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Sacred Mountains and Women in Japan

Fighting a Romanticized Image of Female Ascetic Practitioners

Previous scholarship on sacred mountains and women discussed restrictions on women's access to sacred places primarily in terms of the impurity of blood (*chi no kegare*) from menstruation and childbirth, as well as Buddhist precepts. Historians took the initiative in examining these restrictions, and religious studies scholars and folklorists further advanced our knowledge. However, this body of work often produces a romanticized, stereotypical image of women heroically practicing asceticism on sacred mountains in the face of many restrictions. It also fails to sufficiently include the perspective of gender, and often displays a mistaken notion that gender studies is the niche study of women, and as such, should be left to women. In this article I assert that including the perspective of gender means not only clarifying the existence of gender disparities, but also shining a light on the activities of people who have been marginalized. Applying the perspective of gender in the study of sacred mountain cults uncovers the existence and activities of women that have been rendered invisible by the persistence of deeply rooted androcentric traditions. This article asks what kind of difficulties face contemporary women who perform ascetic training at sacred mountains because they are women, and how they have acquired and maintain their access to their places of practice.

KEYWORDS: sacred mountains—female ascetics—romanticized image—absence of gender perspectives—*nyonin kinsei*—androcentrism—Mt. Omine—Kiso Ontake—Honzan Shugen

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“Do you want to reset your life? Or did you come looking for some kind of healing experience?”

A YOUNG MALE reporter from one of the major Japanese news organizations superciliously asked this question as he edged up to me during an *Ōmine okugake shugyō* 大峰奥駈修行 (ascetic pilgrimage through the Ōmine mountain range, hereafter *Okugake shugyō*), hosted by Shōgoin Monzeki 聖護院門跡 temple, in which I participated several times for research purposes. The reporter also asked me over and over whether I was in some kind of trouble or if I had reached an impasse in my life. I repeatedly shook my head “no” to his insistent questions. Finally, with a *tsk tsk* of the tongue and a dissatisfied look on his face, he moved off. I suspect he was irritated because he could not get an answer out of me that would make for sensational journalism.

The Stereotypical Image of the Female Ascetic Practitioner

The *Okugake shugyō* of Shōgoin Monzeki temple is a trip through the mountains that takes six days and five nights. After traversing the Ōmine mountain range from Yoshino 吉野 to Zenki 前鬼, the participants visit Kumano 熊野. Every year more than eighty people join Shōgoin Monzeki’s *Okugake shugyō*, and approximately a quarter of them are women. About twenty-five women were present at the *Okugake shugyō* mentioned above. The reporter asked all of the relatively young female participants similar questions to those he posed to me. Most likely, he wanted to write an article showing that contemporary young women seek to “reset their lives” and “seek healing” through the *Okugake shugyō*. I feared that the voices of individual female participants, and their various motives for joining the *Okugake shugyō*, would be erased, and instead they would be represented in a way that accorded with the reporter’s ideal of female ascetic practitioners. At the same time, however, this encounter became a reflexive opportunity for me to turn and look back upon my own research posture, and interrogate myself by asking whether I have also approached the research of female ascetic practitioners at sacred mountains with preconceptions, and if I also had intentionally

* This article is a translation of *Romanka sareta imēji ni aragau: Nihon ni okeru reizan to joseigyōja* ロマン化されたイメージに抗う—日本における霊山と女性行者. In *Shūkyō to jendā no portikusu* 宗教とジェンダーのポリテイクス, Kawahashi Noriko 川橋範子 and Komatsu Kayoko 小松加代子, eds., 43–68 (Shōwadō, 2016).

sought to draw out of the practitioners a narrative that is convenient for my own purposes.

Stereotypically speaking, it is often assumed that “female ascetic practitioners” at sacred mountains have some special incentive for participating. For example, it is a common assumption that adversity and traumatic experiences in the family turn a woman towards severe ascetic practice. Misfortune and difficulty are often indispensable elements associated with the narratives constructed of the “female ascetic practitioner.” However, according to my own research, female practitioners’ misfortunes and difficulties are often the result of male-dominance and a patriarchal society, and they have such experiences not because they are “female ascetic practitioners” but because they are women.¹ We should not so easily associate misfortune and difficulties in life with female ascetic practitioners. Doing so may overlook a deeper reality: the issue of Japanese society and its social structure, which for women holds many limiting factors. Compared with men, a narrower range of normative social roles for women may make ascetic practices one of the few routes for overcoming these confines and allowing women to pursue self-realization and expression. Some outstanding female ascetic practitioners are lauded and romanticized as great religious teachers or as “pious women,” cultivating themselves at sacred mountains in a heroic fashion in the face of traditional limitations on the participation of women by researchers. Such accolades, however, may obscure or render invisible sexist discriminatory practices and gender disparities that are the current reality in the world of mountain religious practice.

In this article I examine sacred mountains and the training of female ascetic practitioners from the perspective of gender, in order to shed light on gender disparities and draw attention to the activities of socially marginalized people in Japanese society. In the first half, I draw attention to the absence of gender perspectives from previous scholarship on sacred mountains and women, and in the latter half, I discuss the difficulties that female practitioners have faced in sacred mountain practice, where mountain sites have long been regarded as male ascetic training places, and because androcentrism has and continues to

1. Most of the male ascetic practitioners are married, while some female ascetic practitioners remain single throughout their lives. Commonplace reasons given for this include the fact that these are “ascetic practitioners,” but also that as women they are more restricted by the binding norms of sexual morality than their male counterparts. This is similar to the situation in Japanese Buddhism, where many female Buddhist priests remain single, whereas most of their male counterparts marry. Another telling example of gender disparity in sexual norms I discovered during my research involved “K-san” (1928–), a female ascetic and leader of a Kiso Ontake fraternity in northwest Aichi Prefecture. Although she had long remained single, when she accepted a younger male disciple she was forced by those around her to register themselves as formally married because she was told that “a man coming and going from a women’s home isn’t socially acceptable.”

be deeply rooted. Furthermore, using concrete examples from my research at Mt. Kiso Ontake and Mt. Ōmine, I will take a closer look at how some female practitioners have acquired practice sites and been able to sustain their activities.

*Women and the State of Sacred Mountain Studies:
The Missing Perspective of Gender*

Previous scholarship on the issue of sacred mountains and women has focused primarily on the issues of *nyonin kekkai* 女人結界 (the exclusion of women from sacred areas), or *nyonin kinsei* 女人禁制 (the customary exclusion of women), citing the ritual pollution caused by menstrual blood (*ketsue* 血穢), as well as Buddhist moral restraints and rules of discipline as reasons for restrictions on female practitioners. Historians were the first in the academy to call attention to these issues. According to specialists in the history of Japanese social practices, the period of female exclusion from religious activities associated with the biological phenomenon of menstruation was originally limited to only the period of its duration. However, over time there developed a system of permanently excluding women from religious sites deemed ritually pure, and historical studies point to several motivating factors. These include Buddhist precepts and monastic regulations that prohibited monks' sexual contact with women, discriminatory ideas in Buddhism such as the five special hindrances for women (*goshō* 五障) and the requirement that given these obstacles women transform their bodies into men before they can attain buddhahood (*henjō nanshi* 變成男子). The decline of nunneries, and the ruling Heian era aristocracy's emphasis of patriarchal authority, are also cited.²

Scholars of folklore and religious studies also took up the issue of the relationship of sacred mountains and women, and the problem of the exclusion of women from sacred sites. Inspired by Yanagita Kunio's 柳田国男 (1875–1962) essay, "The Spiritual Authority of the Woman" (*Imo no chikara* 妹の力), many studies assume the superiority of women's spirituality as axiomatic. MIYATA Noboru, author of *The Spiritual Superiority of the Woman and the God of the House* (1983) and *The Folklore of the Woman* (1987), cites a passage in Yanagita's *Rōjo kaseki tan* 老女化石譚, in which an elderly woman is transformed into stone because of violating the sacred area, and surmises that *nyonin kekkai* developed in order to protect women.

Miyata proposes that *uba-ishi* 姥石, stone formations resembling old women, and *bikuni-ishi* 比丘尼石, stone formations resembling Buddhist nuns, both of which mark *nyonin kekkai* on sacred mountains, were placed at locations where

2. There are many studies on this by historians such as NISHIGUCHI (1987), KATSUURA (1995), TAIRA (1992), and USHIYAMA (1996). Moreover, there is also the government-funded (KAKENHI) research in which these historians participated, publishing their results in OKA (2009).

women, who were not able to reach the summit because of their weaker legs, could say to themselves that they had gone far enough to have achieved their purpose in climbing the mountain. Moreover, Miyata advances the idea that legends of women changing into stones were not based on notions of women as unclean. He instead postulates that because each woman who changed into a stone was a woman of superior spiritual power, these sites may be places where women themselves enshrined the god of the mountain using a rock altar or a stone, and that these stones were placed to indicate the *nyonin kekkai* (MIYATA 1993, 22).

More recent studies continue to offer variations on this theme of female spiritual superiority. Nishigai Kenji, a researcher of folklore and Japanese history, and the deputy vice president of NPO Mt. Ishizuchi, in Ehime Prefecture, is one such researcher. Nishigai writes: “Regarding women as impure (that is, red impurity, or menstrual blood 赤不浄; and white impurity, or childbirth 白不浄) because of their physiological characteristics is a general feature of the foundational layers of culture, in other words, a characteristic feature of Japanese religiosity. However, it is also necessary to recognize other characteristics that women possess” (NISHIGAI 2012, 11). Nishigai cites the *mikos* of Okinawa and *itakos* of Tōhoku as examples of “women who bore the spiritual medium’s role of merging with the gods,” and argues that “in Japan women were considered higher forms of existence than men” (NISHIGAI 2012, 11). He discusses several examples, including the ancient medium-queen Himiko, the *onarigami* and *noro* of Okinawa, the role of women performing the domestic religious duties for gods of the home, and also *saotome*, who perform rice-planting rites, as well as a consideration of the labor of women on farms or in the families of fishermen, and the housewife’s authority within the home. Nishigai then concludes:

We can identify vestigial characteristics of the woman of antiquity, [still] strongly at work in the salient features of kami rites in Okinawa and the Southwest islands, mountain cult activity throughout the nation, as well as in the embryonic periods of Tenrikyō and other new religions in the nineteenth century. (NISHIGAI 2012, 18–19)

Nishigai closes by describing women’s significance to the traditions he mentions as a “primordial and brilliant presence like that of the sun, and they continue to be so, even now” (NISHIGAI 2012, 18–19). It is not unfair to conclude that Nishigai unconsciously essentializes women by lumping together women of different times, periods, areas, and situations. He identifies the origins of *nyonin kekkai*, moreover, in Buddhism’s view of women and its wariness of women as obstructions to the ascetic practices of male Buddhist monks (NISHIGAI 2012, 8). Another issue with Nishigai’s study is its photographs of women, which are introduced in ways that romanticize the clichéd female figures of the “hard worker” and the “deeply pious woman.”

In addition to essentializing of this sort, in the methodological tradition subsequent to Yanagita Kunio of placing greater importance on the perspective of women, there is a certain risk of complacency in the work of female researchers who study female ascetic practitioners from an assumed shared standpoint.

Kanda Yoriko has studied the *miko* 神子 of the Rikuchu³ coast who belonged to Shugendo (mountain asceticism) in the premodern period. Her work, based on elaborate oral history research, sheds significant light on the religious life of these *miko*, whom scholarship had previously overlooked (see KANDA 1992 and 2001). It is certainly important to maintain intimate contact with the field site and close relationships with the subjects of the research, local women, but her candidly sympathetic studies that openly demonstrate solidarity with local women tend to lump together the experiences of individual women and judge the resultant composite to be the universal experience inherent to women.

In 1996, Kanda participated in the *Nunohashi kanjōe* 布橋灌頂会, an Edo period ceremony that once provided salvation for women who were not allowed to climb Mt. Tateyama 立山, which had been revived in Toyama Prefecture after an interval of 136 years. In her working paper, Kanda openly relays her own excitement and deep impressions of the ceremony, and mixes her own reaction with the thoughts of the local women who participated in it (see KANDA 2011). However, her use of expressions such as “we women” and “our *Nunohashi kanjōe*” leaves the impression that she lacks sufficient awareness of the relationship of the researcher and the researched. This approach often obscures the exploitation of women by women through the supposition that the researcher and her subjects share gender “as women the same” (KAWAHASHI and KUROKI 2004, 42). The mistake of taking the liberty to speak the thoughts of the other in place of the other seems to be all the more prevalent when the researcher locates herself and her subjects within a fellowship of women. Moreover, it is questionable if it is sufficient to describe the *Nunohashi kanjōe* merely as a “mystical experience,” which is how Kanda movingly responds in light of the fact the rite was performed for the salvation of women who were thought unable to attain rebirth in the pure land (KANDA 2011, 186). In this paper she also mentions that she had come across many *nyonin kekkai* or *nyonin kinsei*, and had the experience of being refused entry and glared at with cold stares at previous research sites (KANDA 2011, 187). Based on those experiences, it is probably more important to consider the value of reproducing and reviving of the *Nunohashi kanjōe* at the present time. What is clear from Kanda’s study is that there is no guarantee that the perspective of gender will be present in a study just because it is the work of a female researcher. It is still commonly

3. Rikuchu 陸中 is the name of a former province that included the areas of Iwate and Akita prefectures.

misunderstood that studies from the standpoint of women and studies from the perspective of gender are not equal.

There are also studies that attempt to tackle the problem of *nyonin kinsei* directly through historical and folklore research, such as SUZUKI Masataka's *Nyonin kinsei* (2002). In this work Suzuki discusses the history of *nyonin kinsei* in great detail while interlacing his abundant knowledge of Japanese folklore. Suzuki also presented a paper entitled "Mountain Worship and Gender" at the Nineteenth World Congress of the International Association for the History of Religions (IAHR 2005, Tokyo), where he insisted that the perspective of gender is indispensable to the study of mountain worship (SUZUKI 2007).

In the prologue of *Nyonin kinsei*, Suzuki acknowledges the fact that *nyonin kinsei* is a regulatory scheme that men forced upon women, but writes that he wants to provide an exposition of the Japanese way of life through the process of clarifying the details of *nyonin kinsei*'s production, transformation, and maintenance, while noting political and social changes "with calm eyes" (SUZUKI 2002, 4). The phrase "with calm eyes" seems to suggest that he considers the recent insistence of people who oppose *nyonin kinsei* from positions that emphasize the human rights of women or researchers with a gender or feminist studies approach as lacking the calmness of academic objectivity and neutrality. Moreover, he says that he wants to observe how women have received, resisted, and reshaped the prohibition while emphasizing the need to consider *nyonin kinsei* from multidirectional points of view (SUZUKI 2002, 4). Nevertheless, he eschews judging whether *nyonin kinsei* is a discriminative practice. KAWAHASHI (2004, 197) points out, however, that this move does not dissolve the question of why structures that give male ascetic practitioners the special authority to bar women are still maintained. Suzuki also mentions that thinking about *nyonin kinsei* allows people to become aware of sex differences, and that this leads them to reconsider men and women's respective ways of life (SUZUKI 2002, 222). Here, Kawahashi responds that we should not obscure how the removal of "women as a category" from the locus of cultural value relates to modern men and women's perception of gender (KAWAHASHI 2004, 197).

To summarize, when we survey the field we are forced to conclude that the perspective of gender has been absent or downplayed in Japanese folklore and religious studies. However, this should not be understood as merely a problem of individual scholars but as an issue for these disciplines as a whole. Folklore scholar Tsuru Reiko points out that despite the fact that every area and field within the academy has seen transformative self-reflection and the incorporation of feminist viewpoints, the Japanese study of folklore has continued as if feminism never existed (TSURU 2009, 19). Here we find a failure to recognize that in religious studies the perspective of gender is not simply one subject of study, but an analytical perspective that is indispensable to any discipline (NAKATANI

2003, 383). Furthermore, there is a bias towards the perspective of gender that sees it as an emotional approach incorporating a political agenda, and lacking academic objectivity and neutrality. Tanaka Masakazu and Kawahashi Noriko criticize academic objectivity and neutrality as premised upon androcentrism because they deceptively universalize as objective and neutral an understanding of religiosity that is already androcentric itself (TANAKA and KAWAHASHI eds. 2007, 10). They also point out that the absence of a gender perspective is also related to the lack of awareness of power and social status disparities between researchers and their subjects. They question whether the objectivity and neutrality of these studies can be guaranteed since it is after securing the socially privileged status of male academic researcher that the authors chose female believers of religion as their objects of inquiry (TANAKA and KAWAHASHI eds. 2007, 11).⁴

Furthermore, the bias that gender studies lacks academic objectivity and neutrality creates a general atmosphere that gender studies is something best left to women who are interested in the issue, and this attitude results in the misunderstanding that gender studies is the research of women undertaken by women. The experience of this researcher is that when I am asked to discuss “gender studies” at lectures, I am often expected to introduce the figure and voice of the woman who approaches faith with modesty and is indefatigable in the face of the limitations on women. In other words, I am not expected to follow the purpose of gender studies in an appropriate fashion by getting to the heart of the inequality of gender and the state of religion that has at times exploited and oppressed women.

Despite these expectations placed upon me as a female researcher, the leaders and practitioners who play the central organizational roles in the mountain worship fraternities that I have studied are mostly men. Within this androcentric world of mountain worship, there are many women who have found themselves conflicted and torn in various directions because of their female gender. It is imperative to trace the religious life of these fraternities, including the conflicts and dilemmas these women experience, while emphasizing the self-awareness and self-understanding of the people concerned.

4. A similar misunderstanding of the perspective of gender can be seen in the study of Japanese folklore. Although YAGI Tōru emphasizes the necessity of folklore studies that explore gender (2008), he notes that many folk researchers react strongly to the word “gender” because in addition to its original meaning, its currency within the feminist movement has given it an ideological air. Compared to other areas of the academy, there are many scholars in folklore studies who are particularly sensitive to this variety of ideology and consequently, this is most likely why the use of the word “gender” in folklore studies is extremely rare (YAGI 2008, 3). Tsuru Reiko points out the fundamental error of Yagi’s perception of the word “gender”: “Even if gender is exclusively used within a social movement, we should not be so naïve as to think that scholarship and social movements can be dissociated” (TSURU 2009).

Modern Female Ascetic Practitioners

For the remainder of this article I will consider the current status of modern female ascetic practitioners from the perspective of gender on the basis of my fieldwork. I have studied the ascetic practitioners of Kiso Ontake fraternities (木曾御嶽講), including taking part in their ascetic practices, since 2002. Because it is necessary to understand the often secretive details of the ascetic practices of mountain worship, and also due to the importance placed on praxis, I have participated in ascetic practices wearing a white religious robe. Furthermore, since beginning to study ascetic practitioners in the Ōmine mountains I have joined the *Okugake shugyō* (ascetic pilgrimage through the Ōmine mountains) four times. I should also add for the record that my grandfather (now deceased) was a practitioner in a Kiso Ontake fraternity, and this background narrowed my psychological distance from the ascetic practitioners I studied.

First, I must take up the problem of *nyonin kinsei*, which is a central theme of previous scholarship on sacred mountains and women. After *nyonin kekkaï* restrictions were publicly lifted by the Meiji Government in 1872, many women began entering sacred mountains throughout Japan. However, after the legal end of the restrictions, in mountain worship fraternities on the folk belief level, women were interrogated about menstruation when they sought to enter the mountains, and the tradition of considering menstrual blood unclean persisted.

Still now, various Kiso Ontake fraternities have several ways to ritually purify the “uncleanliness” of menstruation, and menstruation and afterbirth are clearly regarded within the rubric of the “uncleanliness of blood” (血穢). First, female practitioners that are menstruating are often prohibited from purifying themselves in the water at Kiso Ontake fraternities’ purification sites (潔斎場). However, cold water ablutions at the site of purification is the prerequisite that allows practitioners to don the white robe for ascetic practice, and this means that a female practitioner would not be able to train during the period of her menstruation. For this reason, in some Kiso Ontake fraternities a *sendatsu* 先達 (an ascetic practitioner who is in a leading position) performs the rite of purification (不浄祓いの法) allowing the women to perform ascetic practice without undertaking cold water ablutions at their purification site. Whether to include only the ascetic practitioners or rank and file believers as objects of this purification practice depends on the custom of each individual Kiso Ontake fraternity. Generally speaking, female practitioners receive this purification from the *sendatsu* before climbing the mountain based on their self-assessment. Some female practitioners hesitate to report their menstruation to *sendatsu* because most of these fraternity leaders are men. In some cases, a woman who suddenly begins menstruating while on the mountain is forced to descend in the direction of these

leaders.⁵ In some fraternities, instead of reporting it, *sendatsu* teach women that in order to purify themselves of sudden menstruation during practice, they can wear on their bodies a quantity of coarse salt wrapped in Japanese paper. Additionally, there was a custom that women secluded themselves for a period of seventy-two days following the delivery of a child in order to purify the impurity of blood. Not only were menstruating women or those right after delivery considered temporarily unclean, women who still had menstrual cycles and were involved in the delivery of children were also regarded as fundamentally unclean. Such women considered fundamentally unclean were permanently prohibited from entering the “sacred area” of a mountain.

Now over one hundred years old, female ascetic practitioner K. Y. (1914–), who leads a Kiso Ontake fraternity in Yokosuka, Kanagawa Prefecture, has experienced various forms of discrimination from male ascetic practitioners at places of ascetic practice because of this view of women as impure. When she was young, K. Y. practiced austerities several times a year with male practitioners, on each occasion for a period of about a week, but in many cases she could not conduct the same activities or go to the same places as the men. In particular, she was told that she could not perform cold water ablutions at waterfalls (*takigyōba* 滝行場) or go to the alpine lake called San no Ike (三の池), which is one of the most sacred places on the mountain, and consequently she was left at spots on the mountain while the men continued on. She felt extremely frustrated by these kinds of attitudes (KOBAYASHI 2011a).

On the other hand, the former female *gōriki* 強力, women who did portage on Mt. Kiso Ontake until the 1980s, told me that “there was not a single place” on the mountain that they were barred from entering because they were women. Not only could they go to the aforementioned San no Ike without restraint, on the contrary, they were often made to go to draw the sacred water of San no Ike in response to the requests of visitors (KOBAYASHI 2013, 82–83). In this fashion, the impurity of women was not considered at all when convenience took first priority. Thus, it is clear that the restraints upon women entering sacred areas on Mt. Kiso Ontake were arbitrary. The former female *gōriki* look back on themselves during the time they were active and reflect, “We were not even seen as women.” Although both female *gōriki* and female ascetic practitioners were women who entered the mountain, the way they were treated differed depending on the circumstances in which they were placed and the standpoint they

5. According to Nishigai Kenji, when about 180 members of a Kiso Ontake fraternity from western Aichi Prefecture were climbing towards the summit of Mt. Kiso Ontake in 1995, there was a woman who suddenly experienced the onset of menstruation at the eighth station of the mountain. This precipitated a discussion among the fraternity’s *sendatsu*, which resulted in the decision that the woman descend the mountain from that location. See KISO-ONTAKE HONKYŌ and NISHIGAI (1997, 109).



FIGURE 1. Divine possession (*oza*) on top of Mt. Kiso Ontake.

held. Additionally, as they describe having been “looked down upon” and “made fun of” by visitors to the mountain, we can surmise that the asymmetry here was one of “visitor and *gōriki*” rather than a function of gender.

In recent years, however, it has become difficult to regard the phenomenon of menstruation as “impure” and use it as a reason to exclude a woman from sacred areas. Consequently, there are cases in which entirely different rationalizations are used to place restrictions on menstruating women. A certain Kiso Ontake church in the Kinki district restricts menstruating women from entering steep areas on the mountain because the supposed lack of blood supply to the brain of a menstruating woman gives rise to the danger that she might stagger and fall. A male practitioner in his forties who is related to this church emphasized that they were not placing restrictions on women because of any impurity of menstruation, and explained with seeming confidence in the adequacy of their logic that, “women will understand if this is the reason.” In other words, preaching restraints on women because of the uncleanliness of menstruation is admittedly an anachronism, but their contemporary explanation is justified on the grounds that the possibility of a menstruating woman becoming anemic due to blood loss, then stumbling and falling, is logical, that is, scientific, and for this reason women may accept it. Moreover, another male ascetic practitioner from a Kiso Ontake fraternity in Aichi Prefecture explained the reason to exclude women from the mountains during menstruation was because there are “scientific grounds” that bears are attracted to the smell of blood. This mirrors a recent aspect of the backlash against gender studies and the feminist movement—researchers who dismiss these approaches using “scientific grounds” to justify arbitrary arguments (SEGUCHI 2006). Even

though the times change, the phenomenon of women's menstruation continues to be managed, prescribed, and restricted by men.

Kiso Ontake fraternities practice a ritual of divine possession called *oza* 御座. With the exception of a few female practitioners with natural skill for this practice, generally speaking women do not become *yorimashi* 憑坐 (mediums who receive the spirits into their bodies), which in Kiso Ontake fraternities are called *nakaza* 中座 or *kamishiro* 神代. Instead, most female practitioners perform *maeza* 前座, which entails the duty of controlling the divine spirits that descend in the body of *nakaza* (see photo). The reason often given for this is that divine spirits should not be brought down into the body of a woman who is experiencing menstruation. There are also fraternities that do not train female *nakaza* because of the certainty that there will be periods every month during which they cannot bring down the divine spirits into their bodies, and it is thought that this results in stagnation and inefficiency in the performance of the *oza* ritual and ascetic practices.

In addition to the phenomena of menstruation discussed above, there are other reasons that women may also be restricted from entering the mountains and performing ascetic practice. For example, there is a restriction based on the explanation that women are easily influenced by the spirit-related phenomena that lurk in the mountains.

Miyagi Tainen is the 52nd leader of the Honzan Shugen Shū 本山修験宗, a Shugendo sect whose head temple is the Shōgo'in Monzeki in Kyoto. Honzan Shugen Shū uses Mt. Sanjōgatake in the Ōmine Mountain range as one of the most important places for ascetic practices. Sanjōgatake is the one and only mountain in all of Japan that excludes women throughout its terrain. Miyagi speaks to this in his book *Dōjinai kokoro* (2012), as follows:

Shugendo sects and mountain Buddhist sects based on esoteric Buddhism have conveniently advocated the teachings of the five special hindrances for women, as well as the three masters women must follow (*sanjū* 三從, that is, her father, husband, and son), and have made expedient use of the popular view that mountain weather becomes stormy when a women enters due to the impurity of the blood of menstruation and birth. If, through attitudes of this sort, these sects have promoted contempt for women, by all means they must reflect upon this. (MIYAGI 2012, 164–65)

Miyagi agrees with opening Sanjōgatake to women, and is one person within the Shugendo organizations who has proactively worked for giving access to women. However, though he approves of lifting the exclusion of women and is active in the campaign to remove the ban, while insisting that he supports lifting the ban he nevertheless wants to retain some restrictions. He insists that the *omote gyōba* 表行場 (literally, the “exterior practice place”) and *ura gyōba* 裏行場 (the interior

practice place) on Sanjōgatake should remain closed to women. These two *gyōba* are famous areas of ascetic practice that include difficult ascetic practice sites included in the *Okugake shugyō* like Nishi no Nozoki 西の覗き and Kanekake Iwa 鐘掛岩. These are places where many female practitioners will want to undertake ascetic practice if Sanjōgatake is open to women. Miyagi explains that the reasoning for not opening these two ascetic practice areas is that generally women are sensitive to spiritual influences, and in the past there were actually several instances in which women on the mountain fell into altered states of consciousness, and while none of these led to accidents, their safety would not be guaranteed at the *omote gyōba* and *ura gyōba* (MIYAGI 2012, 167). With regard to Miyagi's explanation, the feminist theologian Kinukawa Hisako expresses some doubts: "The pretext that women are generally sensitive to spiritual influences, and the reasoning that it is not possible to further jeopardize them, seems initially like an expression of consideration for women, but is at the same time extremely bizarre. Isn't experiencing something spiritual one of the purposes of Shugendō? Even it is an extreme experience, why isn't it worth respecting?"⁶

Thus far I have considered *nyonin kinsei* from the two standpoints of the impurity of blood and the spiritual sensitivity of women. From the above discussion we can draw the following conclusions. While mountain worship fraternities that prohibit women from entering sacred mountains on account of the impurity of menstruation are no longer seen in recent years, by offering different rationalizations the trend of concretizing and normalizing the nature of women remains unchanged. Furthermore, the people who teach women these norms continue to be men who are in leading positions in mountain worship fraternity organizations. A woman's nature is ascribed value and her actions are regulated by men. This is a typical attitude that patriarchal societies have taken towards women. *Nyonin kinsei* arose from a mixture of androcentrism and religious faith, and is continued today by changing the grounds for restriction. The men who hold vested rights at sacred mountains, moreover, often have little awareness of the problem.

Changes at Ascetic Practice Sites Brought About by Women Themselves

As we have seen, various restrictions are still placed on women who perform ascetic practices at sacred mountains. It is not easy to find circumstances where women can subjectively play active roles within the organizations of mountain worship. How have women found their own place within the androcentric organizations and ascetic practice sites of mountain

6. This book by Miyagi was reviewed during the panel discussion that I arranged for the 72nd Annual Conference of the Japanese Association for Religious Studies (日本宗教学会第72回学術大会) in 2013. Kinukawa served as a commentator in the panel discussion, and her comments quoted here are taken from that discussion. See *Shūkyō kenkyū* 87, *bessatsu* (2014): 68–72.



FIGURE 2. The outdoor fire offering (*saitō goma ku*) at the Shōgō'in Monzeki, Kyoto.

worship? In this final section of this article, I examine the example of women who participate in the *Okugake shugyō*.

As I mentioned briefly at the beginning of this article, at present many women participate in the *Okugake shugyō* in the Ōmine mountains, and it is not uncommon to see women wearing the *suzukake* 鈴懸 ritual attire lined up among the ranks of *shugenja* 修験者 (ascetic practitioners) or at outdoor fire offerings (*saitō goma ku* 採燈護摩供) (see FIGURE 2). It was female practitioners themselves who opened the way towards today's state of affairs in Shugendō organizations. Miyagi Tainen keenly remembers the women who in 1960 suddenly showed up to participate in the *Okugake shugyō* without first receiving the permission of the Honzan Shugen Shū. As Miyagi tells it, they had come on their own animus, and moved along with the group at its fringes, all the while exposed to the cold eyes of the male practitioners, who glared at them as “uninvited guests.” Miyagi remembers that the attitudes of the men around these women gradually changed as those female practitioners continued participating in the *Okugake shugyō* every year, and in this way the participation of women eventually gained official approval.

Oda Masayasu has studied the postwar *Okugake shugyō* of the Shōgō'in Monzeki using its bulletin *Shugen* 修験 (continued by the journal *Honzan Shugen* 本山修験; see ODA 2013). According to Oda, coinciding with the participation of women, the Shōgō'in Monzeki gradually set a route through the mountains that bypassed the *nyonin kinsei* area, making it easier for women to participate. Furthermore, sightseeing was carried out at the end of the *Okugake shugyō* before the addition of female practitioners disappeared and was replaced by specialized

ascetic practices. Additionally, when women first began participating, men lined up in the front and the women followed behind them at the end of the procession through the mountains, but after women joined the practice, lining up gradually changed to an order based on religious rank (ODA 2013). In short, the actions of female practitioners themselves opened places for ascetic practice that had been restricted to men, and altered many customs that had been resistant to change. Furthermore, this history overturns the reasons that the side opposing lifting *nyonin kinsei* has given: “the place of ascetic practice will react violently” if women enter Sanjōgatake, and “men will not be able to concentrate on ascetic practice.”

However, we must not forget that women had to follow men into these places that were once restricted to men, and from this point women continued to practice while always remaining considerate of the customs of mountain ascetic sites and the male ascetic practitioners who held vested rights there. Among the female practitioners, there are some who are concerned that they, who are late-comers, should not destroy the “tradition” that male ascetic practitioners themselves have forged. Furthermore, there are women who are careful not to pose a hindrance to the practice of men, and strive to practice equally or even harder than men as they feel this is how they will become accepted.

The women who belong to Honzan Shugen Shū have opened the path to female participation in the *Okugake shugyō* of their own animus. They did not accomplish this by foregoing action, nor by being voiceless subjects. In fact, there are many women who want to climb Sanjōgatake if it is opened to women, but also some who do not think performing ascetic practices at Sanjōgatake is an obligatory requisite for an ascetic practitioner, and some who do not find significance in advocating for opening the site at the cost of plunging the sect into internal chaos (FUJITA 2005, 191). However, there is a tendency to, without taking the varied complicated circumstances into account, see female practitioners who hold such attitudes as people who are ignorant of their own human rights.

In August 2006, the Shōgō'in Monzeki held a meeting called “A Gathering to Hear the Opinions of Female Believers and Practitioners (Shōgō'in josei shinto/gyōjasan ni kiku kai 聖護院女性信徒・行者さんに聞く会). Holding this meeting was requested of Miyagi Tainen by the “Association for Lifting the Rule of Exclusion of Women from Mt. Ōmine” (“Ōminesan nyonin kinsei” no kaihō o motomeru kai 「大峰山女人禁制」の開放を求める会, hereafter referred to as “the Association”)⁷ for purposes of exchanging opinions between female adherents/practitioners and the Association. Although I was not present at the meeting, some of the female practitioners who attended later described the situation to me. K-san (early sixties at that time) said, “Women of ‘the Association’ were all

7. This Association consists of scholars, teachers, and human rights activists, but does not include the ascetic practitioners.

eloquent because they are teachers and the like, but I was not able to understand what was what because the women of the Association went on one-sidedly, talking nonstop.” Additionally, S-san (late fifties at that time), who is usually taciturn, explained that she began to cry during the meeting because she became confused when asked why she did not actively seek the opening of Sanjōgatake to women. On the other hand, the Association was disappointed with the failure of the talks that occurred because the female practitioners burst into tears and discussion became impossible.

Furthermore, people within the Shōgo’in Monzeki leadership who were pushing for opening Sanjōgatake also became disappointed with the female practitioners who attended. The executives of the Shōgo’in Monzeki who are active in the movement to open Sanjōgatake to women, such as Miyagi and Okamoto Kodō (the head of the temple office of Honzan Shugen Shū), wrung their hands over why they had such poor awareness of their own human rights. In other words, the female practitioners were criticized by both the activists and the executives for having an insufficient awareness of their own rights. After the meeting, Okamoto told me “Because they are all women, I thought they would work together and cooperate with one another to work towards opening Sanjōgatake to women.” However, he told me that one of the female practitioners who participated in the meeting tearfully exclaimed, “I can’t climb the mountain with people wearing sports shoes,” that is, drawing a distinction between herself and the activists in the Association.⁸ What becomes clear, once again, is the problem of the stereotype that women will be able to collaborate with one another as “women the same,” and it also becomes apparent that the problem of working towards removing *nyonin kinsei* is not simply an issue of sharing female gender, but also depends on the sense of faith possessed by individual female practitioners.

For many years, both Miyagi and Okamoto have been writing articles concerning the problem of *nyonin kinsei* and the opening of Sanjōgatake to women in the *Bulletin* of the Shōgo’in Monzeki. In their articles both of them insist that if male practitioners are proud that Sanjōgatake is a “sacred place for men only,” while at the very same time excluding others, then this behooves them to reexamine their attitudes as practitioners and the sacredness of the mountain (see MIYAGI 1997 and OKAMOTO 2004). However, I think that it will be difficult to realize the opening of Sanjōgatake to women only by urging male practitioners who have vested rights at the mountain to reflect on their own attitudes toward ascetic practice. If the Shōgo’in Monzeki wants to push forward the discussion in practical terms

8. Instead of sports shoes or hiking boots, as part of their sacred ceremonial clothing ascetic practitioners usually wear white *jika tabi* 地下足袋, a variant of the rubber-soled Japanese work socks used by laborers. Thus, with this comment the female practitioner drew a clear in-group-out-group distinction between herself and the members of the Association.

while including female practitioners in the process, it is important not only to set up informal “discussion meetings” or “talks,” but to establish a formal committee inside the sect to examine the issue of opening Sanjōgatake to women, and appoint female practitioners as official standing members. The first thing to do is to create a structure and achieve an environment in which female practitioners’ positions are secure so that they can offer their opinions without constraint.

Conclusion

In this piece I first drew attention to the absence of the perspective of gender in previous studies, and then I discussed the situation of female ascetic practitioners that becomes visible when we incorporate the perspective of gender, doing so through examples of women who are active at practice sites on Mt. Kiso Ontake and in the Ōmine mountain range. The perspective of gender reveals various power structures and social inequalities that oppress people. By adopting the perspective of gender, we notice that androcentrism and discriminatory practices still exist within the organizations of mountain worship, and moreover, these attitudes and practices are often continued as “tradition” without examining the facts of the situation. Additionally, a gender perspective that demands sensitivity to the differences within “the category of the woman” rejects stereotypes of female ascetic practitioners and reveals an actual image of the diverse backgrounds and thinking of each individual female ascetic practitioner.

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