

Rethinking the Practice of *Mizuko Kuyō* in Contemporary Japan

Interviews with Practitioners at a Buddhist Temple in Tokyo

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Scholarly research in recent years has resulted in the publication of numerous books and articles on abortion in Japan, and on Buddhist rites (mizuko kuyō) for the spirit of the aborted fetus. Many of the generalizations and conclusions drawn from this research are based on practices at large temples that specialize in mizuko kuyō, and with which the women participants have only an ephemeral connection. Utilizing in-depth interviews with six women who participate in monthly mizuko kuyō observances at a Buddhist temple in Tokyo, we call into question a number of these generalizations about mizuko rites. Statements concerning the mental health, fear of retribution, and gullibility of women who participate in the ritual, as well as the exploitative nature of priests, must be modified in light of long-term practices at neighborhood temples that do not specialize in mizuko kuyō.

THE IMPETUS FOR THIS research arose from the recognition that in the literature on the practice of *mizuko kuyō* 水子供養 in Japan today, women's voices, that is, the voices of those who are most intimately involved in the memorial service, are largely absent. Numerous scholars have commented on this lack of interviews with women (see e.g. READER 1994, pp. 199–200; TANABE 1994, pp. 439–40; WERBLOWSKY 1991, p. 303; HARRISON 1995, pp. 67, 70), which has led us to believe that many of the previously articulated generalizations concerning women who participate in *mizuko kuyō* may be based on mere assumption. In addition to giving voice to women participants, we also wanted to address

* An earlier (and shorter) version of this essay was presented at the Association for Asian Studies annual meeting in Honolulu, 11–14 April 1996. We thank the session participants for their stimulating questions and contributions to the discussion, especially Ian Reader and George Tanabe for their insightful comments and encouragement.

the fascination in much of the existing literature with the large *mizuko kuyō* temples that have sprung up since the 1970s, the most often cited example being Shiun-zan Jizō-ji in Chichibu, Saitama-ken (see LAFLEUR 1992, pp. 5–10). Most writers on *mizuko* have been very critical of such temples, claiming that their sole purpose is to extort money from unsuspecting and naive people by playing on their fears of retribution (*tatari* 祟り) from the spirits of the aborted fetuses. While these large temples that focus exclusively on *mizuko* play a significant role in the overall *mizuko kuyō* phenomenon, they by no means represent the complete picture. Other practices of *mizuko kuyō* have been either ignored—perhaps due to lack of information—or have been given only passing notice in the context of broader discussions.¹ Other practices of *mizuko kuyō* would include those described by Elizabeth HARRISON in her work on alternative *mizuko* observances organized by women themselves, in some cases beyond the purview of regular temples, as well as the practice of *mizuko* that we investigated at a small temple in Tokyo. In our case, and in direct contrast to the large “commercialized” *mizuko* temples, 1) the practitioners attended services on a monthly basis over a period of many years; 2) they had chosen a small, neighborhood temple near their home; and 3) neither did they spend a large sum of money on such services, nor was the purchase of statues involved.²

In 1992–1993 we found ourselves in the unusual but fortuitous position of having close connections and access to a Nichiren Buddhist temple located in a large temple complex in Tokyo that performed *mizuko kuyō* one day every month. Anderson, who lived in and worked at the temple complex, obtained the requisite formal introduction to the head priest of the smaller temple, which we shall call Honpō-ji, and inquired whether it would be possible to interview some of the seventy women who participated regularly in the *kuyō*. The process of gaining an entree to this milieu and of trying to elicit information on

¹ Brief treatments of two types of memorialization can be found in BROOKS 1981, p. 120 and WERBLOWSKY 1991, p. 330.

² The women at this temple in Tokyo paid ¥3,000 at each monthly service they attended. At the current rate of exchange, the sum would be about US\$25. By contrast see articles in the Japanese media, reporting on extortionary abuses of *mizuko kuyō* practitioners at temples specializing in this *kuyō*; a representative newspaper article reads in part: “Thirty five people sued a temple in Daigo, Ibaraki Prefecture, Monday for ¥88 million in damages over its ‘spiritual business,’ which allegedly led to them paying an average ¥2 million each against their will. Attorneys for the plaintiffs...said Honkaku-ji Temple demanded that visitors donate money, claiming they were ‘haunted by the evil spirits of fetuses that miscarried or were aborted,’ and that the offerings were the only way to prevent their families from dying out....The plaintiffs paid an average of ¥2 million, with the biggest payment amounting to about ¥6 million, the lawyers said” (*THE JAPAN TIMES* 1992, p. 2).

a topic that basically no one wanted to discuss was extremely complex and interesting, and would constitute an essay in its own right. To summarize, although our goal had been ten in-depth interviews, we were finally able to conduct six. Because of the length of the interviews (several hours) and the rapport we were able to establish with the women, our contribution to research on *mizuko kuyō* is of qualitative if not quantitative importance. In addition to the interview materials, our conclusions are also based on our own participation in and observation of numerous *mizuko* services at this temple.³

The format of the monthly *mizuko kuyō* at Honpō-ji combines both formal and informal elements: participants gather in the morning at the temple, register, pay a fee, and their names are recorded on small wooden tablets resembling *toba*. A service of approximately one hour is held with chanting of portions of the *Lotus Sutra* interspersed with repetitions of *namu myōhō renge kyō* by the priest and participants, drum beating by the participants, and a closing monologue by the priest.⁴ The *kuyō* is followed by a social hour in an adjoining room, with substantial refreshments prepared by the priest's wife and several participants who have come early for this purpose. The socializing is informal and there is much general discussion, usually within small groups around the long table. The priest himself does not always attend this part, although his wife does. Many of the participants have known each other for years by virtue of having attended these services at the same temple, and there is an easy familiarity among them. An identical service and social hour is held in the afternoon. The participants, who number approximately thirty in each of the two services, are diverse: the majority consists of women between the ages of forty and sixty, but perhaps 15% of the group is made up of younger women (in their twenties and thirties), some men (typically four to six per service, most in their sixties or seventies), and several young

³ We combined the strengths of our very different backgrounds as scholars for this study. Martin comes from women's studies and comparative literature, and has had extensive interviewing experience prior to the project, while Anderson's areas of expertise are folklore and Japanese religion. These disciplinary differences gave rise to extended negotiation on several points, but the resulting essay reflects a joint and consensual "reading" and interpretation of the interview materials.

⁴ The portion of the *Lotus Sutra* chanted during the service reads: "The three spheres, completely insecure/Are just like a house afire/Being full of many woes/Most frightful/Constantly marked by birth, old age/Sickness, death, and care—/Fires such as these/Raging without cease./The Thus Come One, having already left/The burning house of the three spheres/Is quiet and unperturbed/Dwelling securely in forest and field./Now these three spheres/Are all my possession./The living beings within them/Are all my children./Yet, now these places/Have many cares and troubles/From which I alone/Can save them." (HURVITZ 1976, p. 72).

couples.⁵ Almost all appeared to be middle class. There is a high percentage of repeat participation from month to month, and a couple of women even attended both morning and afternoon services, but this was unusual. Our hypotheses before we had attended these services and prior to the interviews were the following: 1) we expected that all of the participants would be female, 2) we thought that they would attend services only once or twice, or for a brief period of time, probably not extending beyond the year immediately following an abortion or loss of a child, 3) we anticipated a possible close relationship between participants and priest, and 4) we expected that the social hour after the *kuyō* would serve as a source of emotional support, that the women would build a support group. As it turned out, most—if not all—of these hypotheses had to be revised or modified.

Profiles of the Practitioners

We would like first to provide biographical sketches of our interviewees to give a demographic overview of the group and to permit some initial comparisons, and then we would like to draw some conclusions from their observations on various *mizuko* issues. Katayama Hiroko, who is twenty-seven and has spent her entire life in Tokyo, is single and lives with her younger sister and her parents, who are proprietors of a massage and *shiatsu* clinic.⁶ She left her position as a nursery school teacher for health reasons and now sews children's clothes at a small shop nearby. She describes herself as both modern and old-fashioned, although she tends toward the latter. She attends the *mizuko kuyō* at Honpō-ji, a non-family temple, because she "felt sympathetic and was curious," and because the temple was close to her home. She has attended the *kuyō* almost every month for three years, not because she has had a *mizuko* herself—she has never been pregnant—but rather because she has "had spiritual experiences and seen things." She participates in *kuyō* "to give thanks for being born and raised." She feels that people who attend various kinds of *kuyō* are usually of the same mind and join one's hands in worship and thanksgiving. Her paternal grandmother died following a miscarriage, so she sometimes thinks of her during the ceremony. She has come to know the other

⁵ For a comparison, see HARRISON's analysis of *mizuko kuyō* participants (1995, p. 70) in which she notes a change between 1984 ("the vast majority of lay participants were women, mainly women over fifty") and 1992 ("I have seen more men and, especially, more families attending *mizuko* services").

⁶ All names have been altered to protect individual identities, but other descriptive information about the interviewees is accurate.

women who attend the monthly service at Honpō-ji but still considers them acquaintances (*shiriaï*), not friends (*tomodachi*). She does not know why the other women participate in *mizuko kuyō*, but she assumes that most of them have had an abortion.

Mishima Takako, who is sixty-four years old, was born in Osaka and now lives in Saitama Prefecture with her husband, an employee of a computer company, and with her ninety-two year old mother-in-law. She married at the age of thirty, which is relatively late by Japanese norms, and she has one son, a free-lance writer who lives in Yokohama. Mishima defines herself as an average Japanese woman. Although she worked outside the home when she was younger, she is now a housewife. Since the one-way trip from her home to the temple requires two and one half hours, and she makes the trip ten times per month, she spends a considerable amount of time in religious practice and she observes various kinds of *kuyō*, not only *mizuko kuyō*. She is willing to travel such long distances because her family belongs to the Nichiren sect, the temple complex is famous, and she felt a kind of karmic link (*en* 縁) to Honpō-ji. She noticed the sign advertising *mizuko kuyō* on her first visit to the temple complex and then decided to attend services. She has participated in *kuyō* services for over thirty years, the last thirteen of those at Honpō-ji. Her first child died during a Caesarian delivery, and she began participating in *mizuko kuyō* immediately afterwards. Her reasons were threefold: to console the spirit of this child, to become pregnant again and ensure a safe delivery, and because three of her sisters-in-law have had abortions. Her husband and mother-in-law attend the services with her occasionally, but her son is not currently interested in such things. In her opinion, the reason that men do not attend the *kuyō* is that they are too busy with work and cannot spare the time. She sometimes brings a woman friend to the services, and after thirteen years she has made friends among the regular attendees, but she does not know why the other women participate; this is a very private matter and is never discussed. Mishima is probably the most friendly and outgoing woman among the regular participants at Honpō-ji; she was the first to volunteer for an interview and afterwards tried to convince others to be interviewed.

Okumura Seiko, although a close friend of Mishima, appears to have a nearly opposite personality: she is very quiet and reserved, almost shy. Her nervousness throughout the interview could be attributed to the fact that she has had an abortion and is understandably reluctant to discuss it. Born in Tokyo into “a typical, average Japanese family” as she describes it—her father made paper, her mother was a housewife—she is now sixty-one years old. Together with her husband, who is retired from Tokyo Gas, she has two daughters and three

grandchildren. She began attending *mizuko kuyō* after her children were grown, and has participated in services at Honpō-ji for the past ten years. She underwent an abortion at some point in her life, but declined to share any further information about the situation other than to say that at the time she felt resignation and regret (*mōshi wake nai*). She feels that her abortion was a great sin (*ōkii tsumi*) which she will never be able to wash away; therefore she will continue attending *mizuko kuyō* until her death. Since she lives nearby, she saw the sign in front of Honpō-ji advertising *mizuko kuyō*; one day she stopped and talked to the priest and decided to attend. Since that first conversation with him about her experience, in which she expressed her sorrow (*mōshi wake nakatta*) and said that she was conscience-stricken (*kashaku*), she has had no further discussions of the topic with the priest or with others associated with the temple. She feels that this *kuyō* is for both men and women, and her husband attends the services occasionally. At times her daughters also attend with her, but since they have young children they have little free time. She has no idea why the other women participate; women do not talk about *mizuko* during the social hour. Personally, she attends *mizuko kuyō* not only for the aborted fetus, but also as a form of *senzo kuyō* 先祖供養 for her deceased parents.

Togami Mariko, who is now sixty-one, came to Tokyo from Hokkaido when she was seventeen, and after more than forty years of living in Tokyo still feels that Tokyo people are cold and do not greet their neighbors. She describes her family as very traditional, and like Mishima her family practices Nichiren Buddhism. Her mother was a housewife, and her father worked for Tokyo Gas, as did her husband until he retired about ten years ago. They have two grown sons, aged forty-one and thirty-six, and two grandchildren. She had a *mizuko* between the births of her two sons. Soon after the birth of the first son she became pregnant again, but given her weakened condition her doctor recommended an abortion. She did not want to abort and discussed it with her husband and family, but health considerations prevailed. She was twenty-one years old when she had this experience and, at the time, found that it was an acceptable solution. But about six years ago she felt that she must do something for this *mizuko*, so she spoke with the priest at Honpō-ji and began attending *mizuko* services. Thus, twenty-eight years passed between the *mizuko* experience itself and attending the *kuyō*. Even though mostly older women participate in the *kuyō*, she feels that many younger women will, like herself, begin attending when they are older and have more free time. After a pause, she qualified this statement by adding that since younger

women today don't know how to act properly, they may not attend *mizuko kuyō* when they are older.

Takahashi Sumie was born during World War II in China where her father worked as a boat designer. In 1945, when she was three, the family had to return to Japan. Since her mother's family home in Kobe was gone, however, they stayed with the father's siblings in Tokyo, and she has lived in Tokyo ever since. Her husband is a salaryman, and although she works on occasion she is basically a housewife. She worked prior to marriage and was proud not to be an office lady; rather, she did the same work as the men. She was raised in a very traditional family: her mother was a "Meiji person," and the upbringing of the children (*shitsuke*) was quite strict. She had miscarriages both before and after the birth of her daughter, who is now fourteen. She has been attending *mizuko kuyō* for twelve years, having begun shortly after her second miscarriage. She lives in the neighborhood, saw the sign in front of the temple, felt moved, and decided to attend. She has never discussed with the priest why she attends. She thinks that the first time she filled out the paper before the *kuyō* she might have written "miscarriages," but she cannot remember. The first time she went with her mother and daughter; her mother continues to attend when she is healthy, but her daughter is too busy at school. Her husband has never attended, but he prays in front of the temple when he passes by. Her mother had suffered a miscarriage herself and encouraged the daughter to practice *mizuko kuyō*. Before attending she discussed the matter with her husband, not to ask his permission but to inform him of her intention. She attends the *kuyō* only three or four times a year, not monthly, and will continue as long as she is physically able. Takahashi does not understand why young people would have abortions today, given Japan's present affluence. In her view, abortion, especially today, is murder, and women are thinking only of themselves. She feels that it was easier to understand and justify abortion at the close of World War II when times were difficult. She practices *mizuko kuyō* because of the two miscarriages and also for the health of her daughter. Initially she felt there might be a chance for the spirits of the miscarried children to be reborn in her family, but with the passage of time her hopes of that have diminished. Thus she focuses the *kuyō* on her daughter so that she will not encounter problems. The socializing after the *kuyō* is not important to her since she feels she is younger than most of the women (it is not clear to what extent this perception is accurate; if the age of most participants lies between fifty-five and sixty, Takahashi would be five to ten years younger). Because of the age difference, she explains, she has not made many friends.

Katayama Yōko, the younger sister of our first interviewee Hiroko, is twenty-one and lives at home with her parents and older sister. Since the others all work outside the home, she feels that she is the housewife for the family. She does *kuyō* at a number of different temples both within and outside of the main temple complex. She has attended *mizuko* services since she graduated from high school about three years ago, because her mother requested that she attend on her behalf: the mother had had an abortion between the births of the two daughters. At first she was not very interested, but now she wants to attend. She used to attend *mizuko kuyō* with her maternal grandmother, who is now deceased, although she does not believe that her grandmother had a *mizuko*. She thinks that her mother has practiced *mizuko kuyō* for a long time, both at temples and at the family *butsudan*, but she is not sure of this. Her mother rarely attends now because of work, but she continues daily *kuyō* in front of the *butsudan*, although not only for *mizuko*. She first learned of her mother's *mizuko* when she was in elementary school and taking a bath together with her mother. Her mother raised the topic and said that she had taken strong cold medicine while she was pregnant. Since the doctor was not sure whether or not the baby would be deformed, she decided to abort. The daughter does not know if her mother has ever talked with the priest about the *mizuko*, and she herself has never told him why she attends. When she fills out the registration paper before the *kuyō*, she always writes that it is for her ancestors. Her mother initially went to the family temple (*bodaiji* 菩提寺)—belonging to the Tendai sect—for *mizuko kuyō*, but since it is over two hours away, she changed to Honpō-ji when she saw the sign in front of the temple. Katayama did not think it was at all unusual for a daughter to practice *mizuko kuyō* on her mother's behalf.

Mizuko Kuyō: Public or Private?

As the preceding sketches make clear, women attend *mizuko kuyō* services for a wide variety of reasons, and not solely because they have had abortions. We can probably assume that our informants did not comprise a representative cross-section of the women participating in *kuyō* at this temple. It is clear that most women attend because they have lost a child either through abortion, miscarriage, stillbirth, or infant death, but we suspect that many, or even most, of the women have had abortions and therefore were reluctant to talk with us. Of our six informants only two had in fact had abortions, one for health reasons while the other, who seemed uncomfortable during the interview, chose not to reveal the reason she had aborted. The two young

sisters had never been married or pregnant and attended for several reasons: 1) because their mother had had an abortion—one daughter had been told by the mother, the other had surmised it, 2) for the soul of their grandmother who had died fifty years earlier following a miscarriage, 3) for the sake of their own continued good health, and 4) due to feelings of gratitude that they felt were common to the practice of all forms of *kuyō*. Another informant attended because she had lost a child during a Caesarian section, but also because of the *innen* 因縁—or negative karma—of the family into which she had married, due to the abortions of her sisters-in-law. The final informant attended because she had experienced two miscarriages. The results of even this small sample indicate that *mizuko kuyō* is not practiced solely by women who have had abortions or even solely by women who have had a *mizuko* experience themselves. Not only do women occasionally participate on behalf of other “*mizuko* women,” they also participate for the welfare of living children and other relatives.⁷

The diversity of reasons for practicing *mizuko kuyō* is linked to an observation made by a number of our informants: they view *mizuko kuyō* as merely one part of a larger *kuyō* practice, including particularly *senzo kuyō* (for ancestors). As such, *mizuko kuyō* can be seen as a family-oriented practice, and in the broader sense even extended family oriented, in a way similar to *senzo kuyō*. As previously mentioned, the two sisters participated because of their mother’s abortion and grandmother’s miscarriage, and another woman attended in part because her sisters-in-law had aborted. In direct contrast to this, several scholars have emphasized the “individual nature” of *mizuko kuyō*: William LAFLEUR cites as an example women signing and leaving *ema* 絵馬 at temples (1992, p. 153), while Bardwell Smith (citing HOSHINO and TAKEDA 1987, p. 314) argues that “with the gradual devolution of the traditional family system in modern urban areas the responsibility for abortion, which used to be shared by the local community in Edo Japan, must now ‘be borne in secret completely by the individual’” (SMITH 1988, p. 4). Leaving aside the question of whether the local community in the Edo period shared responsibility for an abortion, it appears to us that many contemporary women bear this burden neither alone nor in total secrecy. In response to the question whether she had discussed the abortion before having it, Okumura said, “Yes, I

⁷ In some cases *mizuko kuyō* can even be conducted for men. According to interviews conducted by Margaret Lock, the “national organization of gynecologists holds a *mizuko kuyō* ceremony once a year in Tokyo” (LOCK 1993, p. 277). The ceremony strangely parallels those held by owners of restaurants who serve eels and other animals: once or twice a year such establishments sponsor rites for the spirits of the animals they have been obliged to kill in order to earn a living.

did. Yes, it is normal I think...in most ordinary homes I think it is [normal to discuss it]." Later in the interview she expanded on this initial comment: "There isn't any situation in which I would have to say that I have had a *mizuko*, but it doesn't have to be a secret either. This is an issue that is a personal matter and a family matter. You don't have to report everything [to neighbors, to the world], but at least as a couple we do consult with each other." When asked if she discussed her *mizuko* with anyone other than her husband she replied, "I can. Today I can. I can talk to close friends. But there isn't any need to speak about this to ordinary friends. I can talk to my family, brothers and sisters, and close friends." In a similar manner, Togami talked with family members: "I consulted with my husband...all the family members, father and mother, and husband. The reason for this is that I didn't want to abort, but I was weak." She excludes friends, however, as possible confidantes because, she explains, this is a religious matter and most of her friends do not know anything about Buddhism. Most of the women we talked to mentioned discussing the *mizuko* with their husbands, mothers, children, and other close family members. On the other hand, but as might be expected, the *mizuko* experience was definitely not discussed openly with non-family members: neighbors, acquaintances, or even with more casual friends—hence the reluctance we encountered in identifying potential interviewees. All of our informants told us that *mizuko* is never discussed during the socializing after the *kuyō*, and, in fact, none of the participants knew the specific reason why other women were participating—even after ten years or more of regular monthly observance. In some cases even the priest was uninformed. Of course, participation in *mizuko* services is, in itself, a public statement, albeit of a non-specific nature. Attending *mizuko kuyō* at a temple represents a seemingly contradictory public "non-declaration" of a private event; it does not, however, appear contradictory to the women themselves. Okumura said that although the *mizuko* experience is a personal and private matter, she has no difficulty attending a public *kuyō*, because one's presence can be explained by numerous possibilities: "If we speak of *mizuko*...I have a *mizuko*. But in addition to this, in my family my mother and father are dead. There are a lot of people who pray in front of Kannon-sama for their mother and father. It isn't just for *mizuko*. There are various reasons. They even come for ancestor *kuyō*."⁸ Takahashi, who has had two

⁸ The fragmented nature of the response evident here was characteristic of many of the interviews. Few sentences were completed; rather, phrases were strung together with liberal pauses and filler words and phrases. The pauses seemed to stem from the necessity to think through many answers in a cautious and deliberate manner, but they may also have been due to the (emotional) difficulty of the subject matter.

miscarriages, also seems to rely on a certain anonymity inherent to multiple possible reasons for practicing *kuyō*. She claims to be unconcerned that people will think she has had an abortion because she attends *mizuko kuyō*; at the same time, however, she notes: “if someone appeared to think that, then I would make it clear to them that I had had a miscarriage.” Abortion clearly carries a stigma for her, but she does not believe that *mizuko kuyō* is automatically equated with abortion. In sum, although *mizuko* is obviously a very personal experience, the picture—suggested by some researchers—of women keeping this experience bottled up inside themselves to the detriment of their mental health seems strained at best.

Retribution vs. Remorse

As a result of these observations, we are led to question the universality of some scholars’ suggestions that women who participate in *mizuko* services have emotional or psychological problems. For example, Bardwell SMITH claims that *mizuko kuyō* “represents emotional problems encountered by large numbers of Japanese women following an abortion experience” (1988, p. 3); William LAFLEUR suggests that such ritual “provides for human, emotional needs” (1992, p. 144); and Emiko OHNUKI-TIERNEY claims that “[t]hese services are held primarily by women...[who] often are suffering from what we call psychosomatic illnesses,” and that the services “reflect an increased incidence of what we might suspect are ‘psychosomatic’ illnesses among Japanese women, or at least the fact that they are more aware of their problems and are trying to cope with them by observing one type or another of memorial service” (1984, pp. 78, 81).⁹ While these observations are potentially significant, they must remain speculative because they are not based on information from the participants in the rituals themselves. The underlying premise appears to be that religious ritual “cannot be taken literally” (OHNUKI-TIERNEY 1984, p. 157), and that it is left to scholars to divine the real meaning of such activities. A large amount of literature that focuses on stories of fetuses’ imputed retributive powers has been published by religious groups and temples interested in selling protective services to worshippers/clients. Observations on the alleged emotional and psychological state of women who participate in *mizuko kuyō* probably proceed from published tales such as these, but these generalizations do an injustice to a

⁹ See also LaFleur’s claims that *mizuko kuyō* may have positive therapeutic functions (LAFLEUR 1992, pp. 154, 197, 217).

very complex and diversely practiced ritual. At the very least, they do not appear to apply to those practicing at a small neighborhood temple such as the one in our study. IKEGAMI Yoshimasa (1992) has argued that *kuyō* in general exercises the primary function of reconnecting or reestablishing ties that have been severed. Mishima told us, for example, that she has always been interested in *kuyō* for the ancestors and sees *mizuko kuyō* as an extension of this practice—although she does admit that there are differences, the major one being that with *mizuko* there are no death anniversaries to observe as there are for the ancestors. Some women evidently perform *kuyō* for a *mizuko* for the same reasons that they perform *kuyō* for their ancestors; and certainly few scholars would argue that people who practice *senzo kuyō* automatically suffer from emotional disturbances or psychosomatic problems.

The issue of fetal retribution is closely related to the larger discussion of the role played by guilt in the practice of *mizuko kuyō*. LAFLEUR argues that guilt “is precisely why the practice of the rites for the *mizuko* arose in Japan” (1992, p. 157), and SMITH points out that “some priest-practitioners...capitalize upon feelings of guilt and fear which women frequently experience following abortion, and...attribute most personal and family problems to the decision to abort” (1988, p. 5). Similarly, Domyo MIURA, a Japanese Buddhist priest and author of *The Forgotten Child* (1983), discusses at some length the problems that arise in the lives of those who have aborted and how these problems can be eliminated if people will only pray for the spirit of the aborted fetus.¹⁰ In support of this retribution/guilt interpretation, two Japanese scholars have recently argued that “the purpose of contemporary *mizuko kuyō* is one of providing comfort from the feeling of indebtedness and anxiety that comes from a fear of this curse” (HOSHINO and TAKEDA 1993, p. 186). In support of their reading, the two authors offer an *omoidegusa* (unpublished reminiscence) by a pilgrim to Kikishi-an in Kyoto, which they cite as a “concrete example” of this phenomenon. The woman, who has both miscarried and aborted, remarks: “I feel heartbroken when I think of that child (which I aborted) and think of what it would be like if the child were alive” (HOSHINO and TAKEDA 1993, p. 186). This statement, however, seems to express more a sense of sadness and regret than fear or anxiety about retribution. While some of the women who participate in *mizuko* rites may indeed experience feelings of guilt, a number of our informants echoed more strongly the regret expressed by the pilgrim to Kikishi-an. Togami, who firmly believes that she did not have a

¹⁰ See esp. Ch. 2 “This is how I found happiness!” containing numerous narratives of personal experience.

“real” abortion, since she did not want to do it, sees things differently today than when she had the abortion. Now that she is healthy and her other two children are healthy and the family is materially very comfortable, she regrets that this child was not born since it would have been a part of this happy family. She regrets that it was not given this chance. In the interview she repeated many times: “So as for me, if I had been healthy, I wanted to bear the child and raise it. That’s how I felt about it. So it wasn’t that I didn’t want the child and thus had *mizuko*. I felt that I wanted to have the child and raise it if I had a healthy body.” Regret, remorse, and a sense of loss all play a strong role in these views; fear of vengeful spirits is not mentioned. Okumura is similarly repetitive in her attempts to describe the feeling that has motivated her *mizuko* practice: “My children grew up. I thought, well, they turned out like this. When I look at the children I raised, and think of the *mizuko*...this feeling of regret/sorrow (*mōshi wake nai*) appears. I always thought [about it], but...I didn’t come. Occasionally I felt remorse.” Sentiments of remorse, sadness, and loss seem to predominate over those of fear, guilt, and sin.

Given the preeminent role accorded mothers and the institution of motherhood in Japanese society, both traditionally and in many forms still today, the sentiments of sadness and regret could be understood at several different levels: personal regret but also remorse at a failed social role. OHINATA Masami writes that “the motherhood that has been emphasized has been of a particular kind: motherly love characterized by selfless devotion” (1995, p. 205). Thus, a woman who has had to abort might feel guilty or remorseful for not having been selfless enough, for having put her own health (or other considerations) ahead of the fetus’ life.¹¹ IAWO Sumiko notes that “the role of mother has been greatly glorified, causing women without children to feel their lives are incomplete (there was a time when the childless mother [*sic*] was considered abnormal). Many Japanese women used to say that watching their children grow was all they needed to make ‘life worth living.’ Childrearing remains the pivot of the lives of most women” (p. 129). Since most of the women in our group had other children, they did not face childlessness, but given society’s equation of female self worth with motherhood, regret would be one obvious emotional response to the loss of a child. In the case of abortion, regret might be one among several—possibly even conflicting—emotions.

¹¹ For discussions of motherhood in contemporary Japan, see OHINATA 1995; IAWO 1993, pp. 125–52; ALLISON 1976; and LOCK 1976.

Guilt, Sin, and the Issue of Control

MIZOGUCHI Akiyo (1991) has argued that labeling *mizuko* as a sin constitutes yet another means for men to control women and their sexuality, but the issue of sin lends itself to different interpretations. Although several of the interviewees did, in fact, describe *mizuko* as a sin, they divorced it from feelings of personal guilt.¹² Furthermore, those who had aborted did not indicate that they would decide differently if they had it to do over. An interesting process of accommodation allows women to accept the rhetoric of sin while pragmatically advocating the necessity of that sin. Since the priest at Honpō-ji interprets abortion as sin, we asked Okumura how the priest might react if a second abortion became necessary. “*Mizuko kuyō* is something you continue throughout life,” she replied. “Therefore after having a *mizuko* you will not have a second.” She seemed to be paraphrasing the priest’s comments up to this point, but then suddenly shifted to her own (contradictory) answer, by adding, “but it all depends on the family situation. For example, if the body is weak, or in bad health, not in condition to bear a child then you may still have a *mizuko*. It all depends on the situation.” We encountered this same kind of response when we asked the women whether they thought the law should be changed to make abortion illegal in Japan. Takahashi, for example, despite her feeling that abortion is murder, initially did not volunteer an opinion on changing the law; then, after some thought she stated unequivocally that it should not be changed. This viewpoint does not seem to be restricted to the older generation. Our youngest interviewee, Katayama Yōko, twenty-one, agreed with Takahashi, saying that abortion is fundamentally a sin (*tsumi*), but there are times when it cannot be helped. Although she finds the law permitting abortion bad, she would not want it changed, because it might drive people to do more serious things, such as commit suicide. Thus, although *mizuko* is bad and perhaps even a sin, and although one must atone for this sin throughout a lifetime, situations will continue to arise in which it will be necessary to abort. It does not appear that in this worldview, concepts of “sin” are controlling women’s behaviors. IWAO Sumiko supports this view, according more weight to a sense of pragmatism than to an absolute sense of morality: “Since a fetus is not

¹² In contrast to this interpretation, that absolves women of guilt, Elizabeth HARRISON argues that guilt is inevitable: “Two aspects of Japanese society enable this transformation of grief into guilt over the loss of a child, which in turn is transformed by *mizuko kuyō* rhetoric into feelings of continuous responsibility toward that child.” The two aspects, in Harrison’s interpretation, are the importance of motherhood in Japan and Buddhist belief that the *mizuko* may cause trouble for its living relatives (1995, pp. 71–72).

considered distinctly human until it reaches three months, it arouses no strong sense of guilt, and miscarriage and abortion in general was, and is today, viewed in very practical terms. In the pragmatic Japanese tradition, priority has been attached to the health of the mother” (1993, p. 46). While we agree theoretically with Mizoguchi about the potential for control of female sexuality embodied in the concept of “sin,” it does not seem to have affected the pragmatic attitudes and behaviors of the women in this particular group.¹³

Mizoguchi’s fear of male control is also undercut by the apparent real power that at least some women have within their marriages. According to our interviewees, both the decision to abort and later the decision to practice *mizuko kuyō* have often been made ultimately by the woman. Togami said, “I think men also have feelings [about *mizuko kuyō*], but women have deeper feelings. The reason I say that is because women have more feelings towards bearing a child and becoming a parent and raising it. Therefore, I think women are more deeply involved [in *mizuko kuyō*] than men.” Okumura was even more explicit when we asked if it is up to the wife to make the abortion decision: “I think it would be me...because I am a woman.” Iwao Sumiko would attribute this phenomenon to women’s increased independence and responsibility both within the marital relationship and within the family as a whole: “Throughout most of their marriage many women felt forced by their husband’s employment-imposed work schedule to carry the weight of family affairs and important decisions alone; once they became accustomed to this burden, they gained great independence, learning to function completely without a husband’s help” (1993, p. 115, emphasis added). OHINATA Masami concurs with Iwao’s analysis, writing that in “the traditional notion of motherhood,” “everything is made the women’s responsibility...[and that] by limiting the responsibility for children to women, the issue of responsibility was clarified” (1995, pp. 206–207). Feminists like Igeta Midori would evaluate this same evidence negatively. IGETA does not regard the fact that ultimately it is the woman who makes the abortion decision as freedom over one’s body and reproduction; rather, she argues, “Japanese women have been forced to bear exclusive responsibility for the preg-

¹³ A possible exception to this general observation would be Togami Mariko, who emphasized that the priest at Honpō-ji taught her that *mizuko* was a sin: “Because I was young [when I had the *mizuko*] I didn’t have the consciousness of having a *mizuko*.... However since the first day I came to worship (*omairi*) I was taught [by the priest] that the *mizuko* stays in another world like heaven...and therefore...I, and parents in general, have sinned deeply. Therefore as long as we live we must do *mizuko kuyō*.” On the other hand, she clearly stated that she does not feel that one would be cursed (*tatari*) if one did not do *kuyō* for a *mizuko*.

nancy" (1995, p. 99). Okumura and Togami, both of whom aborted, did bear responsibility for their pregnancies, but it was not exclusive. Both women emphasized that they consulted with their husbands and families before making the decision. Neither of their situations sounds coercive; if anything, Togami's family had to talk her *into* the abortion, not *out* of it.

Elizabeth HARRISON (1995, pp. 67, 71) and other scholars, notably Bardwell SMITH (1985, p.5) and William LAFLEUR (1992, pp. 151-59), refer to women's post-abortion "guilt feelings" as if they were self-evident. Almost no one mentions the possibility of relief or thankfulness as the predominating sentiments at the termination of an unwanted pregnancy. One of Harrison's interviewees, Sasaki-san, describes "her feelings immediately after her abortion": "In my case...the morning sickness was terribly hard, terribly hard, for about a month. Because it was so bad, I felt more relief [than anything else] right after the abortion, and I was young" (HARRISON 1995, p. 85). Although this passage invites comment, Harrison chooses not to explore the possibilities presented. The underlying problem for writers who assume guilt feelings is that they fail to distinguish between loss of a child and abortion of a fetus. Harrison argues that "the question whether or not a fetus is a child is not a part of the debate over *mizuko kuyō* in Japan, [and therefore] I translate the term *mizuko* as 'dead or unseen child(ren)'" (p. 67). In direct opposition to Harrison's position, IGETA Midori argues forcefully for making a distinction: "Not all Japanese women put abortion, which is the result of a conscious personal decision, and miscarriage, which is a physical reaction and a biological phenomenon in the same category.... I do not feel that abortion and miscarriage should be covered by the single term 'child loss,' which ignores the temporal and spatial differences between the two" (1995, p. 99). Our interviewees seemed to distinguish among types of *mizuko*. For example, Takahashi said she would set a person straight if s/he mistakenly assumed she practiced *mizuko kuyō* because of an abortion. The others seemed to focus only on abortion as a sin, not on all forms of *mizuko* indiscriminately, although Okumura appeared to be working through this relationship during the interview:

Q. Do you see a difference among abortion, miscarriage, and stillbirth?

A. They are the same. Everyone feels sorry about the fact they were not able to raise [the child].

Q. Are all three sins?

A. That's difficult. But indeed they are sins.

Q. What about the extent of the sin? [Is it the same?]

A. The extent of the sin? It is different depending on the person. Let me think. It was an abortion in my case, so that is a sin. But I wonder about miscarriage...is that a sin? When I talk to women who have had a miscarriage they say it is always on their mind. Indeed when I look at children who are growing up today, then I think it is a sin [that those children didn't get born].

Given the controversial nature of both abortion and *mizuko kuyō* and their political ramifications, as pointed out by IGETA (1995, p. 98), MIZOGUCHI (1991), and other feminists, referring to abortion as one form of "child loss" as HARRISON does ("the loss of a child by abortion" 1995, p. 90) when more differentiated terms are available, seems to unnecessarily politicize the discussion.

Mizuko Kuyō at a Neighborhood Temple

Morioka Kiyomi has categorized "the relationships between contemporary people and religious institutions" as: 1) temporary—a relationship that does not continue steadily for a long period, being based rather on a short-term need, 2) surface—an outward or superficial relationship that does not penetrate to the deepest dimension of the personality, 3) beneficial—based on worldly benefits, and 4) liberated—unrestrictive, freed from the narrow confines of the traditional family temple relationship (HOSHINO and TAKEDA 1993, pp. 186–87). Hoshino and Takeda claim that these relationships are reproduced in a parallel manner in *mizuko kuyō*:

For example, *mizuko kuyō* is in almost all cases a temporary relationship. There is no formal funeral, and any follow-up services are done at the discretion and convenience of the individual. It is a superficial, surface relationship, because it ends as soon as one is set free from any possible curse and is thus comforted. It is a mutually "beneficial" relationship for the same reason. It is a "liberated" relationship because in most cases the person seeking to offer a memorial service does not go to the family temple but to a place with which one has little or no previous connection. We can conclude that *mizuko kuyō* fits right into the pattern defined by Morioka as typical for contemporary religious activity in Japan. (1993, p. 187)

Our study suggests, however, that this is not always the case. These generalizations apparently arise from the fact that only one type of *mizuko* practice was taken into consideration. Our informants definitely

did not consider their practice of *mizuko kuyō* either a “temporary” or “superficial” relationship with Honpō-ji. On the contrary, most of them claimed that they would continue practicing it for the rest of their lives or until such time as they might be physically unable to do so. For some of our informants the *kuyō* could possibly be viewed as a “beneficial” relationship since they were performing it in part for their own health or the well-being of their living children and family members, although they did not mention curses or *tatari*. At first glance the relationship does appear to be “liberated,” since some of the women were not performing the *kuyō* at their traditional family temple, but closer scrutiny reveals the establishment of a parallel environment. The women had attended services for so many years at Honpō-ji and had come to know the priest, his wife, and the other participants so well that the experience of a family temple was replicated in the “*mizuko kuyō* temple.” Unlike women who travel great distances to the large commercialized *mizuko kuyō* temples, the women in our group, with one exception, chose a temple geographically close to their residence that facilitated monthly participation, but also increased the likelihood that they would be known from the immediate community.

We were somewhat surprised to learn of the importance of location in *kuyō* practice. A number of the women attend services at Honpō-ji even though it is not their family temple, and in some cases the family temple is not even of the Nichiren sect. The determining factor was location and the corollary of convenience. Of course it is also possible that non-family temples are chosen for *mizuko kuyō* in the interest of greater anonymity: one would gain familial anonymity since one’s extended family would not be known at a non-family temple, but one would lose personal anonymity because one would be recognized as a local resident at a temple in one’s own neighborhood. Mishima, who came to the larger temple complex ten times a month, traveling two and a half hours each way, chose the temple because it was old and famous. She could have practiced both *mizuko kuyō* and other *kuyō* at temples closer to her home, but in her case, by exception, the history and prestige of the temple were more important than convenience. Many of the women learned of the *mizuko kuyō* rather serendipitously: they noticed the sign posted in front of Honpō-ji announcing when the services are held and inviting anyone interested to attend. Of the twenty-six subtemples comprising the larger temple complex, only Honpō-ji offers a regularly scheduled and publicized *mizuko kuyō*.

None of the women we interviewed thought there was a generation gap among the participants; all felt that the preponderance of older

women at the services was due to their increased leisure time in contrast to the responsibilities of young wives and mothers. Okumura and Togami did not begin practicing *mizuko kuyō* immediately following their *mizuko* experience; in fact, one of them waited over thirty years before beginning. We suspect that most of the other women at Honpō-ji also did not begin participating in such *kuyō* immediately. Since the median age was fifty-five to sixty, this leads us to question the conclusions of HOSHINO and TAKEDA who state that “it is safe to assume that the age group that experiences the most abortions would be most active in performing *mizuko kuyō*” (1993, p. 180). In addition to practical issues such as young mothers being too busy to attend services, one cannot ignore the real changes in women’s lives since World War II and the resulting differences in attitude between generations. IGETA Midori underlines this change:

Since the Meiji era, the Japanese women’s liberation movement has struggled with the family system and the accompanying inequalities in the relationships between men and women and between parents and children.... These feminists would not support the strengthening of the ideologies of motherhood and familialism that *mizuko kuyō* promotes.... More than a few Japanese women feel alienated from the practice of *mizuko kuyō*... there are also women who are angered by the practice of *mizuko kuyō* and have no interest in being “healed” by a ritual that reinforces and strengthens the mythology of motherhood.¹⁴ (1995, pp. 98–99)

When we asked our informants about large temples that specialize in *mizuko kuyō*, they responded in a similar manner: they felt that such temples were not bad if the women who went to them performed the *kuyō* with a sincere attitude. None of the women in our group had ever visited one of these temples, but that was only because they already practiced their *kuyō* at Honpō-ji, not because they rejected the institutions. Perhaps most interesting was that they regarded these temples from the perspective of women who had had a *mizuko* experience, and evaluated the appropriateness and usefulness of the temples from the practitioner’s perspective: if a woman went there with the proper feelings (“a sincere heart”) and was helped by the *kuyō*, then they saw nothing wrong with the temples. The optimism of these answers may, of course, be due to naïvete or ignorance. Igeta Midori

¹⁴ As an interesting note on the generational question: a recent college graduate from Sophia University in Tokyo polled her friends and informed us that none had ever even heard of *mizuko kuyō*.

observes that even an awareness of women's roles historically as "dependent subjects" in Japanese religion does not offset the negative effect of women's participation in male-designed and male-executed rituals. Another factor that may have elicited undue optimism about these temples is the nature of the question itself: our question on this topic was formulated in the abstract, that is, the idea of a person going to one of these temples. We also did not include the issues of guilt being "created" by priests or of large sums of money being required. The interviewees' openness toward these temples and emphasis on the possible benefits for the participants stands in clear contrast to most of the remarks concerning such temples that have emanated from scholarly studies or have been printed in the mass media. These statements have generally been negative and have reflected a "male" perspective in so far as they focused on the priests who run these temples, the amount of money they charge, and the gullibility of the women who pay substantial sums for the rites and statues. The question of whether *mizuko kuyō* practice must, in every case and for every woman, constitute a negative experience—that is, be exploitative, both emotionally and financially—has become quite controversial. Based on our interviews, we would have to answer this question in the negative. Although emotional exploitation and financial extortion of various degrees do occur in some forms of *mizuko kuyō*, they are not defining characteristics of the practice for the women who attend services at Honpō-ji.

A closely related issue is the role played by the priest. As mentioned earlier, at least one scholar excoriates male priests, who, in her view, actively *create* the guilt experienced by some women who have had abortions, thereby perpetuating male control over female sexuality in the religious domain (MIZOGUCHI 1991). From our interviews it would be hard to argue for or against this reading of the priest's role. The head priest of Honpō-ji did counsel women that abortion was a sin (*tsumi*) and that what they had done was therefore wrong. But Okumura and Togami, who had undergone abortions, said that they began participating in *mizuko kuyō* many years after their actual *mizuko* experience, one because she was "conscience stricken," and the other because of regrets over what might have been, had the child been born. They both implied, however, that the feelings and ultimate decision that led to their participation in the *kuyō* were their own and had not been inculcated in them by a priest. At one point early in our contacts with Honpō-ji a debate broke out between two priests of the Nichiren sect over whether abortion is a sin, the head priest at Honpō-ji arguing that it definitely was, while the other priest main-

taining that it was not. If the issue is such that even priests within the same sect disagree, one would not be surprised to find a wide range of beliefs among the practitioners themselves.

Conclusion

Our purpose in presenting this research has not been to say that previous studies of *mizuko kuyō* have been wrong, but to suggest that they have provided an incomplete picture. In concentrating on the large, commercialized “*mizuko kuyō* temples,” many researchers have created generalizations that do not do justice to the diversity of the practice in contemporary Japan. By reporting on individual women who practice *mizuko kuyō* at a small, neighborhood temple, we hope to signal the existence of other kinds of *mizuko* observance. We had hoped to avoid making a value judgment on this other practice of *mizuko kuyō* that we investigated, but since the associations with the large temples that specialize in *mizuko* services are so overwhelmingly negative, one finds oneself painted into the corner of seeming to advocate the (more positive) alternative. This difficulty is compounded because the women themselves, our interviewees, see their *mizuko* observance as positive. On the other hand, we are in sympathy with many feminist critiques of *mizuko kuyō*. Although the criticisms are aimed more at the overtly exploitative temples, they would also apply to some extent to Honpō-ji. Despite this sympathy, we hardly find ourselves in the position of having to argue that *mizuko kuyō* as practiced at Honpō-ji is, on an overall negative scale, merely “less bad” than elsewhere. Specific characteristics of this *mizuko* practice, as outlined in the preceding essay, allow both for the formation of community and for meaningful individual religious observance. The differences among the interviewees that emerge from their discussions with us suggest not only the complexity of their practice but also the individuality of their beliefs, two factors that need to receive more attention in future research on *mizuko kuyō*.

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