



Barbara Ambros, *Women in Japanese Religions*

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BARBARA AMBROS'S *Women in Japanese Religions* is the first book of its kind to take up the history of women in Japanese religions. Although a handful of books focusing on women in the Buddhist tradition have been published, apart from *Women and Religion in Japan* (OKUDA and OKANO 1998) there has been no monograph on women in Japanese religions as a whole. Ambros's book fills this lacuna.

The strength of Ambros's work lies both in its comprehensiveness and nuanced manner of framing her object of discussion. In her postcolonial feminist critique, Ambros treats the religious lives of Japanese women over an extended period of time—from the Jōmon period (ca. 10,000–300 BCE) up to the present time—contextualizing their engagement in various religious traditions within the contexts of social, economic, political, and legal history. Interrogating, and acknowledging, the role of women historically in Japanese society as accomplices in the expression and maintenance of patriarchal norms, she makes no concession to monumentalizing desires to portray women as mere victims or heroes.

Throughout the book, Ambros looks closely at women's agency in the changing social structure, and in particular, at changes in family structure. Focusing particularly on marriage patterns and inheritance rights, she analyzes a wide range of writings on and by women, insisting on looking at old sources with new eyes, and in particular, "through the eyes of women" (3). Ambros presents a corrective narrative of women in Japanese religions based on her interdisciplinary endeavor connecting different disciplines such as sociology, anthropology, and archeology. But at times her discussion of social conditions and changes seems almost to overwhelm and supplant the discussion of religion, which is meant to be primarily illuminated.

Ambros argues that women were not just suffering from the sexist propaganda of Confucianism and Buddhism as conventionally described. For women, these religions, including Confucianism, Buddhism, Christianity, Shintoism, Shamanism, and new religions were an outlet to exercise their autonomy and agency. Ambros particularly identifies the Confucian-inspired family structure—that is, the virilocal, patrilineal household—as well as the increasing notion of defilement associated with major religious doctrines, as the cause of female exclusion in medieval Japanese society.

In her introduction, Ambros begins with a critique of the androcentric character of previous scholarship. Certainly, Ambros's position is well taken, though her criticism of Bernard Faure is not entirely accurate. In her quick dismissal, Ambros states that "his works fall in line with much existing scholarship—particularly Japanese scholarship influenced by Marxist paradigms—that depicts religion as a mere means of oppression, especially for women" (2). Yet, FAURE's *The Power of Denial* (2003) is a work that challenges the linear narrative of progress in the Marxist scholarship and, drawing upon various examples of Buddhist women, including literary representations of female divinities, demonstrates that women in these contexts were not always silent, passive victims.

The book consists of nine chapters. Chapter 1 examines two proto-historic representations of gender—clay figures from the Jōmon period and the story of Himiko—while chapter 2 deals with mythological constructions of masculinity, femininity, and gender relations during the time when the *Kojiki* and *Nihon shoki* were compiled. Due to the fragmentary character of the surviving record from these periods, the interpretations of the examples given in these two chapters are inconclusive in informing us about the sociopolitical and religious status of women at these times. Nevertheless, Ambros provides a useful critique of modern Japanese scholarship that calls attention to unexamined assumptions about the normative character of gender roles, and invokes the need for methodological caution when using archeological records for the interpretation of myths.

Chapters 3, 4, and 5, which cover the medieval period from the sixth century to the seventeenth, deal with how women negotiated and navigated their liberty within and against the androcentrism of Buddhist and Confucian discourses, such as "Five Obstructions" and "Three Obediences." As Ambros argues in chapter 5, the virilocal, patrilineal household became the norm over the course of the medieval period, while women became more associated with the religious notion of purity.

Chapter 6 considers the role of Confucianism during the Edo period as a double-edged system (105). The chapter presents a wide range of examples of the lives of women from different social strata, although it makes a not entirely clear argument about how women from the lower social class were able to find forms of personal liberty. However, she does make a clear case for the claim that elite women often found ways to use the patriarchal system for their own interests and benefit rather than merely being constrained by it. Moving on to the nineteenth century, chapter 7 discusses women's expected roles of "good wife, wise mother"—the public propaganda promoted by the Meiji reformers and the established religions now operating within a modern secularized paradigm.

Ambros skips over the period of Imperial Japan without any comment, though it might have been interesting to discuss the ways in which the Japanese family system became implemented in Korea and Taiwan, and the ways in which the "good wife and wise mother" slogan changed the social status of colonial women and their engagement with religious practices. The familiar (due to the shared Confu-

cian influences in other East Asian countries) but also foreign (as it was a modern Japanese invention) ideology was initially transplanted in order to subjugate Japan's colonial subjects more effectively, but even after the colonial period, it has had a tremendous impact on the women in these countries.

Chapter 8 focuses on the new challenges that Japanese women faced in the post-war period. Religious leaders continued to promote the wife/mother ideology, and women's responses were varied, as conservative takes on their roles predominated. Chapter 9 describes some of the new debates about gender and the family that emerged in response to the changing economic and demographic realities during the Heisei period (1989–present). In the new social context, multiple voices, from ultraconservatism to those of liberal feminists, coexisted.

In short, Ambros's book will bring a new understanding of the many ways in which Japanese women have articulated and made use of their lived religious experiences throughout their history. The book is a valuable addition to the fields of Japanese history, religious studies, and women's studies. Written in an accessible style, this book ought to make an excellent textbook at both the graduate and undergraduate levels. The three-page-long addendum, "Questions for Discussion," may be particularly useful in generating fruitful classroom discussions.

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