*Japanese Journal of Religious Studies* 50/1: 1–47
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dx.doi.org/10.18874/jjrs.50.1.2023.1-47

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# On the Verge of Damnation and Buddhahood

## Motherhood, Female Corporeality, and Koan Exegesis

Buddhist scriptures depict the female body according to two contrasting models. On the one hand, female flesh is the epitome of defilement that hinders proper salvation. Yet, on the other hand, the gestational body is employed as a metaphor and a model to depict the highest spiritual perfection of the Buddhist clergy. By investigating these two seemingly incompatible approaches, this article shows how these contrasting models coexisted within the same doctrinal framework in early modern Sōtō Zen secret sources. In particular, it explores a Sōtō Zen secret document from the early modern period entitled *Ise niji kirigami*, which provides the doctrinal foundation for salvific rituals directed to women who died during parturition. The peculiarity of this document is the combination of conceptualizations typically associated with female pollution with a wide range of theorizations mainly derived from esoteric discourse on the kami, the *Lotus Sūtra*, and Zen koan interpretations. Therefore, through the investigation of the affinities with koan exegesis, Buddhist scriptures, and kami-related theories, this article aims to broaden our understanding of the tools used by early modern Zen monks to theorize the female body and contribute to the ongoing debate on the representation of the female spiritual and corporeal condition in Buddhist sources.

keywords: female salvation—koan—*Lotus Sūtra*—Sōtō Zen—Ise—kami

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The image of the embryo dwelling inside the womb not yet tainted by the dualism rooted in deluded reality was an ubiquitous metaphor used to describe the experience of awakening across different religious traditions (Ohnuma 2012; Andreeva and Steavu 2016; Langenberg 2017; Buckelew 2018). The embryological model was also an apt image to depict the genesis of both the cosmos and the human being, given that the micro and the macro cosmos were ultimately a reflection of each other. The case of Japanese medieval Buddhism is emblematic of the generalized adoption of the gestational notions to describe the monastic experience. As many scholars have discussed, a few scriptures elaborate on the motif of fetal development, and they enrich this symbolism with cosmological theorizations that emerged in the context of Buddhism-Shinto (Dolce 2006; Andreeva and Steavu 2016; Andreeva 2017).

The gestational model contributed to deepening the understanding of the human body and its biological functions, especially in relation to the problematic event of death. In late medieval Zen traditions, Sōtō Zen secret documents known as *kirigami* 切紙 (paper strips) were particularly eloquent about this theme, given that funeral rites were often explained by using the metaphor of the embryo in the uterus (Licha 2016).[1] The moment of death was thus going back to the state of non-differentiation in the mother's womb and corresponded to the ultimate spiritual perfection. Although embryology was a widely accepted hermeneutical tool among medieval religious groups, a question remains unresolved. How do these notions influence the conceptualization of the female body?

In recent years, this query has partially found an answer in the study by Anna Andreeva (2018), which has cast light on the intertwining of Buddhist discourse

* The research for this article was made possible through the generous support of the Japan Foundation Doctoral Fellowship and the Shinjo Ito Postdoctoral Fellowship in Japanese Buddhism at the University of California, Berkeley.

1. *Kirigami* were used as certificates to attest to the transmission of secret teachings between master and disciple. Likely originating within medieval esoteric Tendai (Stone 2003, 101), these peculiar documents contain different kinds of notions including ritual, doctrinal, and liturgical instructions. In the premodern Sōtō school, *kirigami* were the predominant form of communication and represented a fundamental aspect of how knowledge was shared and transmitted (Ishikawa 2002). I use "Sōtō school" to refer to the lineage that originated in Japan with Dōgen 道元 (1200–1253). However, during the medieval period and the first part of the early modern period, the Sōtō school was composed of several lineages independent from each other and characterized by different factional identities (Bodiford 2008, 121–138). In this context, secrecy became a tool to express these factional identities coexisting within the same school.

and the theme of female reproduction during the Heian period. Andreeva has shown that Buddhist monks were actively involved in rituals and practices directed to aristocratic women and developed manuals to tackle several aspects of pregnancy, from infertility to changing the sex of the fetus in utero. Nevertheless, the medieval period represented a major turning point in the conceptualization of female biological functions as well as of women's subjectivity (Ruch 2002; Meeks 2010; Pandey 2020). Indeed, these centuries presented the massive circulation of discourses about the fall into hell caused by the pollution of the female body and depicted women as intrinsically impure (Moerman 2005; Glassman 2008; Meeks 2020b). The wide acceptance of the apocryphal sutra *Foshuo dazang zhengjiao xuepenjing* (hereafter *Blood Bowl Sūtra*), which championed this vision, led to the identification of childbirth and parturition blood with defilement. Therefore, bodily images, albeit effective and explicative, appear to be intrinsically irreconcilable with the idea of buddhahood, for they are reminiscent of blood and dirt. How can the parallelism of the maternal womb with the attainment of buddhahood be reconciled with the impurity of the female body? Can women's flesh be at the same time the culmination of damnation and the epitome of awakening? The resolution of these doubts might be found in the large body of works pertaining to the Sōtō Zen secret sources, which turned into a discursive arena in which such concerns were expressed and shared.

For the sake of clarity, it must be noted that Sōtō Zen secret literature does not offer substantial insights about women and female salvation before the late sixteenth century. One of the few examples of how Sōtō Zen monks viewed women's roles in the monastic communities emerges from the biography and miscellaneous works of Keizan Jōkin 瑩山紹瑾 (1268–1325), known for his deep bond with his grandmother and mother. The fundamental role played by these women in Keizan's life might have influenced the establishment of the Entsūin 円通院, a convent dedicated to the bodhisattva Avalokiteśvara and the salvation of all women (Faure 1996, 34–43). The generations succeeding Keizan embraced the endemic culture of secrecy (Scheid and Teeuwen 2015, 1–35). Hence, Sōtō Zen *kirigami* showcase an adaptation to the medieval religious horizon resulting in an interesting combination of texts and ideas transmitted within and outside Buddhist lineages.

Although these secret insights have been erroneously understood as an obsolete legacy no longer reflecting the modern face of Sōtō Zen, the enormous textual body composed of secret manuals illustrates the social and religious changes experienced by one of the most widespread Buddhist schools in premodern Japan (Bodiford 2008, 107–134). In addition, *kirigami* are a unique repository of knowledge portraying how the premodern culture of secrecy was engendered by means of mobility of notions and people either belonging to Buddhist or non-Buddhist communities. Accordingly, the mobility endowed in secrecy is a

fundamental aspect to investigate how *kirigami* are built. Being the annotations of oral instructions, the structure of these documents does not follow one single logic; instead, it is a patchwork of logic and ideas revealing that knowledge acquisition was neither linear nor systematic, yet it epitomizes the exchanges and networks created on the ground.

By the end of the sixteenth century, the administration of funerary practices and ceremonies revolving around death shaped the contents of Sōtō Zen secret insights. In addition to providing specific ritual instructions, these secret manuals also presented to the monastic audience how funerals and commemorating ceremonies were part of their monastic practice to the extent of being an occasion to apply Zen teachings to the lived experience of monks. Hence, Zen monks acted as mediators with the afterlife by developing a wide range of death coping strategies that made possible the achievement of enlightenment (Bodiford 1992; Williams 2009, 50–58). In this context, Sōtō Zen monks specialized in specific rituals directed to save women who died during childbirth. The extensive transmission and use of such practices in Buddhist communities are of no surprise given that death in childbirth was a common event carrying significant implications such as women's salvation, pollution, and eventually, their rebirth in hell.

This article focuses on the analysis of these discursive strategies and presents a *kirigami* from the Sōtō Zen secret textual corpus entitled *Ise niji kirigami* transmitted during the early seventeenth century that revolves around the salvation of mothers who died before or during parturition. Unlike many secret sources of this genre that succinctly provide only the ritual passages to save women deceased during pregnancy, the *Ise niji kirigami* is one of the few examples displaying the doctrinal and hermeneutical foundation to explain why Sōtō monks were required to manage such ceremonies. This article analyzes how and why the *Ise niji kirigami* drew from the medieval tradition of secrecy ranging from esoteric kami-related theories to koan commentaries to argue that the conceptualization of women's bodies was produced by the overlapping of multi-layered theorizations on liminal bodies (that is, kami) and pristine bodies (that is, the monastic body and the buddha body). Indeed, the *Ise niji kirigami* discloses the dynamics that participated in the religious construction of female salvation directed to the clerical audience by adapting the concepts deriving from medieval secrecy. Although the *Ise niji kirigami* is not entirely representative of the Sōtō school, it showcases a relevant example that offers a more dynamic interpretation about how the predominantly male clergy conceived women's bodies beyond and within gendered concepts traditionally entrenched in the impossibility of women to achieve awakening. The text also demonstrates how this understanding was integrated within the monastic practice and seen ultimately as a moment of learning and spiritual refinement.

*Embodied Hell: Emplacing Damnation Within Female Flesh*

The *Ise niji kirigami* provides the doctrinal foundation that allowed, and to some extent encouraged, the administration of salvific rites directed to women. The soteriological framework of the documents combines Buddhist classics and medieval religious scriptures into four motifs corresponding to each of the four sections of this article. The four paragraphs reveal the historical and cultural factors underlying the formation of this document, thereby showing how the monastic community conceptualized its relationship with the female body and, while facing the problem of parturition defilement, sidestepped the duality intrinsic to women's spiritual disposition and biological determinism through the expedient of koan exegesis.

> [1] In the two graphs of *I-Se* 伊勢, *I* 伊 is the male, and *Se* 勢 is the female. The *Se* originates the human being. It is the complete force.[2] It is the inherently immutable Mahāvairocana. Heaven is the realm of the vajra realm; earth is the world of the womb: these two are the *yin* 陰 and *yang* 陽. The feminine is the *bodhimaṇḍa* of the three generations of buddhas, the authentic position (*hon'i* 本位) of the treasury of the true dharma-eye, and the exquisite mind of nirvana.
>
> [2a] Therefore, the Devadatta chapter proclaims that the instant transformation of the [dragon] girl is the state of no-origin and the fundamental principle of non-duality. [The *Lotus Sūtra*] also maintains that upon attaining the state of awakening, the dragon princess offered to the venerable one the precious jewel. She was then said to have transformed into a man.
>
> [2b] The invaluable jewel donated in that moment is the rounded and milky pearl, which [is akin to the stage] of the muddied ocean of the universe when the fetus is not yet dwelling inside the mother's womb. Thus, the [scriptures] say, "Through the reversed spear of heaven, Mt. Sumeru opened up and [hence] the entire world formed. This is called Awajishima 淡路島. This is also known as the heavenly *qi* 気. The seven generations of heavenly gods still abide in the cloud and do not have an appearance yet." It is the [condition] before entering the womb. The father's defilement is the bones, the mother's defilement is the skin and flesh. From the union of the red and white fluids, the human [body] is formed. The center of the mother's chest corresponds to dwelling on a wet leaf. At that moment, there is no deluded mind. There is no form. Following

2. This expression derives from the formula *hito tairaka ni umare maru chikara* 人平生丸力, "the complete force from which all human beings are born." This line is found in the Edo-period secret manual *Sangen icchi sho* 三賢一致書 (alternatively *Sangai isshin ki* 三界一心記) known for an interesting combination of kami-related concepts, esoteric Buddhism, and Zen. The words *hito* and *maru* might be an allusion to the common name Hitomaru 人丸 used to refer to the legendary poet Kakinomoto no Hitomaro 柿本人麻呂 (c. 690) and the medieval esoteric tradition centered on the literary and poetic production about Ise (Sanford 1997, 29, n. 46).

this state, the form emerges, and the five parts of the body begin to manifest. Within the tenth day, the body appears in its form, [yet] the six faculties are not yet aware of the form. [This stage] is thus called the no-birth. During the act of birth, this is the principle of all things.

[3] Being up on a tree by hanging from a branch with one's mouth designates the mother's breast. Being under the tree is leaving the womb. Therefore, we say that replying [to the question] when one is on the top of a tree is easy, replying when one is under the tree is difficult. To indicate the state of abiding inside the mother's womb, we comment that the top of the tree is the womb, [while] the base of the tree is the [act of] leaving the womb and being exposed to the myriad of sufferings [of the dualism] of cold and hot. The bare pillar[3] stands inside the womb, and it is the exact point at which the red and white fluids merge. Since even [the merging of the red and white fluids] occurs in the absence of any thoughts and [corresponds to] the attainment of one's original mind, it is also known as being covered in the red mantle (that is, the placenta).

[4] When indicating life, it is called death. For this reason, being born is dying at the sight of the many sufferings. Dying is being alive. At the time of birth, one crosses the River of the Three Destinies (*sanzu* 三途). Inside the [woman's] chest, there is the River of the Three Destinies. Drain and let flow the bloody fluid from the left side. From the right side, run out the polluted water. The water is [then] drained out from the center. These are the River of the Three Destinies. Given that the buddhas of the three generations alike know all at once the principle of original non-duality, if [the woman] attains awakening she [will be reborn] in the land of the buddhas of the ten directions. If she remains in the delusional state, she will go to the realm of the ten hells, which is also known as the [pool] of women's menstrual blood. Inside the [woman's] chest there is a black snake. [Indeed,] the experience of the sufferance [originating from] the five signs of decay and the three distresses, flows in the center [that is, the chest]. This then turns the monthly water into the menstruation flow.[4] (Ishikawa 1993b, 133)

The *kirigami* opens with the elaboration of the two graphs of *I-Se*, a widespread allegory depicting the formation of the universe that arises from sexual union. The second paragraph deals with the famous episode of the dragon princess narrated in the *Lotus Sūtra*. The third theme introduces the conceptual combination of the practices performed to save women and koan exegesis. The

3. The bare pillar (*rochū* 露柱) designates the pillars inside the monastery perimeter that are entirely exposed. In Zen literature, the bare pillar symbolizes the state of the terse and unobstructed mind (*Foguo Yuanwu chanshi biyan lu*, T 2003, 48.208c29–209b20).

4. The document uses the terms "monthly water" (*gessui* 月水) and "menstruation flow" (*sawari* 佐波利) interchangeably. In Chinese sources, given the association between moon and tides with yin in the yin-yang correlative system, menstruation was called monthly water (*yueshui* 月水) (Chu 1980, 42). The *Ise niji kirigami* is also analyzed in Licha (2023, 257–261).

koan mentioned here is from the *Wumenguan* and serves to revise female gestation as an allegory of awakening. Lastly, the closing motif explores the consequences of rebirth in hell inscribed within the biomarkers of women's bodies, such as blood and impurity.

It must be noted that the investigation of the document in this article follows a thematic criterion. However, the *Ise niji kirigami*, and this genre of documents in general, resembles a collection of notes quickly taken during explanatory encounters with one's master. Therefore, the *Ise niji kirigami* does not follow a logical progression and simply juxtaposes different reflections about the four themes discussed in this article. Given the lack of a coherent structure, to guide the reader through the underlying logic and complexities of this kind of source, this article does not investigate the motifs according to the order in which these were originally placed in the document. Yet, the current study reshapes the main topics of the *kirigami* into an argumentative framework to illuminate the intellectual process that led to the creation of these sources. Therefore, the motifs are investigated following the order corresponding to paragraphs 4, 2a and 2b, 1, and 3 of the *Ise niji kirigami*.

These four themes are conceptually distant and, to some extent, contradict each other. In the following sections, the analysis of these motifs will reveal the composite and fragmented identity of the female corporeality, whose representation was not limited to horror and disgust. The conceptualization of the gestational body thus transcended these boundaries and existed within a semantic realm of seeming contradiction that swung between salvation and damnation, holiness and monstrosity.

The most effective manner in which to investigate the document is by first exploring the context in which it developed. The fourth paragraph introduces the theological context that inspired the *Ise niji kirigami*. Two interrelated symbolic loci emerge from this section. The first entails the agency of monks to save mothers who died during parturition, while the second deals with female defilement and its late medieval conceptualizations. In other words, the *Ise niji kirigami* encodes different doctrinal manifestations that validate the salvific intentions of Zen monks performing rituals to save women, more specifically women who died during childbirth. The longstanding religious tradition of Buddhist monks saving mothers was not a Sōtō Zen invention, nor was it developed in Japan (Cole 1998; Ohnuma 2007). Indeed, the theme of priests rescuing their mothers from a cruel destiny was a locus of tales about the life of eminent Buddhist figures (Ōsumi 1983). Several biographies contained in the *Genkō shakusho* 元亨釈書 by the Zen monk Kokan Shiren 虎関師錬 (1278–1347) illustrate the moral debt of monks to rescue their mothers from hell and, in some cases, retain a moral message that encouraged women to become mothers of eminent monks in order to be saved (Ebisawa 2007; Meeks 2010, 265–273; Sanvido 2023).

Although the *Ise niji kirigami* does not directly quote tales of monks and their mothers, the employment of these stories in the earlier ritual setting of memorial services for mothers shows the attempt to provide a rationale underlying the performance of such ceremonies, hence adding an important piece to the semantic framework in which the *Ise niji kirigami* was composed.[5] In addition, medieval narratives of filial piety emerged in tandem with the concept of female pollution, which is the central motif of the fourth paragraph. The most emblematic example of this sort is the *Blood Bowl Sūtra*. The legend of this sutra narrates that Mulian 目連, driven by deep filial piety, exercised his extrasensory powers to descend into hell and save his mother.[6] Mulian discovers that the *contrapasso* for all women is being immersed in an enormous lake of blood since their sin had been the defilement of earth spirits through their uterine fluids. Therefore, to save women and mothers from their eternal damnation, the Buddha preached this sutra, which ought to be copied to allow mothers of the past, present, and future to escape from their cruel destiny. In China, the sutra served specifically to prevent the disgraceful fall into the abyss of hell, especially for women who died during childbirth (Maekawa 2003; Meeks 2020a), which appears as an *ante litteram* formulation of the soteriological approach similarly adopted in Japan, in particular during the Edo period (Williams 2009, 50–58).

Paragraph 4 embraces this symbolic universe and relies on the enduring association that sees parturition blood as well as women's menstruation as polluted. By postulating the intrinsic uncleanness of female corporeality, this section provides the main reason why women in such circumstances necessitate the intervention of a professional Buddhist figure. The rhetorical strategy of our document is not limited to evoking the gruesome hell inscribed in the fate of women. Yet, quite tellingly, it professes the existence of such a hell within female flesh, which appears as a map of her damnation since inside her body resides two markers of the infernal afterlife, the River of the Three Destinies in her belly and the snake abiding in her chest associated with the impurity of blood.

The River of the Three Destinies is the place connecting this with the other world and is oft included in the medieval illustrations of the afterlife, such as the

5. As Michel Mohr (2013) discusses, the Japanese Rinzai Zen monk Tōrei Enji 東嶺円慈 (1721–1792) proposed a Zen-based interpretation of the *Fumu en nanbao jing* 父母恩難報経, a Chinese scripture developed between the fifth and the sixth century that praises filial piety. Tōrei's approach to this sutra resembles the same hermeneutical strategy of the *Ise niji kirigami* and reveals the ability of Zen monks to readapt teachings from heterogeneous cultural backgrounds to their own experiences.

6. The sutra exists in many variants, and the story of Mulian visiting the afterlife differs accordingly. Another scripture deeply linked to the *Blood Bowl Sūtra*, the *Yulanpen jing* 盂蘭盆経, hinges on the salvation of Mulian's mother from the realm of the hungry ghosts (Glassman 2008, 176). A historical discussion about the transmission of the *Blood Bowl Sūtra* in Japan can be found in Meeks (2020b).

FIGURE 1. Detail from Saidaiji's *Kumano mandara* 熊野曼荼羅 (undated). Kṣitigarbha helps the couple to cross the River of the Three Destinies. Courtesy of Saidaiji. © Saidaiji. All rights reserved.

*Kumano kanshin jikkai mandara* 熊野観心十界曼荼羅 (hereafter, *Kumano mandara*), employed during preaching via picture scrolls (*etoki* 絵解き) between the sixteenth and the seventeenth century. This mandala is organized into two sections, of which the upper one illustrates in a bridge-like structure the different stages of human life from birth to death, while the rest of the painting is dedicated to the ten realms of rebirth. In the left-hand lower section, we see a couple formed by a man and a woman crossing a bridge on the River of the Three Destinies together with the bodhisattva Kṣitigarbha.

According to Michiyo OGAWA (2020, 272), the couple's salvation depended upon the successful childbirth accomplished during their lifetime. Accordingly, becoming a mother supposedly prevented the woman from being drowned eternally in the blood pool.[7] Following this explanation, it becomes clear why the *kirigami* implicitly suggests removing the uterine water by piercing three different parts of the belly, which are representative of the three branches forming the River of the Three Destinies.[8] While this exhortation is unlikely to correspond to the actual act of performing a surgical operation on the deceased female body,[9] it

7. On the relationship between mother's bodies and awakening, see BLAIR (2016).

8. The imagery of the River of the Three Destinies is probably inspired by an analogous Chinese locus, the Nai 奈 River as seen in the *Shiwang jing* 十王経 (IWAMOTO 1979, 312–333). Moreover, starting with the *Jizō Bosatsu hosshin in'en jūō kyō* several sources suggest that each bridge to cross the river corresponds to different stages of spiritual refinement (TEISER 1994, 33). In the case of the *Jizō Bosatsu hosshin in'en jūō kyō*, the river can be crossed at the shallows of a mountain stream, at a deep river, or by a bridge (X 1: 20.404c11–13).

9. Several *kirigami* illustrate in detail how to separate the woman from the baby (*mi futatsu* 身二つ) (ISHIKAWA 1987; 1994). However, Sōtō monks would not perform surgical operations; rather, they were mainly responsible for the ritual function, while the procedure, if it occurred, would have been conducted by a physician (TSUTSUMI 1999, 133–152; WILLIAMS 2008, 224).

might be read as an indication to assist the woman while fording the river, hence enabling the monk to play the same role as Kṣitigarbha in the *Kumano mandara*.[10] Thus, our document alludes to the operation of metaphorically removing the uterine water by opening the belly in three different parts. This indication is the only aspect that suggests the presence of a ritual and is reminiscent of other ceremonies performed for deceased pregnant women that shall be discussed later.

The second main element of the fourth paragraph states the primary reason for women's perennial castigation in hell. In other words, the five signs of decay and the three distresses (*gosui sannetsu* 五衰三熱) assume the form of a snake that abides inside the female body and turns into menstruation blood throughout her life. The conceptual overlapping of female pollution, reptile nature, and blood became a central component of medieval narratives about women's inevitable fate in the afterlife. One of the most famous examples is again from the *Kumano mandara*, which translates in visual terms the representation of this fate, echoing the descriptions of hell in the *Blood Bowl Sūtra* (Moerman 2005, 222–224). In the lower right-hand portion of the *Kumano mandara*, we see the hell of the blood pond (*chi no ike jigoku* 血の池地獄) that contains several women with serpentine features, while pedestals in the shape of a lotus flower and a lotus leaf emerge from the pond and host two women peacefully praying in white garments.

A fundamental reference to deepen our understanding of this scene is a medieval Tendai commentary to the *Blood Bowl Sūtra*, the *Ketsubonkyō dangishi*, the first commentarial edition of this sutra. As Lori Meeks discusses in a forthcoming publication, this commentary plausibly became part of sermon-stories preached by itinerant storytellers and of *otogizōshi* 御伽草子 (popular short stories) literature. In the *Ketsubonkyō dangishi*, we learn that all women without exception are reborn as snakes:

> All the women who fall into this hell are transformed into snakes. These women are snakes 20 *jō* 丈 in length. Women with minor karmic ties become snakes of 8 *jō* in length. The reptile bodies are inflicted with afflictions. These are known as the sufferings of the snake's body. There are 84,000 scales. Underneath each of these scales lie 84,000 insects that continually corrode their flesh.
> (Makino and Kodate 2000, 17; paraphrased in Meeks forthcoming)

The manual equates women to animals (*chikushō* 畜生) "since the present pool of blood represents the ignorance of women, they have the same mind as the animals on the blood path" (Makino and Kodate 2000, 21; Meeks forth-

10. The *Jizō Bosatsu hosshin in'en jūō kyō* comments that a woman can cross only when assisted by the man who first was fond of her (that is, her husband) (x 1: 20.404c14; Sanvido 2023).

FIGURE 2. Detail from Saidaiji's *Kumano mandara* (undated). Women in the blood pool. Picture courtesy of Saidaiji. © Saidaiji. All rights reserved.

coming).[11] This interpretation proposes a dehumanization of the female body, whose biological characteristics are seen as a direct reflection of their spiritual capacities. Although less explicitly, the last paragraph of the *Ise niji kirigami* embraces the same vivid set of images found in the Tendai text that links sufferings to a specific marker within the body. We must avoid, however, reaching the premature conclusion that the *Blood Bowl Sūtra* textual tradition represents the only source of inspiration for the *Ise niji kirigami*.

Nevertheless, serpents were not exclusively symbolic of pollution and women's biological characteristics. On the contrary, medieval Tendai theorizations on kami point to the snake form as the manifestation (*suijaku* 垂迹) of deities who, to save sentient beings, "dimmed their light and mingled with the dust of the world" (*wakō dōjin* 和光同塵). For instance, the Tendai compendium *Keiran shūyōshū* proclaims that humans and kami thoroughly incarnate the three poisons and, as such, encapsulate a reptile essence (T 2410, 76.517c17–19; translated in ANDREEVA 2017, 228). Accordingly, the reptile essence endowed in both kami and humans symbolizes the non-duality of ignorance and ultimate reality; the rhetoric adopted in the *Ise niji kirigami* to describe the female condition is likely reminiscent of the esoteric Buddhist discourse on kami.

Indeed, the ontological affinity between reptile creatures and women is stated clearly in the *Ise niji kirigami*, given that female sufferance is symbolized by the five signs of decay and the three distresses. This concept was largely adopted in

11. As MEEKS (forthcoming) points out, another important aspect of this text is the characterization of the menstrual blood as the origin of all sentient beings' afflictions.

medieval Japan to explain the ontological condition of female kami. *Otogizōshi* literature, for instance, offers several narrative examples in which female deities would beg for monastic intervention to achieve salvation, which was hindered by the five signs of decay and the three distresses. These tales frequently feature dragon deities such as Benzaiten 弁才天 and stage a common literary trope that is the bestowal of the robe and the creation of a unique connection with the Buddhist clergy, often represented by a Zen monk (Yamamoto 1993, 122–124; Itō 2012, 181–184). Therefore, the representation of female salvation as depicted in late medieval sources existed inseparably from theories about kami ontology, given the physical and spiritual affinity between women and kami (Itō 2012, 184).[12]

By the Edo period, the ontological affinity between women and kami came to be a stable component of funerary rhetoric. For instance, a seventeenth-century manual conceptually linked to the *Ise niji kirigami*, the *Tainai goi mandara*, adopts the embryological scheme of the five phases inside the womb to illustrate the changes occurring between death and the subsequent rebirth.[13] This text equates the maternal womb to the shrine of the kami, and thus the fetus dwelling inside the womb is the kami. Although this commentary does not embrace the serpentine symbolism, it adopts kami-related knowledge to describe the gestation in the womb, hence applying such interpretative tools to female corporeality (Nakahara, Yoneda, and Gōto 2018, 476).

Hence, the *Ise niji kirigami* appears to be embedded in the dense cluster of references that flourished during the medieval period, when the snake symbolism was assimilated in the Buddhist discourse on the kami and resulted in innumerable ritual formulations, theoretical elaborations, and vivid iconographies (Andreeva 2017, 306–307; Itō 1997, 67–68). In other words, the representation of the woman's afflictions as a snake inside her breast is the result of a theoretical cluster that derives from both the visual illustrations and the commentarial tradition of the *Blood Bowl Sūtra*, and the theory of the reptile essence inherited

12. Itō (2012) notes that this discourse was intertwined with another crucial issue represented by the gender of Amaterasu and their role in the imperial genealogy. Being the primary ancestor of imperial lore, in Buddhist-Shinto sources Amaterasu was frequently considered a male being in order to avoid the problem of pollution and the inability to achieve awakening linked to female deities.

13. The *Tainai goi mandara* was transmitted among the monks at the Shingon temple Kongōji 金剛寺 (Shiga Prefecture). This manual records verbatim quotations from the *Ise niji kirigami*, thus suggesting a connection between these two sources. Other Zen-esoteric texts, such as the *Sangen icchi sho*, adapt kami-related concepts to the process of gestations (see Sanford 1997; Hirose 2012; 2013). These concepts became so common during the Edo period to the extent of being reshaped in educational manuals such as the *Onna chōhōki*, which explains the development occurring during the ten months spent inside the womb (Nagatomo 1993, 86–108). A Sōtō *kirigami* from the early modern period, the *Taijū sagashi no kirigami* 体中サガシノ切カミ, displays a similar elaboration (Ishikawa 2001, 454; Licha 2016, 503–506).

in humans and deities. It is noteworthy that, as YAMAMOTO Hiroko (1993, 251) suggests, the medieval conceptualizations on the serpent-kami—especially in the *Keiran shūyōshū*—echoed the episode of the dragon princess in the *Lotus Sūtra* and inspired the creation of an intricate network of theories. The *Keiran shūyōshū* explains that the dragon princess appeared in front of the Buddha on Vulture Peak as a snake sixteen *jō* in length, thus the original state of all sentient beings is a serpent. By awakening this original state, the princess achieved buddhahood (T 2410, 76.517c24–28; TEEUWEN 2000, 104). Although the serpentine nature of kami and dragon-women is reminiscent of negative and malevolent characteristics, in the Buddhist-Shinto reading of the *Lotus Sūtra* it conveys the inherent enlightenment of these liminal creatures by virtue of the principle of buddhahood in this very body (*sokushin jōbutsu* 即身成仏) (TEEUWEN 2000, 104).

In exploring the common serpentine nature of deities and the human being, these conceptualizations reverberate several characteristics considered to be representative of women. Thus, it is not by chance that the *Ise niji kirigami* reports the episode of the dragon princess, thereby establishing this implicit connection. In other words, women—like kami and dragons—are potentially suitable for salvation, yet they require Buddhist monastic intervention to achieve awakening. The next section explores how the Buddhist-kami medieval *écriture* about the dragon princess exerted their influence on the ontological conceptualization of female dragons in Sōtō Zen's foundational tales (*engi* 縁起), thereby contributing to the hermeneutical principles adopted to explain the relationship between Sōtō monks and female creatures who were to be saved.

### *Woman, Dragon, Deity: The Female Being as Antagonist, Donor, and Protector of the Dharma*

Paragraphs 2a and 2b of the *Ise niji kirigami* refer to the dragon princess parable to introduce the theme of female salvation. This famous tale appears in the chapter on Devadatta in the *Lotus Sūtra* (chapter 12 in Kumārajīva's translation), in which Mañjuśrī praises the story of the princess as the epitome of the perfect awakening quickly attained (WATSON 1993, 182–190). The story is emblematic for illustrating the spiritual perfection achieved by a nonhuman, young, and female being and served the purpose of narrating female enlightenment, which was nonetheless possible upon certain conditions. The *Ise niji kirigami* mentions one of these conditions, which is among the most debated components of the story: the bodily transformation from the female to the male form. Stephanie BALKWILL (2018) has read this element of the story as a skillful means used by the princess to prove her worth to the skeptical male arhats and disciples in front of her. Thus, her sex change does not represent a precondition for her spiritual

progression.[14] In our document, the sex-change theme is tied to another motif: the donation of the jewel. The *Ise niji kirigami* explicitly mentions the excerpt from the *Lotus Sūtra* in which the dragon girl offers the wish-fulfilling jewel to the Buddha. Sōtō Zen tales and records combine these two themes to narrate the role of the dragon princess as a giver and a protector of the dharma. In other words, while the dragon princess undergoes a transformation, it does not exclusively concern her gender but also her spiritual disposition towards the dharma. Such an interpretation better illuminates why the *Ise niji kirigami* incorporates this tale. The vicissitudes of the princess mentioned in the documents represent a locus classicus when narrating female enlightenment, yet it also indirectly suggests the soteriological path that the woman must follow to obtain salvation.

Can reptile dragon-women mediate with divinity and embody the innermost meaning of the dharma? This is the pivotal matter that guided numerous medieval Buddhist exegetes in their mythological construction of the dragon princess as the donor, transmitter, and guard of the Buddha's teachings. The *Lotus Sūtra* episode of the dragon princess inspired the depiction of women as givers, thereby establishing a new narrative pattern that weaved together women, the dragon princess, and the jewel (Ruppert 2000, 193–230; Meeks 2010, 141–155). In addition, medieval commentaries produced within the Buddhist-Shinto lineages expanded this motif and carved a new role for the princess within the transmission of secret insights (Faure 2015, 235–271). A poignant example is that of the *Reikiki*, one of the fundamental scriptures of Ryōbu Shintō 両部神道, which illustrates the legend of the origination of the kami initiation (*jingi kanjō* 神祇灌頂) (Rambelli 2002). The text mentions a succinct description about how this manual was first conceived, claiming that an unnamed emperor entered the secret consecration platform (*himitsu kanjō dan* 秘密灌頂壇) to receive the profound teachings about the way of the kami from the dragon deity (ST 88: 42).

Medieval scholar-monks strove to fill the genealogical gap of the *Reikiki* by adding essential details about the identity of both the unnamed emperor and the dragon deity. Eventually, the two mysterious figures were identified with Emperor Daigo 醍醐 (885–930) and the dragon-woman abiding in the pond of Shinsen'en 神泉苑 garden of the Imperial Palace precincts (*Reiki kikigaki* in ST 88: 213; translated in Rambelli 2002, 280). As Fabio Rambelli (2002) notes, the secret text given by the dragon woman to the sovereign recalls the episode of the *Lotus Sūtra* and the donation of the jewel, thus suggesting that the dragon deity was the princess from the scripture.

14. Balkwill (2021) investigates several Chinese examples in which the transformation of the female body is challenged by young, female, and non-monastic women who reject the spiritual supremacy of men. On the idea of bodily transformation as skillful means, see Sunim (1999).

Another secret manual, the *Jindaikan shikenbun* handed down within the same textual lineage, identifies the dragon woman with an emissary of Amaterasu who appeared in front of Emperor Daigo to guide him through the obtainment of the most recondite meaning inherent in the imperial regalia (ST 90: 563; RAMBELLI 2002, 280). This version of the story reveals the attempt by medieval exegetes to forge and cement the bond between the dragon princess, buddha-kami kinship, and the imperial genealogy. The textual corpus inspired by the *Reikiki* is of particular interest to grasp the medieval construction of the archetypal feminine and introduces two themes embroidered in the *Ise niji kirigami*. The first is the dragon girl depicted as the donor of both material (manuals or texts) and intangible gifts (secret insights) concerning Buddhist-Shinto cosmology. The second relevant aspect is the bond with Amaterasu and, indirectly, the female deities' kinship. In other words, the rewritings of the dragon princess's story add another interpretative layer to her persona. While symbolizing women's enlightenment, this nonhuman female creature embodies different aspects of the supernatural female agency exerted within the androcentric Buddhist world.

Sōtō Zen foundational narratives and hagiographies expand the motif of the gift exchange with dragon creatures by combining it with components emerging from the intercultural mingling with other traditions and local beliefs. The *Getsuan Ryōen Zenji gyōjō*, a historical record about the Sōtō master Getsuan Ryōen 月庵良円 (1348–1425), epitomizes the classic trope of the encounter between Zen monks and dragons. This text narrates that during a sermon Getsuan's attention was captured by a woman. She introduces herself as a deity from China who has been protecting the community surrounding Getsuan's temple, Sōkōji 總光寺 (Yamagata Prefecture). Despite her supernatural powers, the woman confessed her afflictions represented by the five signs of decay and the three distresses—a physical and spiritual condition common to women, dragons, and female deities—and asked Getsuan to liberate her. After a few days, Getsuan bestowed her with the bodhisattva precepts along with the Sōtō Zen blood lineage chart. The dialogue that follows this scene illuminates the conceptual framework to which such a narrative belonged:

> In the remote past, during the *Lotus Sūtra* assembly on Vulture Peak, a dragon girl donated to the Buddha the single luminous pearl. At this very moment, in the dharma-transmission room, I bestow the master [Getsuan] with these objects. Accept [my offer] without any hesitation, so that past and present may become one (*ittetsu* 一轍). (ZSSZ 10: 558–559)

Getsuan welcomed the woman's gift and proclaimed that the transmission that occurred in the room must remain a secret to posterity.[15] This short episode is packed with references that pertain to the same symbolic world that originated in the *Ise niji kirigami*. Although the record does not explicitly recognize the enigmatic woman as a dragon, several components reveal her serpentine nature. In particular, the woman establishes a clear connection with the dragon princess from the *Lotus Sūtra* by interpreting her gift of the three objects as a reenactment of the episode from the scripture. In erasing any temporal and spatial distance, she proclaims herself to be a manifestation of the dragon princess and ties an analogous symbolic knot with Getsuan as the one sealed between the princess and Śākyamuni.

A variation of this tale hinging on the donation of immaterial gifts appears in the record narrating the dharma succession of Tsūgen Jakurei 通幻寂霊 (1322–1391) at Eitakuji 永沢寺 (Hyogo Prefecture). The story recounts a mysterious creature that identified as "a dragon bearing deluded karma" whose presence caused uncontrolled meteorological disasters. Upon the bestowal of the precepts by Tsūgen, the creature instantly dissolved into the clouds and transformed herself into the protecting guardian of the mountain and its temple (*Nihon tōjō rentō roku* in SSZ 16: 276). In the case of Tsūgen's legend, the attainment of buddhahood and inclusion into the Buddhist lineage are rewarded through the restoration of the social order and cessation of uncontrolled meteorological phenomena. Converted into an ally of the dharma, the dragon woman thus manifests her eternal commitment to protect the temple and its community.

How does the logic of the gift in these tales apply to our *kirigami*? We must recall that the *Ise niji kirigami* deals with the dramatic event of premature death during childbirth. By the beginning of the Edo period, such a theme had come to be a common narrative strand in literary and religious sources, which variously depicted the so-called *ubume* 産女, a woman who died during parturition (Shimazaki 2011). As Hank Glassman (2008, 191–195) points out, not only do the *ubume* stories disclose the physical consequences but also the deep psychological ramifications of childbirth. In some cases, the *ubume* was associated with mythological creatures such as foxes and identified as an indomitable spirit capable of subverting the social order with her liminal presence. Moreover, since the *ubume* resides near water streams or rivers, Edo-period sources have identified this place with the aforementioned River of the Three Destinies that separates this world from the afterlife. The *ubume* was also linked to aquatic creatures like reptiles, thereby sharing a kindred nature with dragons (Yasui 2020).

15. The dragon woman donated to Getsuan a coin, a small bell, and a plate to mix and dilute the black ink to paint the teeth. On the elaboration of the dragon princess episode in *engi* literature, see Abé (2015).

The textual body of Sōtō *kirigami* includes the *Ubume kirigami*, which prescribes the recitation of phrases that infuse in the woman a benevolent spiritual disposition and guide her to show signs of repentance induced by the power of the three dharma-treasures (Ishikawa 1987, 188; Sanvido 2023). These instructions suggest that these women were perceived as agents of social destruction, and only the power of the dharma could placate them. This ritual takes place in several passages including the purification of the body, the tonsure of the woman, the explanation and bestowal of the precepts, and the practice of writing Sanskrit syllables on the woman's face and body along with the name of the ten buddhas. The monk would also transmit the precepts of Zhongfeng Mingben 中峰明本 (1263–1323)—a practice not mentioned in Zhongfeng's set of regulations for purity, the *Huanzhu jiaxun* 幻住家訓—and consisting of a prayer directed to the bodhisattva Kṣitigarbha to achieve awakening (Ishikawa 1987, 175).[16] The ceremony culminated with the inscription on the woman's chest of an encircled character for mind (*shin* 心).

The practices described in the *Ubume kirigami* had the function of purifying both the body and the mind of the woman, for her gender, along with her death in childbirth, represented two major forms of defilement. The development of such ritual strategies remedies the general belief that women who died during parturition would have returned to cast their curse on the living, given their tormented souls that hindered salvation. Consequently, these supernatural manifestations, while being narrative expedients, were nonetheless an integral part of lived reality, thereby inspiring the creation of ritual responses that could cope with the social and spiritual fear experienced by both the family and the woman herself. To some extent, the gruesome transformation of the *ubume* echoes similar characteristics of nonhuman beings such as dragons that threatened communities and temples. Therefore, the *kirigami* on female salvation, as well as Sōtō tales, have in common an analogous conceptual framework directed to strengthen the transforming power of the precepts and rituals, which were able to turn even dangerous creatures into protectors of the dharma. In other words, the allusion to the gender transformation mentioned in the *Ise niji kirigami* can be interpreted in terms of spiritual change following the embrace of the dharma and culminating in the tacit vow to become a guardian of the temple community.

The performance of such rituals was embedded in the relationship of mutual obligation between the monk and the creature to pacify—being a dragon or a

16. The creation of such practices was linked to the widespread faith in Kṣitigarbha, which was also connected to the cult of the ten kings, and the belief in the thirteen buddhas (Ishikawa 1985, 486–487). In Edo-period Sōtō temples, the propagation of the *Blood Bowl Sūtra* occurred in tandem with the faith in the bodhisattva Kṣitigarbha, who was frequently invoked and prayed to during funerals for laywomen (Williams 2009, 50–51).

woman—since the acceptance of the precepts corresponds to the tacit promise of not haunting the living. Therefore, the reciprocity at the foundation of this act is reminiscent of the dragon princess's donation of the jewel and bears kindred symbolic implications. Whereas the depiction of the female body in paragraph 4 of the *Ise niji kirigami* accorded to an aesthetic of repulsion by evoking disgust-inspiring representations, the motif of the donation of the jewel invests the feminine self with a certain degree of agency (Wilson 1996, 77–111; Langenberg 2017, 75–94, 153–179). This depiction was by no means an attempt to remedy deeply ingrained gender imbalances. However, the capacity of changing the world with the agency endowed in their supernatural powers, as well as becoming vessels and protectors of the dharma, resembles other creatures with a similar nature, such as kami, and evokes an ideal kinship between women and nonhuman beings.

As previously mentioned, Buddhist commentaries on the kami such as the *Jindaikan shikenbun* established a direct connection between the dragon princess and the kami pantheon, emphasizing the kinship bond between Amaterasu and the princess. Of particular importance for the present argument is a widely known commentarial edition of the *Lotus Sūtra* by the Tendai monk Eishin 栄心 (d. 1546), the *Hokekyō jikidan shō*, which narrates the reincarnation of the dragon princess and her sisters in Japan. Here, we discover that Seiryō Gongen 清滝権現, the protecting deity of Daigoji 醍醐寺, is the second daughter of the Dragon King Sāgara and manifested in the archipelago as Princess Tamayori 玉依. The elder daughter of the dragon king, that is, the dragon princess from the *Lotus Sūtra*, is Princess Toyotama 豊玉 and corresponds to the illuminating deity (*myōjin* 明神) of Buzen 豊前 Province and its surrounding mountains. Lastly, the younger dragon daughter is the illuminating deity of Itsukushima 厳島 (*Hokekyō jikidan shō*, fasc. 7: 28b–29a).

The *Hokekyō jikidan shō* is only one among the many examples illustrating the divine kinship existing between female deities (Tanaka 1993, 13–47). For instance, the *Jingi keizu*, a genealogy of gods by the Tendai priest Ryōhen 良遍 (d.u.), further enriches the tale in the *Hokekyō jikidan shō*. This chart presents Princess Toyotama and her sister Princess Tamayori (also glossed in the text as Seiryū Gongen) as the daughters of Izanami and Izanagi. Accordingly, Amaterasu and the two princesses share the same ancestors, thus making Amaterasu a direct descendant of the dragons (st 90: 604). The textual strands developing the reincarnation of the dragon daughters in Japan, regardless of minor discrepancies, display related ontological characteristics shared among these female creatures, such as their connection with water and, in turn, with fertility; the linkage with pregnancy; and the inclusion in the imperial genealogy. Of particular interest for this study is the role of the dragon princess in the process of cosmological gestation that created the universe and the divine kinship crowned by Amaterasu.

The Buddhist-Shinto elaborations on the relation between Amaterasu and the dragon princess were echoed and further expanded by other traditions such as Shugendo groups. To understand this linkage, we must recall that the passage from the *Hokekyō jikidan shō* cited earlier argues that the worldly manifestation of the eight-year dragon princess in Japan is the illuminating deity of the mountains located in Buzen (Fukuoka Prefecture). Buzen is the cradle of the Shugendo tradition based at the sacred mountain of Kubote 求菩提. From the Heian to the Edo period, Mt. Kubote hosted the Tendai temple Gokokuji 護国寺, serving as a center for Shugendo ascetics. The proximity to Gokokuji, along with the influence of Tendai practices, culminated in the centrality of the *Lotus Sūtra* within many beliefs and rituals performed in this area. The *Tenjin shichidai Chijin godai*, an undated document related to this tradition, explains the process of the creation of Japan and its deities by adapting the dragon princess parable. Here, the dragon princess is conceived not so much for her ability to achieve awakening, yet she is endowed with gestational characteristics derived from her role in the generation of the cosmos. The text cements the connection between the princess and fertility by establishing the association with Kaya no hime no kami 鹿屋野比売神, the protector of fields and meadows who represents abundance and fecundity. In the *Tenjin shichidai Chijin godai*, the dragon princess's role in the cosmological gestation hinges on the transmission of the wish-granting jewel. The text states that the dragon girl received the jewel from the dragon palace, traveled to India to visit the Buddha, and donated the pearl to him. The jewel then became the drop that originated the universe. The Buddha and the dragon princess thus double the heavenly couple of Izanagi and Izanami, the Buddha being the former and the dragon princess the latter. Being the body of the dragon princess, the receptacle that encloses the "primeval white brine," which is the precious jewel, Amaterasu and the dragon princess are one and the same since they are formed by the same substance (Shigematsu 1969, 107).

In the *Tenjin shichidai Chijin godai*, the drop of brine that originates the first island dwells inside the dragon princess's body, which is composed of the substance that created the entire universe and is the same as Amaterasu. Likewise, the *Ise niji kirigami* collocates the dragon princess's "milky pearl" within the generation of the cosmos, as it is "akin to the stage of the muddied ocean of the universe when the fetus is not yet dwelling inside the mother's womb." This reading of the jewel adds another hermeneutical layer to the parable of the dragon princess, resulting in a twofold symbolism endowed in the jewel. On the one hand, as mentioned earlier, in paragraph 2a, the pearl establishes a mutual obligation between the monk and the woman. Therefore, the object is representative of the individual experience of the woman and expresses the bond with the monk who is responsible for her salvation. Yet, paragraph 2b presents another analysis that

associates the jewel with the cosmological arising. In addition, the pearl is also evocative of a non-subjective experience that manifests through the metaphor of cosmological gestation. In other words, the gift of the pearl is paired with cosmological and gestational theories to convey the state of non-differentiation that precedes the moment of birth.

### *Birth at "I-Se": Gestational Metaphors and Imperial Symbology*

The third thematic thread of our document presented in the opening paragraph of the *Ise niji kirigami* concerns the hermeneutical elaborations rooted in the multiple semantic ramifications of the term "*I-Se*." The conceptualizations of *I-Se* introduce two fundamental aspects that illuminate the context of production in which the *Ise niji kirigami* originated. First, the *Ise niji kirigami* reveals how medieval notions revolving around Buddhist embryology—as in the case of the *I-Se* paradigm—were readapted and applied to interpret conception and birth. Far from being just a metaphor for the highest spiritual achievement of the Buddhist clergy, the gestational model expressed by the union of the two graphs of *I-Se* was indeed an apt theory to describe the female experience of parturition. Second, the context that inspired the *Ise niji kirigami* is ascribable to the relation between Zen and Ise as "divine capital" (Breen and Teeuwen 2017), intended here in the broader sense of the intellectual, literary, and religious products that derived from the Ise complex and its central deity Amaterasu.

The polysemy endowed in the characters *I-Se* unravels the dense entanglement of discourses circulating among different fields of knowledge and textual traditions in medieval Japan. The common ground of these fields was the intrinsic secret nature of their transmission. The semantic elaboration of the word "*I-Se*" initially developed within the framework of poetic commentaries clearly reflects the impact of Buddhist doctrinal speculations produced within the context of Shingon and Tendai groups, as well as the mixture of kami cults and yin-yang divination (*onmyōdō* 陰陽道) practices (Klein 2003).

In the *Jingi kanjo kegyō sahō* 神祇灌頂加行作法, ritual instructions on the *jingi kanjō* in Goryū Shintō 御流神道, we read the same line that opens the *Ise niji kirigami*: "As for the two graphs of *I-Se*, *I* is the male, and *Se* is the female. The two graphs of *I-Se* are the force that originates the human being" (Itō 2011, 485; Faure 2000). This interpretation derives from the association of *I-Se* with the masculine (*I*) and the feminine (*Se*), whose union is symbolized by the merging of the white fluid (semen) and the red fluid (blood) (literally, the merging of the two drops [*niteki wagō* 二滴和合]). The sexual union is thus the epitome of a single and unified entity and expresses the understanding of reality from the standpoint of the enlightened ones (Klein 1998).

While esoteric manuals extensively applied the pervasive imagery of *I-Se* to add a more nuanced understanding of awakening (Itō 2011, 482–483), the *Ise niji kirigami* reshapes this concept on the actual event of childbirth. In this way, gestation-derived notions are not merely narrative expedients to illustrate the male experience of spiritual progression, but they also provide an apt theorization to illuminate the interrelated biological and soteriological processes of the female body. What is striking about the hermeneutical framework of the *Ise niji kirigami* is that it employs the allegory of the female corporeality to explain the condition of the woman's body entrapped in an eternal gestation, thereby resolving the ontological impasse of childbirth death, which becomes a form of liberation rather than unavoidable damnation.

Yet the *Ise niji kirigami* is not an isolated example displaying the readaptation of the *I-Se* theories to the event of childbirth. Other early modern Sōtō *kirigami* describe how to create amulets inspired by the concept of *I-Se* to protect women during delivery.[17] Among these, the *Nansan fu kirigami* illustrates how to craft the amulets for difficult births. During such occasions, the monk divided a soybean (*shiromame* 白豆, also referred to as *daizu* 大豆) into two parts. On one half, the ritual performer was required to write the character "*I*," while on the other half "*Se*." The *kirigami* also instructs where to collocate the two halves of the bean. During labor, the first half was momentarily placed on the woman's mouth, and the second half on the birth opening (*sanmon* 産門). This ceremony was then followed by the chanting of the *dhāraṇī* of Vairocana Tathāgata (*kōmyō shingon* 光明真言), which had the function of eliminating any trace of evil karma that might have hindered a prosperous birth and concluded by offering hot purifying water to the woman. Another untitled variant of this document, while reporting identical directions, also depicts the graphic shape of the talisman. The instructions prescribe to write a ritual formula on a piece of paper four *sun* 寸 (roughly twelve centimeters) in length. At the center of the paper rectangle in larger characters there is an homage to the bodhisattva Avalokiteśvara (*Namu Kanzeon Bosatsu* 南無観世音菩薩). On the upper section, annotated in similar writing, we read the inscription "Ise," while on the lower part, in smaller ideograms, the amulet blesses the woman for a "safe and serene delivery and a virtuous child" (*anrakusan fukushi* 安楽産福子) (Ishikawa 1993a, 111–112).

One may wonder about the degree to which these practices were representative of the knowledge about pregnancy and the female body in the late medieval and early modern periods. Although these *kirigami*, as well as the *Ise niji kirigami*, were certainly directed to a monastic audience, the healing power of

17. Duncan Williams (2009, 52–55) has extensively discussed the distribution of talismans directed to women and promoted by Sōtō Zen temples.

*I-Se* in the context of parturition also became widely known among women. The *Onna chōhōki*, a famous early modern educational guidebook for women, suggests writing the word *I-Se* on a piece of paper to use it as a talisman during difficult childbirths. This guide proclaims that the rationale underlying the *I-Se* talismans derives from the expression "the complete force from which all human beings are born" (*hito tairaka ni umare maru chikara* 人平生丸力), the same words evoked at the beginning of the *Ise niji kirigami*. The woman who contemplates the two characters of *I-Se* and reads in there the aforementioned expression would give birth by means of extraordinary powers (*jinriki* 神力) (Nagatomo 1993, 108). Accordingly, at least during the seventeenth century, women were knowledgeable about the protecting function of *I-Se*, which is presented here as a powerful spell capable of generating a supernatural force that enters the woman's body to help her during parturition. Therefore, the creation of talismans rooted in the parading of *I-Se* suggests that this theoretical framework served as the conceptual blueprint to describe the moment of birth as well as the spiritual and biological implications of parturition. Indeed, the *Ise niji kirigami* translates in doctrinal terms the logic underlying the practices described, for instance, in the *Nansan fu kirigami* and the *Onna chōhōki*. In addition, the *Ise niji kirigami* reveals that gestational notions initially developed in the context of Buddhism-Shinto to explain the principle of non-duality between the opposite pairs of male-female and human-kami were applied to the actual moment of childbirth and the female condition.

Nevertheless, the adoption of the *I-Se* paradigm was one of the consequences of a much broader cultural evolution that involved the interest of Zen monks towards Ise and its related matters. Indeed, the readaptation of the *I-Se* semantic framework in Sōtō Zen *kirigami* pertains to the Buddhist gaze on Ise and its central kami Amaterasu that likely stemmed from the crisis of the Ise Shrines during the fifteenth century.[18] One of the aspects that emerged from this exchange is the arising of a new genre of secret insights aimed at transmitting the Buddhist interpretation of the three sacred treasures (*sanshu no jingi* 三種神器): the mirror, the bead strand, and the sword (Hirose 2012). Such *kirigami* dedicated particular attention to the transmission of the sword, as seen in a series of *kirigami* known

18. The systematic production of knowledge centered on Ise in Sōtō Zen *kirigami* derived from the weakening of the shrines in the late fifteenth century. During this time, the Ise shrines experienced a decline, accelerated by the burning of the outer shrine in 1486, followed by another fire in 1489. Several actors took advantage of this situation to claim their agency over Ise and its divine capital (Breen and Teeuwen 2017, 116–120). Although Yoshida Kanetomo 吉田兼倶 (1435–1511) was the most successful, Sōtō monks' theorizations of Ise were linked to the Ise shrines, revealing an attempt to inscribe their authority on the real and symbolic space of Ise. Nevertheless, Sōtō Zen *kirigami* in Ise and the imperial symbology also drew on the historical precedents depicting the devotion of Zen monks toward Amaterasu. I am indebted to William Bodiford for pointing this out.

as *Ipponken kirigami*. The *Ipponken kirigami* opens with the inscription "secret oral instructions about the two graphs of *I-Se*," which is topped by another gloss reporting that the heaven corresponds to yang, while the earth is the yin. Following these two glosses, we find three different illustrations depicting the three regalia and explained through the gestational metaphor derived from the two graphs of *I-Se*. The first one illustrates the case containing the divine jewel (*shinji* 神爾), accompanied by the comment, "The state preceding the separation of heaven and earth is the case [containing the jewel] kept with the lid [closed]. [Again], it is the seven generations of heavenly kami" (see FIGURE 3).

The second chart depicts the sword paired with two inscriptions on each side. On the right, the explanation reads, "Jeweled Sword, Izanagi no mikoto." On the left side, the inscription reports, "the cutting instrument: thus the facing part of the grass, trees, and leaves are the same as the sword" (see FIGURE 4).

Lastly, we have a circle representing the mirror. The stylized mirror is connected through lines with four glosses that, from right to left, recite,

> Izanami no mikoto as the hidden deity; the sacred mirror; the myriad of phenomena, [such as] grass and trees reflect in the mirror. Being the manifold phenomena reflected as such, their forms are conceived; the circular form [of the mirror] is the shape of the sea. It is the internal verification of the empty circle. It is the body of the full moon (see FIGURE 5).

In other words, the three imperial objects correspond to different components of the cosmology inspired by medieval mythology. Thus, the jewel is the unity of heaven and earth, while being reminiscent of the pearl donated by the dragon princess. On the other hand, the sword and the mirror represent respectively Izanagi (the masculine and the yang) and Izanami (the feminine and the yin).

The three diagrams are paired with a type of koan commentary known as *daigo* 代語 (literally, substituting words), in which the master and his disciple discuss the symbolism of the three jewels, with particular emphasis on the sword. In this dialogue, the sword is said to be reminiscent of the blade extracted by Susanoo from the serpent's tail. The *kirigami* refers here to the legend of Susanoo and the Yamata no orochi, the eight-headed and eight-tailed legendary serpent-dragon narrated in the *Kojiki* 古事記 and the *Nihon shoki* 日本書紀. In the story, Susanoo, amid the battle against the beast, discovered a sword hidden in one of its tails. Upon successfully defeating the monster, Susanoo donated the object to Amaterasu, hoping to receive her forgiveness for his disruptive behavior (BORGEN and URY 1990, 79–81).

The *Ise niji kirigami* is, in all likelihood, the product of these intellectual ramifications. In fact, in the case of Sōtō, the description of the women's corporeality and their biological functions did not necessarily derive from the textual corpus

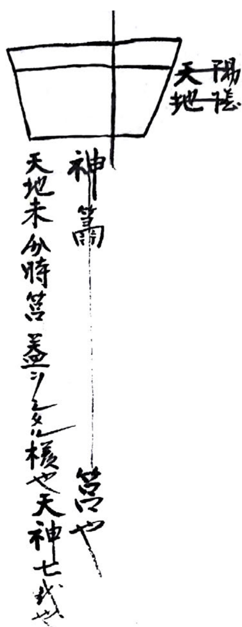


FIGURE 3. The case containing the divine jewel. Line art by the author based on the *Ipponken kirigami* from Sōrinji (1585). © Marta Sanvido. All rights reserved.

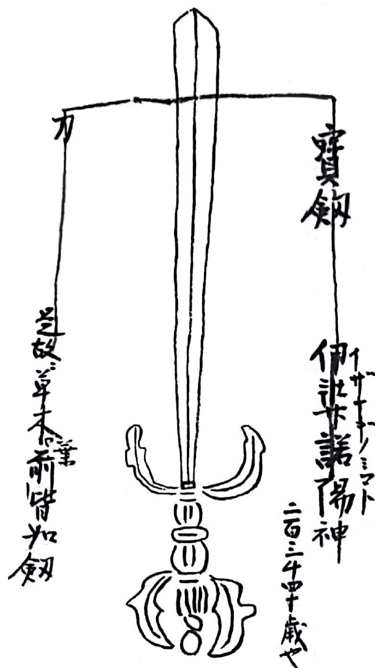


FIGURE 4. The sword. Line art by the author based on the *Ipponken kirigami* from Sōrinji (1585). © Marta Sanvido. All rights reserved.

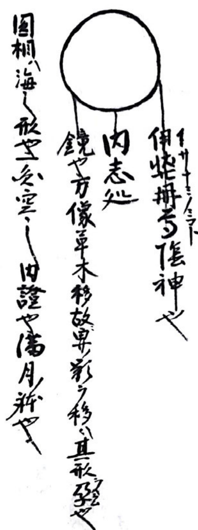

FIGURE 5. The mirror. Line art by the author based on the *Ipponken kirigami* from Sōrinji (1585). © Marta Sanvido. All rights reserved.

dealing with female salvation. On the contrary, the *Ipponken kirigami* shows that the gestational theories about *I-Se* were initially integrated within Sōtō's doctrines to forge a connection between the imperial imaginary and Zen teachings. It thus seems evident that Zen monks were keen to nurture their relationship with the imperial symbolism, yet they were also determined to provide their own interpretation of these matters.

Stable relations between Zen monks and the Ise complex were established well before the creation of the *Ipponken kirigami*, extending the influence of this connection over the following centuries. During the thirteenth century, the lineage of the Shōichi monk Chikotsu Daie 痴兀大慧 (d. 1312) founded one of its major temples, An'yōji 安養寺, at Ise. Chikotsu became an ardent advocate of the so-called union of Zen and esoteric Buddhism (*Zen mitsu kenshū* 禅密兼修), given his attempt to combine the Zen and esoteric teachings into a unified doctrinal framework. An'yōji was thus one of the most prominent religious centers of the amalgamation of Zen and esoteric teachings at the time and a pioneering example of the relation between Zen and shrines such as Ise (Takagi 2000; Itō 2018, 674).[19]

The devotion towards the Ise shrines predominantly manifested in the form of pilgrimages made by Zen monks to honor the Ise main deity, Amaterasu. The fourteenth-century short account *Tenshō daijin sōden kesa ki* narrates how a famous monk pertaining to another Zen faction, Muhon Kakushin 無本覚心 (1207–1298), the founder of the Gozan 五山 lineage Hōttō 法燈, donated the Zen robe to Amaterasu. Muhon is said to have been bestowed with the *kāṣāya* made from lily-root fiber (*kesa* 袈裟) on Mt. Tiantai 天台 in China. During his pilgrimage to Ise, soon after returning from China, Muhon would have offered the robe to Amaterasu. Later, this same robe was donated from Amaterasu to a monk from the Shōichi group, Beppō Daishu 別峰大殊 (1321–1402) (DNK, 309–312; paraphrased in Faure 1996, 107). The short story illustrating the circulation of Muhon's robe reveals crucial details that developed within the Buddhist network established at Ise. Beppō, while being a Shōichi priest, spent part of his educational years with a leading figure of the Hōttō group, Kohō Kakumyō 孤峰覚明 (1271–1361). Kohō cultivated the connection established by his master Kyōō Unryō 恭翁運良 (1267–1341) with Keizan's disciple Gasan Jōseki 峨山韶碩 (1275–1366) and the communities at two of the Sōtō main temples of the time, Yōkōji 永光寺 and Sōjiji 総持寺 (Bodiford 2008, 51–65). The Hōttō group thus represents a fundamental component in the assimilation of esoteric knowledge—

19. After Chikotsu's death, An'yōji lost the initial combinatorial approach adopted by its founder, and supposedly, also the linkage with Ise Shrine. According to the *Biyō zakki* 尾陽雑記, the Shingon and Shinto scriptures at An'yōji were later donated to the Watarai 度会 family or transferred to nearby Shinpukuji 真福寺 (Itō 2018).

intended here in the broader sense to include esoteric Buddhist theories on the kami—among medieval Sōtō monks. Harada Masatoshi (1998, 221) has pointed out that the crucial component of the *Tenshō daijin sōden kesa ki* is the gift and the countergift of the robe, which corresponds to proof of dharma transmission. In the powerful symbolic act of paying tribute to Amaterasu with the robe emerges the attempt of Zen priests to cement their connection with the world of the kami and, more specifically, with its most powerful one, Amaterasu. Most importantly, the theme of the gift and the transferring of objects, whether material or symbolic, constitutes a fundamental component of such narratives, as well as in the case of the *Ise niji kirigami*, in which the gift trope is expressed in the donation of the dragon princess's jewel.

As in the case of the aforementioned *Ipponken kirigami*, Sōtō monks contributed to the enrichment of the Zen-Ise narrative by expanding its boundaries to include the transfer of the three objects, a combination very likely inspired by the three imperial regalia. As a result, the juncture between Zen transmission of the precepts and the bestowal of the three divine regalia was embroidered in the foundational narratives of Sōtō temples.

Often cited in this regard is the foundational tale of Jōganji 浄眼寺 and its founder, the Sōtō monk Daikū Genko 大空玄虎 (1428–1505). Jōganji was built in the vicinity of the Ise precincts upon the bestowal of the three treasures to Daikū from none other than Amaterasu. The *Shinmei sanmotsu ki* narrates that Daikū was visited by a mysterious presence in the middle of the night, who revealed itself as Amaterasu. Daikū granted the Mahāyāna precepts and, in turn, received from Amaterasu the three treasures, represented by the lily-root fiber *kesa*, the rosary of white pearls, and the red lacquered censer. This *engi* tale retained an enormous symbolic significance to the extent of being considered among the treasures of the temple (Tatsuya 2010, 76; Tsutsumi 1998). While this narrative pattern resembles the tale of the robe donated to Amaterasu in the *Tenshō daijin sōden kesa ki*, it also epitomizes a typical Sōtō discursive formation that developed in tandem with their local development. As noted by several scholars (Hirose 1988, 418–420; Bodiford 1993; Faure 1996, 83–113), Sōtō monks created a system of ordination for local spirits, which is indicative of the intricate and multilayered relationships between Sōtō temples and site-specific cults. In addition to favoring exponential regional growth, the inclusion of local deities was thus instrumental in attracting the financial support of wealthy local families.[20]

Therefore, the *Ise niji kirigami* developed at the intersection of different mythological strands influenced by the Ise complex and the figure of Amaterasu, as

20. Daikū seems to have received the support of the Kitabatake 北畠 clan, in virtue of his connection with Amaterasu (Tada 2008, 173–180).

well as the narratives about the divine kinship established between Amaterasu and other female deities, which contributed to the creation of the archetypal feminine. By linking together various conceptualizations of femininity, this textual subgenre was an essential cultural reference in the making of our document, which developed from the interactions among actors from different traditions.

*The A-Gendered Awakening: Koan Hermeneutics and the Female Body*

A man hangs from a tree only with his mouth. His arms and feet reach no bough. Beneath the tree, a person asks him the meaning of coming from the West. If the man replies, he falls into the void and dies. Yet, by not answering, he admits the incapacity to grasp the innermost meaning of Zen (T 2005, 48.293c1–11).[21] This is the tale narrated in the fifth case from the koan collection *Wumenguan* and is the story that opens the third paragraph of the *Ise niji kirigami*. What is the connection between a woman who died in childbirth and the innermost meaning of Zen? Paragraph 3 elaborates on this question and provides the hermeneutical principle to explain the condition of the woman's body from a Zen standpoint. The last section constitutes the doctrinal hallmark of the document, for it reshapes the esoteric and kami-related notions displayed in the previous paragraphs by using koan hermeneutics.

The third paragraph of the *Ise niji kirigami* adopts the fifth case from the *Wumenguan* to map the female body. While in the fourth paragraph the woman's flesh embodied the geography of hell symbolized by the markers of her infernal fate and afflictions, in paragraph 3 this dualistic perspective is abandoned. In fact, the woman's body is no longer a micro-cosmic hell, yet it becomes a tool for reading the salient components of the koan. In fact, paragraph 3 displays the association between the woman's breast with the man up in a tree hanging, while the man trying to climb down from the tree corresponds to the moment of birth. Although the woman's body is chained to childbirth pollution, the document suggests that motherhood can offer an apt image to describe the transformation brought by the attainment of buddhahood.

The *Ise niji kirigami* borrows these concepts from another secret document that was exchanged among Sōtō monks, the *Jujō no kirigami*. This *kirigami* is entirely dedicated to the fifth case, suggesting that this koan had been transmitted as an independent secret teaching given its relevance in the monastic curriculum. At this point, one may question how these two documents are interrelated and how such a reading of the fifth case became widely accepted and transmitted among Sōtō monks to explain the dynamics of human gestation. The diagram and the inscription displayed in the *Jujō no kirigami* provide valuable insights

21. For a complete analysis of this koan, as well as other related koan, see Sharf (2021).

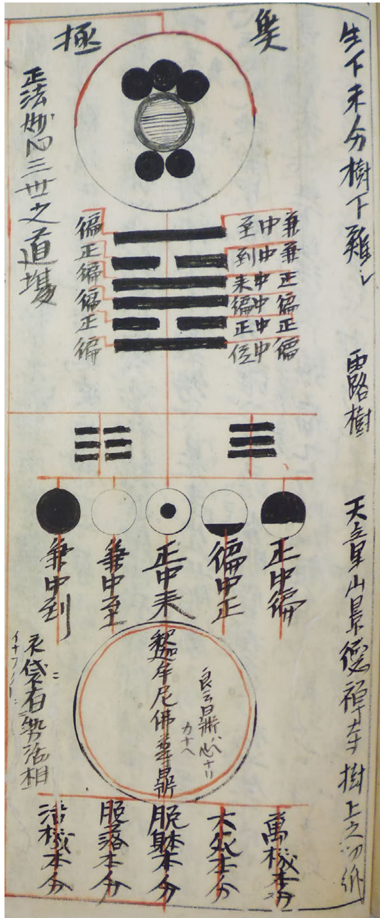


FIGURE 6. The diagram in the *Jujō no kirigami* from the collection of *kirigami* titled *Butsubutsu soso sōden himitsu shōbōgenzō* 仏仏祖祖相伝秘密正法眼蔵, vol. 1 (mid-Edo period), 36a. Picture taken by the author. Courtesy of the Komazawa University Library. © Marta Sanvido. All rights reserved.

about the conceptual proximity of the two documents and unravel the intellectual trajectory that gave rise to the construction of the feminine body inside the Sōtō monastic community.

As prescribed by the commentary, the diagram must be read from the top down. The similarity with the Neo-Confucian scheme of the supreme polarity is evident since the scheme is topped with the non-polar (*mukyoku* 無極) circle, which symbolizes the stage preceding birth, being representative of the embryo inside the womb. The description adds that,

> The non-polar is what precedes the [stage] before being born (*mishō izen* 未生已前). In the upper circle, the outer part is the mother's womb. The inner circle is the child. It is the correct form of being in the womb. The person up in a tree is said to be the [condition of] not-yet-separated that anticipates being born.

> Suckling from the tree bough is [suckling from] the mother's breast (*chibusa* 乳房; literally, the maternal milk)….
>
> The *li* hexagram (*jūri* 重離) is the simultaneous union [of awakening and delusion]. It is the aspect (*sō* 相) that embraces each of the five circles [of the five positions]. (Iizuka 2012, 152–153)

In other words, the circle at the top is the non-polar, which symbolizes the maternal uterus, while the stylized form depicted inside it is the embryo. The mother's womb is then connected to the *li* hexagram ☲☲, which, according to the theory associating the five positions of delusion and awakening (*henshō goi* 偏正五位) with tri-hexagrams, is the symbol of the ultimate union of the five positions (that is, of awakening and delusion) beyond duality.

The following section is composed of two trigrams, which are *qian* ☰ on the left side of the scheme and *kun* ☷ on the right. In the "Shuogua zhuan" 説卦伝 section of the *Yijing*, *qian* is said to be the heaven and the father, while *kun* is the earth and the mother (SKT 63: 1753). Thus, *kun* and *qian* are the two seeds that generate the remaining six trigrams composing the eight fundamental trigrams. *Qian* and *kun*, the gloss reads, bring the roots of life and death, good and evil, cold and heat, and thus union is achieved in the *li* hexagram depicted in the upper part. In other words, *qian* and *kun* symbolize the two opposites of awakening and delusion in the five-position system.

What follows are the five positions of awakening and delusion, which are represented by white-and-black circles where the white (light) symbolizes the awakening, while the black (darkness) is the delusional state. The five positions show here the interplay of awakening and delusion in the practitioner's mind and how the relation between these two forces change and evolve over time.[22] The inscription adds that the five positions represent the five faculties, the five characteristics, and the five colors.

The diagram then places another circle, which is connected through a vermilion line to the upper one. The description explains that this circle is,

22. The usage of charts in Sōtō Zen secret sources should not be surprising. These elaborate graphics, mainly inspired by Neo-Confucian cosmological diagrams, were often employed as visual aids during the master's lectures directed to a small group of acolytes and considered as secret teachings.

In the diagram featured in FIGURE 6, from right to left, the five positions are illustrated as follows: delusion within awakening (*shōchūhen* 正中偏); awakening within delusion (*henchūshō* 偏中正); approaching awakening (*shōchūrai* 正中来); reaching togetherness from within (*kenchūshi* 兼中至); and attained union of awakening and delusion (*kenchūtō* 兼中到). The prolegomenon to the relation between koan and the five-position cosmological theory is developed in a pivotal manual that constitutes the conceptual milestone of Sōtō Zen secret transmission, the *San'un kaigetsu zu* 山雲海月図 by Gasan Jōseki (Iizuka 1998; Sanvido 2017). For a detailed explanation of the theorization between tri-hexagrams and five positions, see Ziporyn (2012).

> [T]he life infused in the robe-placenta sack (*etai* 衣袋).[23] Śākyamuni, [when dwelling] inside the womb as a child, is the thusness inside the darkness [of the womb]. This the Śākyamuni of the remote origin. (Iizuka 2012, 152–153)

Lastly, the diagram terminates with five Chan idiomatic expressions that echo the gestational metaphor and are representative of the state of awakening. From right to left, the myriad of activities (*manki* 万機), which are, paraphrasing the inscription, thoroughly illuminated in the moment of birth; the great death (*daishi* 大死) is the liberation from the birth itself;[24] casting off the body (*dattai* 脱躰) is "experiencing the wind of the dharma realm and uttering the verse of sufferance"; casting off (*datsuraku* 脱落) is liberating from the outward form (*gyōgai* 形骸); and the moment of liberation (*kakki* 活機) from the mundane world towards autonomy of liberation (*kakki jizai* 活機自在).

This *kirigami* is noteworthy for including explicit references inspired by biological functions connected to gestation and birth. In other words, by relying upon the assemblage of embryogenic theories and cosmological models, the *Jujō no kirigami* depicts the state of the practitioner and their spiritual development. In addition, the diagrammatic representation conveys the experience within the monastery illustrating the internal transformation of the practitioner from the bestowal of the robe to the moment of awakening. The spiritual growth of the practitioner is suggested by two expressions that evoke the female body and gestation. First, the man holding the bough with his teeth is reminiscent of the child suckling the milk from his mother's breast. Second, the "robe sack," which is the placenta, is representative of Śākyamuni's robe, and in general, the Buddhist *kesa*. While the inclusion of gestational theories and symbolism within Zen teachings occurred already during the first part of the medieval period, being particularly evident in the textual body produced by the Shōichi monks (Takayanagi 2004; Dolce 2006; Kameyama 2020), the application of such conceptualizations to childbirth death remains unexplored. To illuminate the historical process and sociocultural dynamics that produced such hermeneutical outcomes, we must explore kindred secret documents exchanged among other Zen groups since the case of Sōtō Zen represents by no means an isolated example.

23. The word *etai* usually indicates the monastic robe, yet here is glossed as *inafukuro*. Upon comparison with other *kirigami* pertaining to the same genre, the gloss appears to have been miswritten given that the correct reading is *enafukuru*, in which *ena* 胞衣 is the placenta (*Kyōgenjujō no kirigami*).

24. The term "great death" appears to have been inspired by the sixth case of the *Foguo Yuanwu chanshi biyan lu* (T 2003, 48.146c8–10). The other four expressions from this pentadic formula appear in several Chan sources, including the *Foguo Yuanwu chanshi biyan lu*, yet considering that these are words commonly found in many texts, it is not possible to determine a univocal philological match.

Late medieval Sōtō Zen shared several doctrinal affinities with the Rinzai-branch Genjū 幻住. Established by Enkei Soyū 遠渓祖雄 (1286–1344) after his period of study in China with Zhongfeng Mingben from the Zen branch Yangqi 楊岐, the Genjū faction developed at the intersection of the Rinzai branch of the Daitokuji 大徳寺 community and Sōtō groups, reflecting the doctrinal tendencies that emerged in these two factions at the time (Andō 2011, 167–176).

Despite having been long overlooked by scholars, the close relation between Sōtō and Genjū monks is especially evident when comparing the secret documents and the koan manuals transmitted by the two factions. Particularly relevant for this study is a Genjū secret manual of koan, the *Ganzō roku* by Kohan Shūshin 古帆周信 (1570–1641), which contains the commented versions of eighty-five koan from different collections.[25] Among these, a case entitled *Ise no hon'i* 伊勢之本意 is almost identical to the *Ise niji kirigami* (*Ganzō roku*, 39b–40b; Suzuki 1987, 295). Unlike the Zen *kirigami*, the *Ise no hon'i* does not allude to any postmortem fetal extraction. Thus, in the context of the Genjū lineage, we can suppose that this teaching was not directly connected to a specific ritual setting, yet it was simply treated as a koan. This aspect is particularly intriguing since it reveals that Zen monks expanded the boundaries of the koan corpus, which differed from the conventional classic Chan collections.

As seen in the *Ise niji kirigami*, the *Ise no hon'i* reports a formula inspired by the fifth case of the *Wumenguan*, "being up on the tree is tasting the flavor of milk within the womb. Being under the tree is leaving the womb" (*Ganzō roku*, 40a; Suzuki 1987, 295). Again, this quote implicitly advises us to read this commentary alongside the exegesis of the fifth case, which is presented in another koan manual, the *Zōroku*, by the same author. Indeed, in the *Zōroku*, the fifth koan stands alone and is treated as a separate case, which is commented in the following manner,

> The master asked: what is this tree [in the koan]?
> Elucidation: the tree is the mother's body.
> Comment: the rock [grows] a rootless tree.
> [Asking]: "Being up in a tree," what is that?
> Elucidation: it is the embryo dwelling inside the mother's womb.
> Hanging with your mouth… and the feet, what is that?
> Elucidation: Hanging with the mouth from the tree is being inside the womb. It is being nurtured from the root of milk. The hands not grasping the branch [to climb the tree] corresponds to [placing] the hands on one's chest.

25. The manual does not report any date of compilation. Andō Yoshinori (2011, 198) suggests that based on other manuals transmitted by Genjū monks and preserved at the Matsugaoka archives, the copy is probably datable to 1714.

> The feet not reaching [a bough] are the feet bending towards the mother [while being inside the womb].
>
> Comment: Nine years spent [sitting in meditation] in front of the wall in silence. Again, nine years facing the wall without the wind passing through. The blooming of the five-petaled flower, in a spring outside *kalpa*s.
>
> The lecture proclaims: The nine years in front of the wall correspond to the nine months in the womb. This is also known as putting on the placenta. The red robe covering Bodhidharma while facing the wall is the placenta. Bodhidharma contemplated [being] inside the womb and taught it to the multitude of people. (*Zōroku*, 34b–36a)[26]

This excerpt displays several concepts already explored in the *Jujō no kirigami*. Likewise, the Genjū exegesis of the fifth case revolves around the adaptation of concepts related to the female body and its biological functions like breastfeeding or the placenta. Indeed, the affinity in koan interpretation shared among these two factions is a crucial component to shed new light on the dynamics underlying the inclusion of a koan in the explanation of the female corporeality and contributes to unveiling the historical apparatus that participated in the development of such an interpretative framework.

The act of "suckling from the milk root" derives from a passage in a late Mahāyāna sutra, the *Dasheng bensheng xindi guan jing*, a scripture that elaborates on the four fundamental objects of debt (*sien* 四恩). The section devoted to the explanation of one of the four debts, the moral obligation towards mother and father, acknowledges the pain and suffering of pregnancy. Difficult childbirth, the sutra explains, might be as painful as being plunged by hundreds of knives. Moreover, the text continues, the mother's dedication to nurture her child with "the sweet nectar of milk coming from her breast makes her merit incalculable" (T 159, 3.297b3). Eventually, the debt of a child towards his mother will never be repaid since, while in the womb,

> Male and female suckle with their mouth the root of milk and are nurtured with their mother's blood. When one is born, before turning into a child [capable of eating solid foods], one consumes 180 vessels of maternal milk. When the mother attains the superb taste (*shangmei* 上味), she provides it directly to her child. This is like offering the marvelous monastic robe. (T 159, 3.297b16–b19)

26. Although a similar version of this commentary is reported in Suzuki (1987, 291–292), here I use my transcription since Suzuki omits the details of the documents he is referring to. As Andō (2011, 176–180) notes, Suzuki's transcription seems a combination of different manuals (call no. Kuha 1240, Kuha 883–3) that include the commentary used here. Another translation of this commentary based on Suzuki's transcription can be found in Faure (1995, 362–363).

Despite the lack of any precise mention of the four forms of indebtedness, the usage of the evocative image of "suckling from the milk root" confirms that, besides possessing a general knowledge of the textual corpus exploring gestation and the female body, Zen monks adopted these notions to theorize salvation and enlightenment from a nondualistic standpoint.

The second crucial component of the Genjū commentary is the embryonic metaphor applied to the iconic image of Bodhidharma facing the wall in meditation. Thus, the cave is the womb, the red robe is the placenta, and the nine years absorbed in contemplation correspond to the time spent in the womb. We must recall that in Sōtō's *Jujō no kirigami*, the monastic robe is identified with the placenta. Likewise, in the *Ise niji kirigami*, the merging of the white and red fluids is the "attainment of one's original mind, and it is also known as being wrapped in the red cover," in which the red cover is very likely the vermilion robe of Bodhidharma.

The metaphor of the placenta to illustrate the network of meanings that are conceptually linked to the Buddhist robe is commonly used in *kirigami* about the transmission of the *kesa* (Faure 1995). The *Kesa no kirigami* adds a more nuanced explanation of the placenta, which better illuminates the intellectual process that led to the acceptance of this metaphor. This document reports that the amalgamation of the five colors (that is, blue, yellow, red, black, and white) creates the purple robe, which is the superior one. The purple robe is described as the buddha Mahāvairocana and symbolizes the union of both realms (the vajra and womb realm), as well as the syllable *A*. The document also adds that "in the Shinto [tradition], [the robe] is the placenta; it is the *chihaya* [千葉屋]" (Iizuka 2008, 262).

The term *chihaya* derives from the expression *chihayaburu* 千葉破る that opens the poem intonated during the Ise *abhiṣeka* (*Ise kanjō* 伊勢灌頂) (Teeuwen 2000, 103; Andreeva 2017, 246–255). These verses were utilized to convey the inherited enlightened and kindred nature of the practitioner and the kami, whose body already contained the seeds of awakening. *Chihaya* indicates tearing one thousand petals inside the womb and serves as a metaphor for the placenta shredding apart during childbirth. Being conceptually adjacent to Buddhist embryogenic theories, the theorization of *chihaya* developed in the same context of the two graphs of *I-Se* (Klein 1998, 29–33), as well as theories of the kindred nature of kami and humans displayed in the *Ise niji kirigami*.

In addition, the fragmentary collection *Meishuku shū* 明宿集 by the Noh playwright Konparu Zenchiku 金春禅竹 (1405–1468) reveals that the semantic overlapping of the placenta and the robe was echoed by the multiple meanings embedded in the term *chihaya*, which can indicate both the ceremonial white garment (*chihaya* 襅) and the tearing of the placenta. Indeed, the *Meishuku shū* proclaims that "the placenta [that protects] the child in the womb symbolizes the

sleeves of the white vest" (quoted in Takahashi 2014, 146).[27] The medieval commentarial tradition of literary works, such as the *Kokinwaka shū* 古今和歌集 and the *Ise monogatari* 伊勢物語, adds another semantic layer to the term *chihaya* that reverberates in the *Meishuku shū*. In this case, *chihaya* evokes the myth of Amaterasu inside the cave. In such a network of associations, *chihaya* metonymically indicates the sleeves twirled during the dance of the gods to celebrate the opening of the cave and the appearance of Amaterasu (Takahashi 2014, 147).

The image of the cave-womb pertains to the same semantic framework of the placenta-robe, for it developed in the context of Buddhist-Shinto mythology to convey the innermost meaning of the scene depicting Amaterasu withdrawing into the heavenly cave (Itō 2011, 498–499). A section entitled "Ama no iwato kanjō" 天岩戸灌頂 from a Ryōbu Shintō manual, the *Tenchi kanjō ki* 天地灌頂記, states very clearly that "the cave is the maternal womb.... We [human beings] arise from the union of the red and white fluids in the mother's womb" (quoted in Yamamoto 1993, 331; Faure 2016, 317–318). In other words, the placenta evokes the cosmic gestation along with the bestowal of the robe, which was interpreted as a form of rebirth inside the monastic womb. Accordingly, the locus classicus of the cave contained in both narratives created a semantic resonance that inspired the rewriting of Bodhidharma's legend through the gestational lens.

Nevertheless, the grotto scene from Amaterasu's myth confirms that these metaphors turned into a set of tools to read the female body. Indeed, the application of the cave-womb allegory was included also in ritual contexts foreign to either koan or *abhiṣeka* and related instead to pregnancy and funerals. This association served to explicate the purification rituals performed by the Shinto priests of Ise shrines to grant safe childbirth. In such a context, the moment of birth is described as "the disclosure of the birth opening at the bottom of the chest," which symbolizes the opening of the heavenly cave (*Daigūji kikigaki* in Miyachi 1981, 180; Yamamoto 1993, 332). Zen monks thus were not the only actors involved in the ritual administration concerning childbirth. On the contrary, Shinto priests successfully managed childbirth-related ceremonies and embraced the symbolism of the womb-cave to explain these ritual settings.

Likewise, the Shingon-Zen funeral manual *Tainai goi mandara* adheres to this hermeneutical vogue and claims that Amaterasu retiring into the heavenly grotto is the same as the fetus dwelling inside the womb (Nakahara, Yoneda,

27. In an esoteric collection of rituals, the *Sōji shō* compiled by the Tendai priest Chōgō 澄豪 (1259–1350), the candid garment of the white-robed Avalokiteśvara (Byakue Kannon 白衣観音) is an allegory for the placenta, which protects the human being from adverse conditions. Besides, in another section of the same text, the white vest of Avalokiteśvara is said to be the epitome of purity (T 2412, 77.72a4), thereby suggesting that the placenta was not stigmatized because of its connection with childbirth and pollution. On the conceptualization of the placenta in relation to the concepts of purity and pollution, see Faure (2016).

and Gōto 2018, 476). Hence, the discourse that revolved around the motif of the cave-womb, albeit initially applied to a different ceremonial setting, turned into a prominent component in the transmission of practices dedicated to childbirth.

The cultural process that led Genjū, as well as Sōtō monks, to apply the gestational metaphor to koan interpretation, however, is also the historical product of a much more intricate development that occurred in the medieval field of koan exegesis. Indeed, as previously mentioned, Genjū's approach to koan practice emerged from the amalgamation of various traditions, encompassing the influential lineage of the Rinzai school centered at Daitokuji.

Yōsō Sōi 養叟宗頤 (1376–1458), the twenty-sixth abbot of Daitokuji, who like Ikkyū Sōjun 一休宗純 (1394–1481) studied under the guidance of Kasō Sōdon 華叟宗曇 (1352–1428), trained several Genjū monks such as Ikka Sekiyu 一華碩由 (1447–1507), thus having a visible impact on their interpretative style (Harada 1995). Yet, despite being the dharma heirs of the same master, Ikkyū and Yōsō could not be more different. Indeed, Yōsō and his methodology became the main target of Ikkyū, who in the miscellaneous *Jikai shū* made abundantly clear his disdain towards his dharma brother for having initiated the creation of corrupted and unorthodox Zen practices. According to Ikkyū, Yōsō would teach exemplified versions of koan to nuns and merchants and then certify their achievement of awakening. In particular, Yōsō used images and metaphors related to hell to educate laypeople (Iizuka 2001, 298). These words reflect the general tendency of adapting koan interpretation to the audience by including notions that did not strictly pertain to Zen doctrine. This passage is noteworthy since it mentions that the community at Daitokuji used the imaginary of hell to make more accessible the explanation of koan. Indeed, it corroborates the hypothesis that Zen monks were familiar with the symbolism endowed in the representations of the afterlife to the extent of including it in their own teachings.

The teachings that Ikkyū refers to are contained in several secret manuals that were transmitted by the monks of Daitokuji. For instance, in the *Hyaku gojū soku*, the "insights about hell" mentioned by Ikkyū indicate the tale of Zhaozhou Congshen 趙州從諗 (778–897) in hell, contained in the *Zhaozhou Zhenji chanshi yulu* (x 68: 1315.82b8–10). This story reports a dialogue about whether people of great virtue (that is, masters who achieved buddhahood) fall into hell. Zhaozhou replies that if people like him would not have been reborn in hell, they could not save anyone (Iizuka 2002, 251). Another secret koan commentary, the *Kosoku kōan*, enriches the explanation of the tale of Zhaozhou in hell with an embryological metaphor that is reminiscent of the lines that open paragraph 4 of the *Ise niji kirigami*, "being born is dying at the sight of the many sufferings. Dying is being alive." Indeed, birth was a direct antecedent of suffering that begins with the act of leaving the womb. Everyday life is thus entrenched in pain,

and it is the true hell (Iizuka 2002, 306).[28] Given the extreme popularity of hell tales, it is very likely that such interpretations arose to provide a more understandable and ready-to-use reading of Chan cases to present to laypeople.[29] It is thus evident that the intertwining of hell images and embryology constitutes one of the doctrinal hallmarks of the Daitokuji commentaries. As a result, the impact of this interpretative style emerges in the secret manuals from the Genjū lineage and Sōtō *kirigami*.

By adapting koan exegesis to the ritual setting of female salvation, the *Ise niji kirigami* represents the *summa* of the doctrinal evolution of koan interpretation. In other words, the highly speculative embryological theories adopted to express the most recondite meaning of enlightenment were reshaped to explain the biological process of birth and thus applied to the female body. Therefore, the doctrinal dilemma of whether an impure being could ultimately achieve buddhahood is reconciled through koan hermeneutics. Indeed, the nurture ("suckling the milk root") from and protection (the robe-placenta) of the mother's body are the ultimate state of realization. When understood from a non-dualistic standpoint, the maternal corporeality, although initially depicted as monstrous and repulsive, embodies the most exquisite form of spiritual perfection.

### *Conclusion*

It is hoped that this article has contributed to the discussion about how women were depicted in religious material, by showing that such representations were much more nuanced and did not fit a priori into the clearcut categorizations of misogyny and sexism. The *Ise niji kirigami*, on the contrary, embraces opposite portrayals of women and their bodies, which were nonetheless coexisting within the same semantic space. It is precisely within this space, which could be defined as "heterotopic,"[30] that women were perceived as impure creatures, mothers to be saved, donors, deities, dragons, agents of social instability, and ultimately corporeality of enlightenment. It must be noted, however, that the *Ise niji kirigami*

28. Birth seen as a subcategory of suffering was already a central component of the birth metaphor in Indian Buddhist sources (Langenberg 2017, 28–42).

29. The aforementioned Shingon-Zen funeral manual *Tainai goi mandara* uses the same tale of Zhaozhou in hell to equate the moment of birth with suffering. In other words, this manual explains that the woman's birth opening is the mountain of death and is the place where the impure blood of menstruation flows (Nakahara, Yoneda, and Gōto 2018, 485–487).

30. Foucault (1986) has elaborated on this concept to explain liminal spaces such as the cemetery or the asylum. Franklin-Brown (2012) has proposed to apply this notion to textual spaces such as encyclopedias, which retain several characteristics emblematic of Foucault's heterotopia. In the analysis of *kirigami* and secret sources, especially in the case of the *Ise niji kirigami*, heterotopia might illuminate the dynamics that partook in the construction of the secret space, which appears as a juxtaposition of concepts apparently in contrast with each other.

remains a portrayal of the female body as it was perceived and understood by the male-dominated institutional environment. In the assemblage of its doctrinal discourses, the *Ise niji kirigami*, like the vast majority of Zen secret sources, leaves the female voice silent. While this is surely a limit of this study, the secret sources examined here offer a valuable perspective on how Zen monks lived and conceptualized the topic of female salvation in relation to their religious practice. Although our document likely served as an echo chamber for widespread medieval narratives, it also demonstrates the agency of Zen monks in the creation of new perspectives that could deepen the conceptualization of women's spiritual capacities and biological functions.

In the introduction, I posed two relevant questions. How can the maternal womb depicted as impure be reconciled with the metaphor of buddhahood understood as a regression into the uterine status? How do embryological notions influence the conceptualization of the female body? Through the *Ise niji kirigami*, the present study has demonstrated how the theorization of awakening in gestational terms indeed had a visible impact on the negotiation of maleness and femaleness, which were by no means fixed categories. The *Ise niji kirigami* upholds classic doctrinal compounds ingrained in the representations of defiled female bodies, yet at the same time, this document also displays the methodology used to subvert gender dualism, thereby rebuilding a new conceptualization of motherhood and femininity. Ultimately, the biological processes embodied in the female body are taken as the norm to illustrate awakening itself. Accordingly, women could not be denied salvation, for their ontological selves were already the epitome of enlightenment.

As displayed in the *Ise niji kirigami*, *kirigami* documents encompass a wide variety of notions and forms of knowledge whose relation appears often inconsistent and contradictory. Although secret instructions such as the *Ise niji kirigami* are descriptive of the intellectual logic set in place inside the temple, they represent an invaluable repository of knowledge whose investigation may uncover the historical developments that favored the circulation of certain ideas and concepts. In this case, this textual corpus enabled us to shed new light on the categories of femininity and childbirth, showing that such motifs were not exclusive to a gendered domain of knowledge. Rather, characteristics emblematic of female ontology were to some degree considered representative of nonhuman beings, such as dragons and kami. In conclusion, we can affirm that this inner dynamism and mobility of ideas reflect on the hermeneutical fluidity that characterizes the exploration of the feminine self, which is generated through discursive practices that transcend the rigid ontological classifications.

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SKT *Shinshaku kanbun taikei* 新釈漢文大系. 120 vols. Uchida Sennosuke 內田泉之助 et al., eds. Meiji Shoin, 1972–.

SSZ *Sōtōshū zensho* 曹洞宗全書. 20 vols. Ed. Sōtōshū Zensho Kankōkai 曹洞宗全書刊行会. Sōtōshū Shūmuchō, 1970–1973.

ST *Shintō taikei* 神道大系. 120 vols. Ed. Shintō Taikei Hensankai 神道大系編纂会. Shintō Taikei Hensankai, 1977–1994.

T *The SAT Taishō Shinshū Daizōkyō Text Database*. Version 2018. By the SAT Daizōkyō Text Database Committee with the approval of Daizō Shuppan. Web resource maintained by the University of Tokyo. https://21dzk.l.u-tokyo.ac.jp/SAT/index.html.

X *Dai Nippon zoku zōkyō* 大日本続蔵経. CBETA edition. Maeda Eun 前田慧雲 and Nakano Tatsue 中野達慧, eds. 750 vols. Zōkyō Shoin, 1905–1912. Cited from the online version, CBETA Online Reader. http://www.cbeta.org/index.htm

ZSSZ *Zoku Sōtōshū zensho* 続曹洞宗全書. 10 vols. Ed. Sōtōshū Zensho Kankōkai. Sōtōshū Shūmuchō, 1973–1976.


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