

Seven Hindrances of Women?

A Popular Discourse on Okinawan Women and Religion

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*It is often assumed by some feminist groups that religion is essentially oppressive of women. A recent popular discourse in Japan, exemplified by the award-winning book *Inaguya nanabachi* (Seven hindrances of women), identifies certain culturally specific religious activities, such as ritual bone-washing (*senkotsu*), with the subordination of Okinawan women. In this essay, the author critiques *Inaguya nanabachi* and argues on the basis of her fieldwork in the Okinawan village of Ōgimi that religion is not univocal or essentially oppressive and is potentially a means for creating a post-patriarchal world.*

Keywords: Okinawan women — *senkotsu* — feminist anthropology — secular feminism — *Inaguya nanabachi* — Ōgimi

AS A HISTORIAN OF RELIGION, I oftentimes hear the accusation by feminist colleagues that religion is inherently and irrecoverably patriarchal and, therefore, detrimental to women's attainment of liberation. While many historians of religion share a commitment to search for the profound meaning religion carries in human life—going beyond the gender boundary—the view that male domination is essential to religion still seems to prevail.¹ This holds true, too, for studies of Okinawan women's history. A discourse has recently developed on the nature of Okinawan women and religion that identifies Okinawan

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¹ For collections of cross-cultural research on female spirituality, see PLASKOW and CHRIST 1989 and 1992, and COOEY et al., eds., 1992. In Japanese, see OKUDA and OKANO 1993, and OKUDA 1995.

women's involvement with religious affairs as the source of their subordination.

Contrary to this line of argument, I propose in this essay that women's religious experience cannot be interpreted in a univocal way and that some forms of religion may well contribute to a construction of a post-patriarchal world. I will reexamine a text by a Japanese feminist historian to delineate how an unexamined ethnocentric and secularist bias has led her to misinterpret the lives of Okinawan women.

Religion and Women in Okinawa

One of the most striking characteristics of Okinawan religious culture is its gendered nature, and its allocation of authority to females. The complete domination by women in the rituals of the various Okinawan social institutions, such as household group, kin group, village community, and, formerly, the state, illustrates that women monopolize control of the religious sphere even when that sphere's relevance extends to the whole society. As has been observed by many researchers, non-subordinate roles of women in the religio-cultural life of Okinawa significantly differ from those found in other cultures, where women are traditionally excluded from religious leadership.²

Ordinary Okinawan women serve conspicuous religious functions as sisters and daughters on the one hand, and as wives and mothers on the other. Okinawan women, regardless of the official priestesshood, are assigned a culturally recognized role as spiritual guardians. In general, while sisters are traditionally believed to fulfill the role of spiritual protector toward their brothers throughout their lives, married women are assumed to protect their household members as housewife-priestesses of the hearth deity. That is, Okinawan religious culture appears to have chosen a particular modality of sacred beings in which women in general are imbued with extraordinary strength.

We have, however, witnessed recently an alternative discourse on Okinawan women that betrays our previous understanding. In 1990 HORIBA Kiyoko, a Japanese feminist historian, published an award-winning book on Okinawan women entitled *Inaguya nanabachi* (Seven hindrances of women), which eventually became an influential voice in articulating the condition of Okinawan women.³ As the title indicates,

² Since there are numerous works of significance on the subject of women and religion in Okinawa, I will limit my references to recent works: HIGA 1987, IREGAMI 1988, UEMATSU 1989, and TANAKA 1982.

³ This book won the fifth Aoyama Nao prize in women's history. Horiba is a renowned historian who has done extensive research on Takamure Itsue, also a prominent Japanese

Horiba's objective was to explore the roots and development of what she took to be subordination and oppression in the history of Okinawan women. Her contention is that Okinawa is predominantly patriarchal, adding that this is evidenced by the Okinawan patrilineal descent system, which she believes subordinates women in all areas of life. Thus, she says, we must move beyond the standard discourse of Okinawan culture as espousing a pro-female ideology.

At the outset, HORIBA (1990, p. 11) poses the question, "If they are liberated, as they are thought to be, why is it that Okinawan women cannot even write their own history?"⁴ She then argues that in Okinawa men have traditionally been associated with politics and literate culture whereas women have been linked to a magico-religious world and oral culture. She appears to hold to a definition of politics as being essentially logical and of religion as being essentially non-logical. As a result, she concludes (pp. 68, 233) that women who have not left behind the "magical world" for the rationality of the literate culture occupy a position subordinate to men. In her understanding, it was fundamentally the female monopolization of the religious domain that caused the inferior position of women in society. She then expresses her belief (p. 160) that many of the traditional female names of Okinawa, such as Kamado (Ok. *kama*, "hearth") and Nabe ("cooking pot"), may well demonstrate that Okinawan women were deprived of their full humanity.

Horiba employs, as a metaphor of female subjugation, the Okinawan ritual of "bone-washing" (Ok. *shinkutsi*, Jp. *senkotsu* 洗骨), of which women have conventionally been in charge. The bone-washing rituals take place several years after a death; the bones of the deceased family member are cleansed and purified. According to the local interpretation, this act is expressed in Okinawa as *churaku nashun*, literally meaning "to make pure and beautiful."⁵ It was women who were primarily responsible for the performance of this ritual, since they

feminist historian. She is also the winner of the eleventh Gendai Shijinshō award given to outstanding poets. Her book contains three chapters: the first dealing with the abolition of bone-washing practice in Ōgimi, the second with the extinction of the traditional Okinawan garment and of traditional first names, and the third with the problem of disposition of the ancestral tablets. My discussion in this essay is primarily limited to the first and most lengthy chapter.

⁴ Horiba obviously overlooks numerous activities, including publications by Okinawan women. For example, the Okinawa Joseishi Kenkyūkai (Study Group on Okinawan Women's History) has been active since 1974, and the Shuri Kōminkan Okinawa Joseishi o Kangarukai (The Shuri Study Group for the Reconsideration of Okinawan Women's History) has recently been publishing works of major importance.

⁵ This practice of ritual bone-washing is disappearing, except in areas where there are no facilities for cremation. For a description of this ritual see LEBRA 1966, pp. 200–1.

were thought to have a closer affinity with the spiritual realm than men, and thus were held to be more appropriate for such tasks (KAMATA 1990, pp. 12-13).

In Horiba's opinion, however, women's engagement in this ritual is one of the seven hindrances of women, meaning that *senkotsu* is only one among a number of practices exploitative of women in Okinawa. Horiba emphatically recounts some of the heroic village women's struggles and efforts to abolish *senkotsu* practice in the northern Okinawan village of Ōgimi. Although HORIBA mentions in passing the connection between the bone-washing ritual and women's supernatural power, her observation implies that women of Okinawa have lost such power and thus that they no longer find relevance in this ritual practice (pp. 95-98). Therefore, for Horiba the *senkotsu* ritual is a humiliating practice that is nothing but a fossil of a past age. To this she adds that Okinawan women obtained liberation, symbolized in the abolition of *senkotsu*, by being incorporated into the larger cultural power of mainland Japan (pp. 144-45).

Furthermore, HORIBA gives an account (pp. 86-87) of a woman who abandoned the practice of enshrining a hearth deity (Ok. *finukan*) in her household, and implies that this action was followed by everyone else in the village. In her account, this is the same woman who led in the *senkotsu* abolition campaign. Then she goes on to explain that this woman belongs to the group of so-called *sādakaumare* (Ok. *sādaka'nmari*) women, which refers to those born with more than the usual spiritual power. She extrapolates from this case (pp. 97-98) that it was perhaps through the cultural will of Okinawa that the *sādakaumare* woman herself put an end to an obsolete and exploitative ritual. After all, for Horiba, indigenous religious culture is a legacy of a premodern mentality that should be exorcised in the name of rationality and modernity (e.g., pp. 52, 90).

What strikes me as fundamentally problematic about Horiba's thesis is that her judgments of Okinawan cultural practices show hardly any sensitivity to either historical or cultural contexts. That is, she does not move beyond mere recognition of the distinctiveness of Okinawan culture, simply importing her ethnocentric and universalist criteria of what would constitute liberated and modernized womanhood. Her decontextualized and secularist interpretation does not take into account the predominant beliefs of the Okinawan symbolic system, in which women are considered to be in possession of greater power and knowledge vis-à-vis the supermundane world.

Furthermore, the perspective she has employed in the course of her data collection is that of the elitist tradition, which ignores alter-

native voices. To give one example, the Okinawan phrase *yinaguya nanabachi* (seven hindrances of women) itself is hardly known to Okinawans outside the privileged class, which resides in urban areas and possesses a closer affinity with mainland Japanese and Confucian values. She then draws an overgeneralized conclusion from a rather peculiar example, and concludes that Okinawan women are striving to part company with a traditional ritual practice oppressive to women. Her data are in fact taken from the area in northern Okinawa that also happens to be the primary area where I did fieldwork. My observations indicated that the significance of hearth deities, for example, has yet to decline in villages today, and Horiba's description of a *sādakaumare* woman who took the initiative in abolishing hearth deities as well as the *senkotsu* practice seems to be rather odd. The enshrinement of the hearth deity may have been simplified, but it has not, in fact, disappeared.⁶

Horiba indeed seems too quick to correlate the abolition of *senkotsu* ritual performance with secularization of spiritual life and devaluation of the indigenous religious heritage. The village of Ōgimi 大宜味,⁷ on which she bases her discussion of the *senkotsu* abolition, has experienced two contradictory influences: one toward Japanization (*yamatoka* 大和化), and the other toward an anti-conservative-nativist-political movement, just as in many other parts of Okinawa. At the time of the Second World War, the village vigorously promulgated nationalistic aims, among which was the notorious campaign to replace the Okinawan dialects with standard Japanese.⁸ But once the war was over, Ōgimi reverted to its reformist orientation, and since then the village has been known as anti-conservative. The progressive political attitude of the people of Ōgimi today, however, does not seem to be reflected in an inclination toward thoroughly secularizing their everyday life, even though there was a time in which their progressive mentality created a conspicuous tendency to trivialize their traditional cultural heritage in hopes of demonstrating their modernization and assimilation into mainland Japanese culture.

Contemporary Okinawan society in general, however, shows characteristics of a so-called revitalization movement, in which "traditional"

⁶ In contemporary Ōgimi, most families have replaced the traditional three stones with an incense burner, as a simplified form of the hearth deity. A single Okinawan woman living alone may install a hearth deity of her own if she wishes. In this case, she obtains from the stem-house of her family some ashes from its incense burner, and establishes a new one in her house.

⁷ Ōgimi consists of 17 hamlets and has approximately 3,600 inhabitants. It is about two and a half hours by car from Naha.

⁸ See, for example, MIYAZATO 1987, pp. 40–42.

rituals are being revived after a long interval (HESHIKI 1990, p. 552). For example, one of the subdistricts of Ōgimi, called Kijoka 喜如嘉, where Horiba's chief informant resides, has reconstructed the root-house (Ok. *nīya*) of the village in the past decade. The root-house is the founding house of the village and is where one of the chief divine priestesses of the village normally comes from. In this district, the root-house, which disappeared for an unknown reason around the turn of the century, was reestablished through the villagers' efforts. The root-house, as the founding house of the community, symbolizes the collective identity and cohesion of that community. When residents sensed that the community in which they lived was fragmenting, they decided to bind it together by reconstructing their root-house, which was presumed to have historical continuity with their primordial ancestors.⁹

It appears that increased emphasis on modernization and Japanization in Okinawan socio-cultural life does not automatically lead to a drastic secularization in which religion no longer has relevance for people's lives. On the contrary, Okinawans, when brought into close contact with things Japanese, have obtained a renewed awareness of their "Okinawan" identity vis-à-vis mainland Japan.¹⁰ Many of the villagers have come a long way from viewing their cultural heritage as primitive and barbaric—a legacy of the assimilation program of the Meiji government at the time of the annexation of Okinawa. It is, therefore, inappropriate to conclude that indigenous religious practice ceased to exert its grip on local women because of its purported patriarchal nature, for religion may serve as an important means for expressing cultural particularity and identity.¹¹

⁹ I conducted four stints of fieldwork in Ōgimi from 1986 to 1991. A detailed description of how the village headmen as well as the group of divine priestesses were responsible for the reconstruction of the root-house is given in my dissertation (KAWAHASHI 1992, p. 153-90).

¹⁰ I owe this insight to Wesley Ueunten's studies in Okinawan identity and ancestor worship. See UEUNTEN 1990.

¹¹ Horiba's misrepresentation of Okinawan women is apparently derived partly from her mistaken equation of patrilineage with patriarchy. As W. P. Lebra and many others have observed, Okinawan society has a patrilineal descent system. However, patrilineality in Okinawa fails to follow the exogamy rule, and the traditional residential arrangement for a married couple is known to have been matrilocal, at least until the first child was born. These factors significantly change the picture of "patriarchal Okinawa" that Horiba paints. A. L. Tsing and S. J. Yanagisako have written an important article reassessing the category of patrilineality, and stating that our study of gender relations should abandon oversimplified and stereotyped notions like "patrilineal descent," which are automatically construed as a sign of "patriarchy." They hold that it is a mistake to assume that "labels such as 'patrilineal descent' describe societies in which descent, marriage, exchange, prestige and gender are interrelated in such a way as to constitute a single kind of social system" (TSING and YANAGI-

Ōta Yoshinobu, for example, cautions us against the danger of representing the indigenous peoples of other cultures as rapidly disappearing due to modernizing and Westernizing influences.¹² He writes that our representation of Okinawan people's lives should not sacrifice their creative subjectivity, for they struggle to "create their own cultural spaces within the limits and constraints imposed on them from the outside" (ŌTA 1992, p. 78). My description of the re-creation of a root-house may be understood as the villagers' effort to improvise new meanings attached to their religious heritage vis-à-vis the influences of modernization and Japanization.

Feminism and Cultural Imperialism

I have thus far raised criticisms against several claims that Horiba makes in her book. The points I have been making boil down to the problem of translation of one culture into another. In Henrietta MOORE's cogent statement:

When researchers perceive the asymmetrical relations between women and men in other cultures, they assume such asymmetries to be analogous to their own cultural experience of the unequal and hierarchical nature of gender relations in Western society. (1988, p. 2)

The source of Horiba's approach, then, is nothing novel; it resembles the familiar perspective of unexamined belief in "the shared experience of women." She seems to cling to a misguided assumption of "women" as a universal category, and presumes that there exists a kind of privileged relationship between her informants and herself based on this "common womanhood." We are, however, all aware of the danger in using a decontextualized notion of "women." This means that even if a researcher's interpretation takes women's issues into account, this fact per se never guarantees that his/her interpretation is of better quality than previous analyses that were indifferent to the problems of women. This is precisely because the validity of any interpretation is dependent on the researcher's own epistemological ground. The question, as Lila ABU-LUGHOD (1991, p. 17) says, is "where do we stand to get this better view?"

In many of the more unfortunate cases, women of other traditions did not speak for themselves; instead, they were spoken for by the

SAKO 1983, p. 516). For a comprehensive study of the Okinawan kinship and descent system, see TANAKA 1983. For a good study of the Okinawan marriage system, see SEGAWA 1969.

¹² Ota here draws on James Clifford's concept of "entropic metanarrative."

authors of the Western texts. This is a theme familiar to many of us: Orientalism. Edward SAID explains in his often-cited work that Orientalism is a style of thought based upon an ontological and epistemological gap made between the Orient and the West, which thus essentializes and dichotomizes human beings into “us (Westerners)” and “them (Orientals)” (1979, pp. 2-3). The intelligibility and identity of the Oriental’s world is imparted by the West as follows:

They (Orientals) cannot represent themselves; they must therefore be represented by others. (SAID 1985, p. 113)

Consequently, the West carries on the self-appointed mission of placing its inscription on the Orient as if Westerners alone were capable of rationalizing and generalizing. Obviously this puts the complex endeavor of representing others in jeopardy.

Horiba’s argument, moreover, becomes even more problematic when she proposes that Okinawans should re-establish the practice of wearing ethnic *ryūsō* 琉装 garments and taking on indigenous given names. As I mentioned above, she stated that Okinawan women were given first names such as “cooking pot,” a sign of their deprived humanity. However, in a later section of her book she states that, to the contrary, Okinawan women must start using indigenous names and garments if they hope to regain pride in themselves (HORIBA 1990, p. 182). Horiba’s advocacy is condescending and dangerous; it seems as if she is free to place any inscription she wishes on Okinawa. That is, she appears to have arrogated to herself the task of adjudicating the justifiability of any of the traditional practices, be it the *senkotsu* ritual or indigenous names, as if she possesses the universal standards and criteria of rationality.

Criticism of Horiba’s work has been raised by Okinawan women as well. For example, Hokama Yoneko, who is active in the women’s political movement, points out that *ryūsō* garments and indigenous names (Ok. *uchinā-nā*) are in fact a legacy of the class structure of pre-modern Okinawan society and that therefore Horiba’s figurative imposition of those practices on Okinawan women is unjustifiable.¹³

The problematic of Horiba’s argument, after all, reveals the difficulty in achieving universal feminism as well as an understanding of women’s universal experience. Through the course of my fieldwork, it became clear that the experience of women involved in the *senkotsu* ritual

¹³ See HOKAMA’s review (1992) of Horiba’s book. By contrast, a rave review in praise of Horiba’s work is given by TAKEZAWA Masako (1990), a Japanese woman married to an Okinawan male and living in Okinawa. She writes that Horiba’s book has given her much encouragement and a chance to reflect on her own standing in patriarchal Okinawa, “the place she hates so much.”

is, in fact, multi-faceted. Contrary to Horiba's interpretation of the *senkotsu* ritual, a woman in her early forties recounted to me her experience of having had her baby cremated several years ago. She explained that she found the simplistic and mechanical procedure of cremation unbearable, and wished that she had been able to keep the baby's body in order to perform the bone-washing afterward. Others likewise admitted that *senkotsu* is a way of showing affection for the dead.

My description here is not to be construed reductively as supportive of the *senkotsu* ritual. I am by no means attempting to impose this ritual practice on Okinawan women as a cultural necessity. Furthermore, it is not my intention to "Orientalize" Okinawans as "essentially religious" by exoticizing their cultural differences.¹⁴ My point, rather, is that "tradition" is a multivocal concept, and that whether or not it is held as being a positive source for women is largely dependent on how the researcher understands the past.

My own observations in Okinawa indicate that the indigenous religion is still maintained as an important source of cultural unity, so in our interpretations of religion in Okinawa we should not be too eager to deride women's adherence to their religious heritage as incorrect. It is important to recognize that claiming that women are deprived of authentic power within traditional religious practice fails to do justice to those contemporary women who have positive experiences within that same religious tradition.

I wish to stress once again that my argument thus far is not a defense of indigenous patriarchal domination to counter the imperialist and universalist discourse. As is seen in many cultures, the nationalist paradigm often employs the distinction between the material world and the spiritual essence of the culture, and maps this opposition onto the gender issue. That is, this type of male-dominant framework identifies women with the uncontaminated essence of the culture, even at the expense of their agency. In YĖĖENOĖLU's cogent words, "It is woman who becomes the ground upon which nationalism builds its discourse to construct a national identity" (1998, p. 125).

Patriarchal nationalism of this kind is, for example, found in the writing of SEKI Hironobu, who is not an Okinawan descendant but adheres to Okinawan patriotism. He strongly criticizes Okinawan woman leaders who have left behind the *senkotsu* practice by accusing them of being "hyper-hygienic" and unaware of their own "polluted nature" (1990, pp. 89-92). According to Seki's understanding, those women abandoned their love for the nation and ancestors for the

¹⁴ The danger of exoticizing cultural others by radically magnifying the distance between "others" and "ourselves" is explained by Nicholas THOMAS (1991).

sake of material gains. Needless to say, his line of argument, which coercively identifies woman as the essential site of the culture, subjugates the self-understanding of women themselves.

I have argued that Horiba Kiyoko's thesis on Okinawan women is an example of how a woman from mainland Japan (which has acted as an oppressor of Okinawa from time to time) Orientalizes and condemns the cultural particularity of Okinawa. It is not my intention here, however, to condemn specifically Horiba's representation of Okinawa. Anyone might fall prey to this type of institutionally sanctioned power relation between the investigator and the subject. So far the discourse on Orientalism has centered on the East-West/West-East configurations in which only the West is held responsible as being the agent in Orientalism. Horiba's case, however, suggests that a Japanese female researcher, too, may well be guilty of taking an Orientalist/imperialist stance. Hence I prefer to read Horiba's text as a warning to all of us who are engaged in the act of cultural interpretation to proceed with caution.

Conclusion

In conclusion, I would like to introduce the voice of an Okinawan woman that suggests a future direction Okinawan women may take. I do this because I believe that the direction in which they head is not something to be determined by either an ethnocentric Japanese feminist who puts blind faith in modernity or, say, an elite Okinawan male who reifies "community" and "tradition" at the expense of women's freedom.¹⁵

Yui Akiko is a journalist who became the first woman editor-in-chief at the *Okinawa Taimusu* newspaper. She wrote a review of ASATO Eiko's book (1991), *Yureru seiiki* (Sanctuaries in crisis), which narrates, from an ecologist's perspective, how the sacred groves of Okinawa (Ok. *utaki*) have been infiltrated by artificial resort facilities. YUI writes in her review:

Sanctuaries in crisis is a tragic narrative of an island that has sought for material affluence. As Asato herself admits, she is a

¹⁵ See the following quotation from Lata MANI (1990, p. 28):

In short, black feminists in Britain have refused "salvation," whether by the state in the name of civilized modernity, by black men on behalf of tradition and community integrity, or by white feminists in the interest of ethnocentric versions of women's liberation. In this context, discussions after my presentations explored, among other things, questions of rhetoric and strategy: how to argue for women's rights in ways that were not complicit in any way with patriarchal, racist or ethnocentric formulations of the issues.

modern individual used to a rational way of thinking, and thus it must not be easy for her to communicate with the elders of the island, whose lives are as one with the world of deities. "A modern individual who can think rationally" is after all the very ideal that both men and women of Okinawa have been running after ever since the annexation of Okinawa. Asato must have been one of those people. This is precisely why I was very much struck by Asato's attempt to make a new start by reflecting on Okinawa's roots. I find it so fresh. Sometimes I wonder if the female intellectuals of Okinawa, who have moved rapidly from the magico-religious world to the modern world, do not somewhat resemble the octopus eating its own body. They have exhausted their cultural heritage, it seems. I also feel that now might be the time when we must stand firmly on our historical particularity. Probably Okinawan women's consciousness, which has been contradictory and fragmented, has started to look for a new direction. (1992, pp. 102-3)

Yui's account of Asato's work shows how some women of Okinawa are imputing new meanings to their cultural heritage by reinstating the significance of what was invisible through modernist eyes. Therefore, we must not be condescending in thinking that Okinawan women as a whole are struggling to part company with their tradition and to acquire values identical with those held by Japanese or Western women.

I have argued that Horiba, perhaps contrary to her original intention, rejected problematizing the issue of epistemology and power in relation to the representation of women of other cultures. Her seemingly humanist undertaking unfortunately was determined by a narrowly focused metropolitan feminist agenda. The brilliant feminist anthropologist VISWESWARAN expresses that there exists a division between Western and non-Western women that corresponds with a distinction between "feminists" and "the others." She writes:

To take seriously the idea of writing ethnographies of feminists and feminist movements in other places means we first understand something about the shape feminism takes in other parts of the world. (1997, p. 616)

She stresses the significance of being sensitive to various forms of feminism other than the secularist Western feminism and cautions us against the trap of identifying feminism with the first world. Her statement indeed offers us a crucial lesson in the enterprise of cultural understanding.

Religion in Okinawa is an important social good, yet it is not

monopolized by men. Religious belief and ritual in Okinawa have accorded women high spiritual value, and hence society has recognized women as valuable social beings. If we desire to do justice to the richness and complexity entailed in the lives of women of other cultures, then we must dislodge ourselves from predetermined assumptions produced by our own cultural bias. We must not ground our analysis of women in other cultures with a decontextualized notion of “women.” That is, we must test our presuppositions of “the shared experience of women” before we try translating a female experience from one cultural system into our own. Only by remaining faithful to a hermeneutical exercise of this kind does our endeavor of representing others become ethically and politically justifiable, leaving behind the coercive discourses of Orientalism and cultural imperialism.

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