politically connected at home and at branches abroad.

The leadership and adherents of Ijun are aware of the Okinawan tradition of female-centered religion. Until 1989, the most important ritual of the group, the Fire Festival, was led by women. That year Ijun made a decision to replace these leaders of ritual with men, and by 1992 women played clearly distinct and subordinate roles.

This paper examines the tradition of female dominance in Okinawan religious life and the transition from female to male leadership in the ritual of Ijun. I examine change across time at the main church in Okinawa and diversity in contemporary practice based on a comparison of the main church and the Hawaiian branch. Of particular interest is the view of gender and folk theory of male and female psychology that Ijun adherents give to explain the change, one that appears to reflect a gender view that is changing under the influence of acculturation. I argue that the idea of female spiritual superiority

¹ Takayasu's possible political agenda remains unclear because of the rhetoric of enlightenment and world peace, but one component is probably Okinawan nationalism. It is likely that he hopes the overseas expansion of Ijun's organization will call back the days in which the independent kingdom of Ryūkyū carried out successful trade on the world scene, armed only with an indomitable spirit.

has been reinterpreted to fit the adherents' perception of a modern religion. This reinterpretation is necessitated by a strong association in their minds between the female ritual specialist and the traditional shamanism from which Ijun seeks to distance itself. Adherents refer to traditional practice as *yuta-kai* (shaman purchase) and disapprove of those who participate.

In Hawaii, about half of the adherents speak Japanese as their first or second language, in addition to Hawaiian Creole English. Those with Japanese language ability translate for the founder when he visits Hawaii and interpret in the study group. Nevertheless, the transmission of doctrine from Okinawa to Hawaii remains a problem, and might have been a critical one if the group did not emphasize simple ritual rather than complex doctrine. LEBRA writes that Okinawan religious philosophy is characterized by an "absence of complexity in the system of belief" (1966, p. 204), and I argue that this characteristic has been used by Takayasu to construct a theology that facilitates cooptation of adherents from other traditions. The absence of theological complexity is more striking in Hawaii, where the doctrine is imperfectly understood by adherents.

This research is based on two years of participant observation (1990–92) in the Hawaiian island branch where I was introduced to Ijun, plus fieldwork on the islands of Okinawa and Miyako in the summer of 1992 and in Taiwan in 1993. I participated in services at the Ijun Honzan (the central church) and overseas, translated theological texts and lectures by the group's founder, and became acquainted with the central staff, branch staff, and adherents.

The Founding of Ijun and Its Deities

The main deity of Ijun is Kinmanmon, the kami who appeared to Takayasu as a voice in 1972 and identified itself as the primary deity of Okinawa and of the universe; other deities in the Ijun cosmos are manifestations of this deity. Kinmanmon had not appeared to humans for some three hundred and sixty years, from about the time, Takayasu reasons, that Ryūkyū came under the control of Satsuma (1609) and lost its own religious tradition.

Kinmanmon instructed Takayasu to obtain a book by Taichū Ryōtei 袋中良定 (1552–1639) called the *Ryūkyū Shintō-ki* (see GINOZA 1988 for a translation into modern Japanese). Taichū, called by the title Shōnin, was a learned priest of the Jōdo sect of Buddhism who spent three years in Okinawa beginning in 1603 (SAKAMAKI 1963, p. 23). Takayasu reports that he was astounded to learn that the book contained a

section devoted to Kinmanmon, whose existence he had not suspected in spite of his own research (see SAKAMAKI 1963, pp. 23–27; GINOZA 1988, pp. 137–44, 222–24).

The Okinawan kami are described as indifferent spiritual forces in the cosmos, neither animistic nor animatistic. That is, they are neither *mana* nor spirit (SASO 1990; SASAKI 1984). At times Takayasu equates Kinmanmon with the universe itself and at other times with true enlightenment. It is thus difficult to describe Kinmanmon either as a spirit or as a supernatural power; it might be more accurate to say that he is both. In the Ijun faith Takayasu is a kami person, called *kaminchū* in Okinawan. This means he has a close relation with one or more kami.

In Japan and Okinawa, one becomes a shaman or religious leader as a result of divine calling, and the names of deities are often revealed through the mouths of spiritual leaders (SASAKI 1984, pp. 76–77). Takayasu speaks of his affinity to the spiritual since childhood. He saw an air raid on Naha through the eyes of the kami one year before it occurred (TAKAYASU 1991, pp. 24–25). His mother saw the signs of a spiritual calling during his childhood and he was later identified as the holder of great spiritual force by a leader of Seichō no Ie. Thus Takayasu's account of his vision and the revelation of Kinmanmon is consistent with the image of the religious leader (see HORI 1968, pp. 228–29). Takayasu's gender, however, does not match the image of the religious specialist in Okinawa, where women have dominated religious life in both the formal and informal spheres. Later in this paper I will examine the way in which this contradiction has been resolved.

Another important deity known to Ijun adherents is the Great Kami of Ijun, protector of Ijun and its adherents. These two Ryukyuan deities are important in Hawaii as well, where prayer also recognizes the Hawaiian deities Pele and Lono, both thought to be local incarnations of Kinmanmon. This theological strategy makes possible the cooptation of Hawaiians, who become Ijun adherents and then leaders without any destruction of their own belief system.

In the Okinawan tradition all natural phenomena correspond to supernatural spirits, an idea shared by Shinto. Ryukyuan kami (LEBRA 1966, pp. 21–22) include those of natural phenomena, those associated with certain locations (such as the hearth), those connected with certain occupations, and those identified with ancestral spirits (viewed as kami of low rank).

Finally, there are the *kaminchū*, living people who have the kami spirit and live up to obligations imposed by the kami. Members of the

Hawaiian branch recognize all of these.

There is evidence that Takayasu espouses a universalist philosophy. Here I briefly describe two bodies of ethnographic evidence for this assertion, taken from the sister-shrine in Chang Hua, Taiwan and from the Hawaiian branch, known as the Hilo Ashagi.

The Ijun deity Kinmanmon, in the form of the Great Kami of Ijun (Ijun no Ō-Kami), is enshrined in a Taoist temple in the city of Chang Hua, Taiwan. Called Chintō-gū 鎮東宮 by Ijun adherents, the temple also enshrines Taoist, Buddhist, and spiritualist deities. The temple has donated religious objects to the Ijun Honzan altar, and dozens of Ijun adherents visit Chintō-gū each year in what they consider to be a pilgrimage.

Ijun adherents who visit the temple are primarily interested in one particular deity, a natural stone called Sekitō-kō 石頭公 (stone head figure). According to popular belief, the stone was found in a nearby lake about three hundred years ago. When it was brought into a nearby village, people noticed that they became stronger, especially children. Sekitō-kō was enshrined at Chintō-gū along with Taoist deities brought from mainland China, some dedicated to success in business and others to the protection of children and neighborhoods. Contemporary Taiwanese taking entrance examinations and traveling overseas to study often pray at, and are called children of, Chintō-gū. When I observed the temple in 1993, students had deposited copies of their identity papers on the altar to insure good fortune in entrance examinations.

Takayasu's association with Taiwan extends back into the 1940s, when he was evacuated to the island in anticipation of the battle of Okinawa. Ijun adherents say that once Takayasu was ill with a kidney stone. In the belief that somewhere there existed a natural stone with spiritual vibrations (*reikan* 靈感) that would cure him, he carried out a long search but rejected every stone he found as being without spiritual power. When he approached the deified stone Sekitō-kō, he broke into a sweat during prayer and experienced a revelation. Simultaneously, his kidney stone melted away.

Worship at Chintō-gū bears little resemblance to that carried out at the Ijun Honzan. There are yearly festivals such as the "birthday" of Sekitō-kō, but there are no weekly observances to compare to Ijun's fire festival or the services in Hawaii. At Chintō-gū, worshippers arrive individually at any time to put offerings of paper money and fruit on tables, pray, then place lighted sticks of incense in braziers in the temple. The paper money is incinerated to make it available to the deities. Despite these differences in form of worship, the temple's caretakers,

all of whom are conversant in Japanese, say that there is much in common between the spiritual force manifest in Sekitō-kō and the force accessed by Takayasu of Ijun. Additional research is needed to determine how many of those Taiwanese who visit Chintō-gū are aware of Ijun, and how many adherents of Ijun are aware of its sister-shrine in Taiwan.

A second body of ethnographic evidence for a universalist theology comes from the activities of the founder himself. During Takayasu's yearly lecture tour in Hawaii he uses spiritual acuity to read the vibrations of members of the audience. Often he remarks to participants that they hold spiritual strength and should begin to exercise it in the Ijun faith. If they attend Hilo Ashagi services and seem earnest, he designates them "holders of the power symbol," the only indicator of rank above layperson in Hawaii. His lectures are strongly universalist, with much talk of light and energy and little mention of Ryukyuan deities. Hence they are able to draw individuals from other religious contexts as well as from the community at large. These people understand that there is no pressure to reject their own religious beliefs in favor of Ijun.

In this way Takayasu has brought Hawaiian priests and other sorts of healers and spiritualists into Ijun as holders of the power symbol. These people have rapidly gained status in a group that is ethnically Okinawan despite ignorance of Okinawan belief and practice. This is syncretism of a social type, since it involves the borrowing of people from other traditions. It is one of the ways that Takayasu works to create an international religious organization.

Takayasu has also laid the theoretical underpinning for cooptation of Buddhists. In a recent book (1991) he explains that the Buddha put a 2,400-year time limit on his own supernatural reign and that Kinmanmon has appeared to keep the wheel of life turning in his place. Christians are told that Jesus is one who reached enlightenment, called awakening to emptiness. Thus, the theology of Takayasu has a strong flavor of universalism.

One key to understanding Ijun belief and practice is Seichō no Ie. A number of characteristics of Seichō no Ie noted by NORBECK (1970, pp. 210–17) are applicable to Ijun, including its religious syncretism and emphasis on spiritual healing. Moreover, Takayasu, prior to founding Ijun, had a distinguished career in the organization of Seichō no Ie, rising to the highest position in Okinawa. Hence it is not at all unusual that he has borrowed elements of belief and practice from Seichō no Ie, such as the Ijun power antenna that I describe in a later section.

Ijun's membership bears little resemblance to that of certain other Japanese New Religions in Hawaii, such as Tenshō Kōtai Jingūkyō (NISHIYAMA and FUJII 1991). Adherents tend to be successful business-people who are well integrated in civic organizations. There is no evidence of social isolation from Japanese Americans or from the larger society. The situation is much the same in Japan. Ijun's image in Okinawa is carefully orchestrated by Takayasu, and it appears to be free from controversial features. The group's chief supporters (called *kaichō*, who provide facilities for services) in Yokohama and on Miyako Island include the owner of a medium-size manufacturing facility and a developer.

Women in Traditional Okinawan Belief and Practice

Female dominance in Okinawan religious ritual has been exercised in two main areas. The first consists of informal household religion and shamanic healing. The second consists of formal religious ritual in the Okinawan state religion that was practiced from the early sixteenth century until 1879.

INFORMAL RELIGIOUS RITUAL

BLACKER (1975, p. 28) suggests that shamanism in Korea, among the Ainu of Hokkaido, and in the Ryukyuan islands, provides evidence for a broad culture area "where once a feminine shamanism of a northern, Siberian type was dominant, where sacral power was believed to reside more easily and properly in women, and where in consequence women were recognised to be the natural intermediaries between the two worlds." Early influence on Okinawa was of this northern type, similar to Altaic and Tungusic practices on the Asian continent, in which women were preeminent. Shamanism is also indigenous to Japan, where "shamanesses outnumber shamans" in many regions (HORI 1968, p. 181). Here I examine the essentials of ancient Okinawan religion following LEBRA (1966, p. 103) and then draw on varied sources to describe female leadership in the informal ritual and spiritual healing of contemporary Okinawan society.

The creation myth of the Okinawan people leads them to see themselves as the offspring of two sibling creator deities and therefore of divine descent. More importantly, the myth holds that men and women were created simultaneously. This equal creation suggests a higher status for women than in societies where women are believed to have been created after men. I argue that this myth forms the cognitive basis for gender view, and that it anticipates a social role for the

female religious specialist in Okinawa.

According to an early version of the myth, recorded in 1638 by the aforementioned Japanese priest Taichū Ryōtei in his *Ryūkyū Shintō-ki*, two sibling deities, Amamikyū (a female) and Shinerikyū (a male), were directed by unspecified higher deities to create the first land and people. In obedience, the two descended from the heavens and created Kudaka Island. "Without benefit of sexual intercourse three offspring were created: a first son (the first ruler), a daughter (the first priestess), and a second son (the first farmer)" (ROBINSON 1969, p. 23). Thus, the idea of female leadership in Okinawan religious life is firmly established in ancient creation myth. This creation myth has been taken as a cornerstone of Ijun theology (SHIMAMURA 1992, pp. 5–6; see also TAKAYASU 1991).

A second essential of ancient religion in Okinawa is worship in sacred groves that are natural shrines. These are called *utaki* in Okinawa and are sites for worship in natural settings. Sacred groves are also used as settings for certain Ijun rituals. The sacred groves were formerly taboo to male entry. When these natural shrines became part of state religion and worship was conducted by "state priestesses at Seefa Utaki, the most sacred site of the nation, even the chief ministers of state were required to affect female guises" (LEBRA 1966, p. 69). It should be noted that "this practice became an increasingly sore point as Confucian ideology gained ascendancy among the leaders of government" (LEBRA 1966, p. 116).

All natural phenomena were believed possessed by supernatural spirits, and women dominated ritual life because of their ability to contact and control these spirits. This ability gave them political power that was exercised by males on behalf of females, leading to a close relation between female religious specialists and male political leaders at all levels of society (LEBRA 1966, p. 103).

In each household the oldest female was in charge of conducting household ritual. She undertook to employ a shaman when needed, and many women who became known for an ability to heal illness took on the shaman's role themselves. In Okinawa, the shaman are called *yuta*, and they remain a powerful influence in society (LEBRA 1964) despite attempts to eradicate them (KERR 1958, p. 219).

LEBRA (1964, p. 94) reports that the overwhelming majority of *yuta* are women, "self-recruited, but in Okinawan thinking...selected by the *kami* and destined for their role from birth," with males numbering "probably less than five per cent of the total shaman population." Many of the male shamans have a physical handicap, and are referred to as male-female (*wikiga-winagu*) types, not due to sexual deviance

but because “they have assumed a role predominantly associated with females, and because their physical incapacity hinders or bars performance of many male roles” (LEBRA 1964, p. 94).

Household rites in Okinawa are conducted by the senior female on the first and fifteenth of each month (LEBRA 1966, pp. 182–86). These rites, performed at the hearth, are prayers that report the activities and events of the family to the higher deities. The deity of the hearth (*fii nu kang* in Okinawan, *hi no kami* in Japanese) transmits the reports, thanks, and requests, although it is not itself an object of worship. Ijun encourages adherents to practice these rites at home in their kitchens.

According to Ijun’s folk theory of Okinawan religious history, kitchen practice was necessitated by the Japanese domination of religious life. Takayasu explains that this domination interrupted the traditional Okinawan worship of Kinmanmon and other native deities, and caused their altars to be moved from the alcove (*tokonoma*) in the main room of the house to the kitchen (TAKAYASU 1991, p. 23). This ignores the fact that the performance of certain hearth rituals, such as the incineration of pieces of paper and wood on which wishes are written, could not have easily been done in the alcove. The explanation does, however, tie in with Takayasu’s idea that traditional Okinawan religion was forgotten due to Japanese cultural dominance.

FORMAL RELIGIOUS ORGANIZATION

The *nuru* system of female priestesses in Okinawa is well known, despite the fact that since 1944—when the “last chief priestess died” (ROBINSON 1969, p. 32)—it has existed only at the village level on a hereditary, not a political, basis. For many years scholars believed the system to be quite ancient (see KERR 1958, p. 32), but it has been shown to be a “relatively recent development in Okinawan culture” (LEBRA 1966, pp. 108–109), dating perhaps to the early sixteenth century. It is easily confused with the indigenous tradition of household religion and healing, in which one female in each village was recognized as a sort of community priestess, usually a woman of the founding household of the village. She was referred to as *niigami*.

The *nuru* (called *noro* in Japanese) system was established by the government of Shuri as a national religious hierarchy with local, regional, and national priestesses. The appointment of the *nuru* was probably an attempt by the central government to communicate state authority and “curb the religious power of the dominant kin group in the village” (LEBRA 1966, p. 109).

This differs from the folk theory of the origin of *nuru*. In the

Okinawan creation myth, the first act of the children of Amamikyu is to seek fire. It is thought that the *nuru* system and household hearth rites originated in the practice of having a virginal daughter from each household guard the hearth to prevent the fire from going out. This folk theory ties together the *niigami*, the *nuru*, and the deity of the hearth, although they are probably unrelated. The fire cult is a Chinese introduction (although some suggest it was adopted because it resembled a similar form of hearth worship indigenous to Okinawa) and there is evidence that “household rites were the responsibility of the *senior* [emphasis added] female member of the family—the wife of the household head or his mother” (LEBRA 1966, p. 100).

The *nuru* system paired each male occupying an important status in society with “a female aide, a religious specialist who manipulated the spirit world in his behalf” (LEBRA 1966, p. 105). The king was paired with his sister, as were regional governors and chief ministers of state. The relation was enacted on down to the village level (see ROBINSON 1969 for a description of the organization).

Social Status of Okinawan Women

In this brief sketch of Ryukyuan religious life we see that female leadership derives from a broader tradition of female shamanism. In Okinawa women came to dominate not only informal household religion and shamanic healing, but also formal state religious ritual.² This can only have had a positive influence on the social status of women.

SMITH's (1961, p. 159) fieldwork in a village of seven hundred on Ishigaki Island in the early 1950s shows that four priestesses, one for each of the four main natural shrines of the village, “are the true religious leaders of the community.” The four shrines—sacred groves of dense forest—are each associated with a particular patrilineage. Priestesses are the eldest sisters of men who are reckoned to be the direct male descendants of the shrine founders. It is unclear whether this is a non-state-supported extension of the formal *nuru* system (indeed, these women may be referred to as *nuru*), or a part of the informal ancient tradition in which the eldest female of each kin group is a religious specialist, and in which some kin groups, by virtue of their size and status as village founders, have more important roles

² ROBINSON (1969, p. 17) reports that some religious functionaries “of lesser importance” are male. In the Okinawan village, the highest-ranking male is called *niitchu*. He serves as assistant to the *niigami*. The two are siblings, the oldest male and female members of the family credited with founding the village. Such men assist in the serving of ceremonial wine, the carrying of large fans, the beating of ceremonial drums, the cleaning of ritual sites, and the collection of funds for ceremonial expenses (ROBINSON 1969, p. 17).

than others. ROBINSON (1969, p. 16) suggests that in villages with both *niigami* and *nuru*, the latter outranks the former.

SMITH's ethnography focuses on social control and provides evidence of the former political significance of the Okinawan female religious specialist. At times of important village ritual it is taboo to work in the fields or make any sort of noise. Those who break the taboo are subject to ritual punishment in the shrine at the hands of the priestess, who ties the garments of the offender "at the back of the neck and at the top of each sleeve. This is a substitute for tying the hands behind the back" (1961, p. 165).

A number of elderly informants likened the role of the *nuru* to that of policeman "and stated that it was the practice...to confer with her whenever there was crime or disorder in the village" (LEBRA 1966, p. 103). Until recent years the *nuru* was asked to determine the guilt or innocence of suspects in isolated areas "by lifting the *bijuru* stone; if it felt heavy, he was declared guilty, if light, not guilty" (LEBRA 1966, p. 102). Visitors to Okinawa in 1573–1592 and in 1606 observed that "the power to decide and punish crimes was held by priestesses," and that troops were sent to battle "in the name of the chief priestess, not that of the king" (LEBRA 1966, p. 102).

The role of religious specialist gave some political authority to Okinawan women. Male activities such as warfare and agriculture were of uncertain outcome and the influence of the deities was thought to be critical. Propitiation of such deities in rituals that were performed by women gave women a degree of influence over the related activities.

The role of religious specialist also had an impact on the sexual behavior of the Okinawan women who adopted it. In the formal state system, high-ranking priestesses and *nuru* "were required to observe sexual continence...from the time of assuming office until death" (LEBRA 1966, p. 58). In the informal sphere and among *nuru* in this century, the female religious specialist has been allowed to marry. However, some admit "to refraining from intercourse with the husband during the period of a ceremony," and continence also results from the ritual seclusion of priestesses "on the eve of a major ceremony" (LEBRA 1966, p. 58).³

³ This idea that males are a source of spiritual pollution to a female religious specialist seems, at first, a reversal of the idea held in highland New Guinea societies, where mutual antagonism characterizes relations between the sexes and men fear the spiritual power of women because it may be expressed in witchcraft and sorcery. Men "fear women's supernaturally derived sexuality and prevent them from participating in the most important rituals" (MEGGITT 1964, p. 205). These two gender views share the assumption that women have an affinity with the supernatural world.

The Okinawan idea that women are the appropriate leaders of religious ritual to propitiate the supernatural led women to a measure of political authority and correspondingly higher status in society.⁴ The sexual continence enforced upon state priestesses may be seen as oppressive, but the voluntary nature of the continence of informal religious leaders and *nuru* in this century indicates a measure of control over their own sexual behavior.

Gender and Healing in Ijun

In an effort to convince others of his enlightenment and supernatural power, Takayasu has said that he is the only true *yuta*, and his own personal history—including possession by spirits and visions from an early age—is in line with descriptions of acquiring the role (see SASAKI 1984, pp. 79–81). Nonetheless, his writing and teachings contain statements that deride the *yuta* and those who rely on them. Because Ijun also does healing, adherents tend to think of the *yuta* as competitors. More importantly, they believe the *yuta* to be dangerous to others because their power does not derive from a true relation with the kami, and dangerous to themselves because they may inadvertently take on their patient's illness.

Takayasu says that he is aware of the female-centered Okinawan tradition on which Ijun is based. He insists that today there is no discrimination, which means that even men can come to be *kaminchū* (those who have a relation with one or more kami), an apparent reference to his own reputation as intermediary between the human and the supernatural world. Most of his congregation, a core of several thousand on the islands of Okinawa and Miyako, are female. Nonetheless, his close staff and leadership in all ritual are male, as are those in Ijun thought to have the closest relation with the kami and greatest powers of sight and wisdom. The founder explains that there are two reasons for this. The first is that Japan is a male-dominant society and unless an organization plays along it will not prosper. This view is bolstered by the second reason, the idea that, since most of the adherents are female, the group will appear to be a “women's club” if the ritual leaders are also female. He adds that the demands of childbearing and

⁴ SMITH stresses that the priestess prays for the whole community: “The priestess, in spite of her close association with the deity, cannot petition in her own or any individual's behalf. Nor does her prestige as a religious functionary extend to her household, her husband, and her children” (1961, p. 160). In the village that Smith studied, women alternated in their adoption of the role and some accepted it with reluctance. However, I argue that more general gender perceptions are influenced at the cultural level, and that Okinawan women as a whole, not individual women, enjoyed relatively higher status, due, in part, to their important role in religious ritual.

family would sometimes incapacitate the female leader of ritual.

For whatever reason, in important ritual conducted at the main church today, only men directly face and speak out at the altar to lead in prayer. The reasons given by the founder for this are sociological, but others offer historical, theological, and psychological arguments. For instance, some remark that the Okinawan tradition is to keep daughters in the home for education. Others say that the female role in ritual is more appropriately expressed by kitchen ritual focused on the deity of the hearth.

The Fire Festival is the group's most important ritual, conducted several times a month at the main church. In the service, requests for help from the kami are written out by the congregation and then burned in a large brazier on the altar floor amid recitations of prayer. Participants understand that the fire deity transmits the requests to higher-level kami such as the Great Kami of Ijun, and then to the ultimate Ijun deity, Kinmanmon, in much the same way as the deity of the hearth in the kitchen ritual transmits prayers of supplication and thanks to higher-level kami.

A team of five to thirty-three Ijun functionaries conduct the Fire Festival, but the women among them are clearly differentiated by the color of their robes (yellow instead of white), their position on the altar floor (farthest from the altar), and their subordinate (silent) role. One of their tasks is to open and close the two doors that lead behind the altar so that the team of functionaries conducting this elaborately staged ritual can enter and exit. During the burning of requests women pass the wooden sticks upon which the prayers are written to men, who place them on the fire. Only men speak out on the altar and lead in prayer recitation.

Until 1989 the Fire Festival was led almost exclusively by women, and it was conducted three times a day on a less formal basis (i.e., with a shorter ritual and with fewer in attendance). In 1989, the group underwent a crisis that probably had an economic dimension. It was feared that this fledgling religion would not survive, ending the hopes of the Okinawan people for a world religion. A number of changes were instituted leading to the present practice in which important ritual is conducted more formally but less frequently, and in which men officiate.⁵

⁵ The trend in gender of Japanese religious leadership is unclear. On the one hand, the leadership of several religions in Japan has passed from the hands of women to those of men. For example, Tenrikyō was founded by a woman, Nakayama Miki, but has been led by males since her death in 1887. However, INOUE's (1991, p. 11) listing suggests that, at least for Japanese New Religions, female leaders remain significant in number and importance.

In the course of fieldwork at the main church in Okinawa, I found that adherents agreed to an explanation for the crisis: the quarreling of women during the time that they held leadership roles in ritual. The spirit of this quarreling was communicated to adherents, who responded by not attending. This explanation depends on a folk theory of male and female psychology. Both women in the church and church leaders say that women act on the basis of the senses and emotions (*kanjō de ugoku*) because of the experience of childbirth, regardless of whether or not the individual woman has had such experience. Men, on the other hand, are thought to act on the basis of logic (*ri-kutsu de ugoku*), so it is natural that they reach enlightenment more quickly and are better suited to resist the rapture that accompanies church leadership. It is believed women can reach enlightenment, but that more time is required because of their greater inherent sensuality. Women frequently add that it was the intention of the kami that they take subordinate positions in Ijun ritual. Many remark that there is no discrimination, only segregation into naturally appropriate roles.

In the minds of adherents, one reason for the appearance of Ijun is dissatisfaction with the *yuta*, who are regarded as little more than crutches for the superstitious. Because most *yuta* are women, Ijun adherents perceive that Okinawans associate female-centered religion with traditional shamanistic practice. By placing men in ritual-officiating positions, the Okinawans of Ijun are seeking to appear more modern.

As I have shown, the role of women in the ritual of Ijun's main church has changed dramatically over time. A synchronic examination of contemporary practice among Ijun churches also reveals considerable diversity in leadership gender. In Okinawa and on the island of Miyako, men conduct all major ritual, with a few women in attendant positions. Miyako women may conduct Ijun household ritual, but are deemed unsuited to perform the local services: two young men are dispatched from the central church to conduct the ritual once a month despite the existence of a number of women competent to lead.

In contrast, the leadership of the Ijun branch on the island of Hawaii is dominated by *issei* and *nisei* women of Okinawan ethnicity. Ten of the eleven who hold the power symbol are women. These women speak out at the altar and lead in prayer as they conduct services. The leaders of the main church (the founder and his central staff) explain that this is appropriate because the deity Pele, mentioned in prayer at the Hawaiian branch church, is known to be a female deity, the Hawaiian incarnation of Kinmanmon.

The belief in and practice of healing among those of the Hilo

Ashagi is based upon at least four assumptions that are part of Ijun faith:

- 1 All serious misfortune has a supernatural cause.
- 2 The conduct of ancestors affects the destinies of descendants due to the facts of transmigratory rebirth and karma.
- 3 A universal energy exists that has unlimited powers of healing and revitalization.
- 4 Takayasu Rokurō and certain others have developed, based on their own progress toward spiritual enlightenment and their own relations with the *kami*, the ability to heal the root cause of illness by manipulating this universal energy.

Adherents hear stories of healing and clairvoyance by Takayasu. During his lectures he mentions his accomplishments in healing physical illness. In addition, he has constructed a philosophy in which meditative trance leads to enlightenment, vital health, and the ability to heal others. This is a universalist philosophy because Takayasu argues that all religious leaders have reached enlightenment, something he describes as seeing the Nirai world (see TAKAYASU 1991). In this way, Takayasu puts himself in the same category as Jesus and Buddha, and with such modern religious leaders as Nakayama Miki (the founder of Tenrikyō).

More than half of the time at Hilo Ashagi services is devoted to healing. Prayer recitation and power play—a silent prayer or meditation in which a continuous infusion of power is maintained for several minutes by all present—take only about twenty-five minutes, but at least an hour is required for the healing, counting about two minutes per healing for thirty-five to forty-five adherents with the attention of all those present. Participants rearrange their seating around a single stool in the center of the room about one meter from the altar. The healer, in all cases a woman of Okinawan ethnicity or a visiting healer from Okinawa, stands in front of and prays over the supplicant, grasping the supplicant's left hand and holding her own hand away from her body as if it were an antenna. She may kneel to the front or side of the supplicant, lightly pound his or her back in three places that correspond to centers of power, slap the thighs, and pound the shoulders and back of the neck. To conclude, the healer holds the supplicant's hands in a praying position over his or her "power card." This power card is about the size of a business card and has the characters for Nyo-i Roku Jin Tsū 如意六神通 written on it.

Other power symbol holders (the leaders of the branch) stand holding hands in a circle around the healer and supplicant or stand

facing them with their arms in the antenna position. The rest of the congregation is seated, holding their power cards and adding their energy to the healing effort. One element of the healing is the actual laying on of hands. Some finger pressure is applied to the neck and shoulders, especially in the case of older adherents and those who complain of back pain. Those with ailments in specific body parts receive some rubbing of the afflicted area.

Members believe that at these times there is a flow of universal energy through the healer, other holders of the power symbol, and the power card antennae of the congregation, and that this energy is utilized by those with ailments to heal and revitalize themselves. If there is no illness, the healer may remark that she gained power in the act of healing. The healing is also thought to enable a supplicant to revitalize and achieve some worldly goal. A permanent cure comes from the achievement of a proper relationship with one's ancestors, attained by attending services at the Hilo Ashagi, where ancestors are the object of prayer.

Adherents give credence to the idea that kami retribution or *mana* retribution—a concept described as *tāri* or *kami-dāri* (LEBRA 1966, p. 37)—afflicts those who shirk the obligation to use their supernatural power and affinity with the kami to heal others. A story is noted by SMITH (1961, p. 161) in which a woman who refused the calling faced misfortune as a result. In the Hilo Ashagi, a woman who complained of irregular heartbeat was told it was the result of having spiritual power but not using it as intended by the kami. She was advised to begin attending services on the first and fifteenth days of the month.

In another case, a woman had already been healing others, which she described as “light-work” because it involved the reading of people's auras to diagnose illness and prescribe remedy. She reported internal pains, which the Ijun healer interpreted as the result of an attempt to heal others outside of a relationship with the kami. As the Ijun healer explained, native curers in Okinawa sometimes die of the illness they are trying to cure because their relation with the kami is nonexistent or improper.

When Ijun activities in Okinawa and Hawaii are compared, a contradiction is evident, born of the Okinawan group's desire to become a world religion. In Okinawa it is perceived that only male ritual leaders can successfully motivate membership. In Hawaii, however, women predominate in ritual leadership, probably because few men have become adherents. Leaders insist that separate but equal treatment of the sexes is necessary at the main church and the church on Miyako, but the founder is aware that in its push to become a world religion

Ijun will have to develop an organization based on gender equality. Takayasu views the Okinawan situation of gender segregation as temporary but necessary, and once expressed an intention to create teams of male *and* female leaders of ritual.

A number of explanations are offered by Ijun adherents to explain male accession to the female role in ritual. Their status as folk theories (i.e., native explanations of what has taken place) provides a view of Ijun adherents' view of gender as it articulates with their ideas of the form and function of religious ritual.

Conclusion

The general principle by which the new religion Ijun combines traditional and innovative features is one of pragmatism. I argue that the organization perceived a need for innovative change and responded by changing something that they viewed as a central element of their traditional practice, the gender of the ritual specialist. In doing so they chose modernity over tradition. Theoretical justifications for this were developed later, and included theological, sociological, psychological, and even pragmatic arguments. This may be one reason why the philosophies of the New Religions often contain "internal inconsistencies" that "do not stand up under logical scrutiny" (NORBECK 1970, p. 212). The case in point is Ijun's insistence that females are inappropriate as ritual leaders in Okinawa, but acceptable in Hawaii since the local incarnation of Kinmanmon is a female deity. In this New Religion women were called upon to fill the role of ritual specialist, and then, when deemed necessary, to relinquish that role and play a supporting role to younger, male ritual specialists. INOUE suggests that the new religious movements may best be understood as "a meaningful development within the modernization process, or from the perspective of the evolution of religious institutions" (1991, p. 12), and I have followed his suggestion in attempting to explain Ijun's experience with the gender of the ritual leader.

Practical concerns also seem to dominate the relations between home and overseas branches. If one thing works in Okinawa but only another can work in Hawaii, then continued existence of the overseas branch depends on a pragmatic approach to diversity of practice.

It has been written that Confucianism and Japanese Buddhism, both of which stressed male superiority, "did much to undermine the status and authority of traditional female-oriented Okinawan religion" (ROBINSON 1969, p. 32). The gradual extension of Japanese culture into the Ryukyuan islands has been associated with a decline in the

position of the Okinawan female in religion and in society.

In Ijun, people conduct ritual that employs the fire deity to petition higher-level deities. This has been done for centuries by Okinawan women on the three-stoned hearth, but the leading actors in Ijun ritual are male, though even in Ijun these rites were performed by women prior to a shift in the inclination of the kami as communicated by the founder. Due to members' understanding of male and female psychology and the perception that Japan is a male-dominant society, there is a coincidence between the intention of the kami and the males who make the decisions in the organization.

The folk theory of this event reveals the worldview of Okinawa in the process of acculturative change. Most interesting is the idea that traditional practices are associated with women, and that the creation of a modern religion requires a gender reversal to male leadership. The idea of female spiritual superiority appears to have been reinterpreted, so that what has emerged is a gender view in which the sensuality, not the spirituality, of women is emphasized. This reinterpretation serves as a convenient justification for the church's decision to replace female with male leaders of ritual.

In my discussion of early Okinawan religion, I argued that female preeminence in religious ritual also led to a measure of political power for women. Thus, the shift of leadership gender from female to male bodes ill for the social status of women in Ijun and in Okinawan society generally, even if it is thought to help the organization attract and hold adherents.

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ABSTRACT

This paper clarifies the general principle by which the New Religions combine traditional and innovative features, analyzing the way in which the New Religion Ijun has dealt with tradition and innovation in the gender of the ritual specialist. Of interest are the tradition of female leadership in Okinawan religious ritual and shamanic healing, the replacement of female leaders by males in the ritual of this newly founded religion, and the changing view of gender in Okinawan culture that this shift reflects. I find evidence of greater diversity in the gender of the ritual specialist in overseas branches than in the home organization, and argue that religious ideology is reformulated when practical considerations are seen to necessitate innovative change.