

Women and Sexism in Shinto

Okano Haruko

THE TASK OF THIS article is twofold. The first is to trace the change in the position, meaning, and role of women in Shinto, and the second is to consider critically how Shinto participated in the formation of women's image and arrived at a sexist stance. I shall show this by reconsidering the meaning and role of women in Japanese society as developed by Shinto. My first aim is to delineate Shinto's progressive disownment of women's spiritual power which had been acknowledged by the ancient Japanese, of women's exclusion from the center of religious life, and of the gradual deprivation of women's autonomy. My second is to show how the issue of feminism in an undifferentiated, unitary society is different from Western societies where a person is established as an individual.

In modern Japanese society, Shinto coexists with an advanced technological economy. This is a peculiar phenomenon as Shinto, which is very alive, still maintains its archaic animistic beliefs and ancestor worship. Shinto's perdurance demonstrates the persistence of the spirit of the Japanese who locate themselves in the original life-community which developed naturally. The ancient Japanese were convinced that their communal well-being was guaranteed by the gods. Within ethnically grouped communities, individual members do not differentiate between themselves or between themselves and the world around them. Consequently, those who display individuality in Japanese society are not easily

accepted, while those who go with the stream are welcomed.

WOMEN IN THE HISTORY OF SHINTO

Shinto, the "Way of the Gods," so-called to distinguish it from *Butsudō* the "Way of Buddha," is a collective term for several different forms of religion. Besides primitive Shinto, there are Shrine Shinto, the orthodox form which includes Imperial Household Shinto; popular Shinto, the religion of the people; and finally Sect Shinto, a set of independent systems. I will not include Sect Shinto here, which I consider to be akin to the New Religions, because its content differs qualitatively from the primary form of Shinto. Thus, excluding Sect Shinto, Shinto can be classified historically into three periods:

1. Primitive Shinto, from early history to the organization of Shinto, from the end of the 2nd to 7th century CE.
2. Organized Shinto, from the Taika Reform to the Meiji Restoration, 645-1867.
3. Shinto after the Meiji Restoration, 1868 to the present day.

It is not quite certain whether in Japan's early history, the existence of priestesses preceded that of the priests or not. We cannot say whether a golden age of women ever existed or not. The actual state of Shinto in its early period has not been sufficiently clarified. A much more important problem is the relationship between men and

women in that period where this can be historically substantiated. In the earliest stages, rulership implied priesthood, and as the social structures included both men and women, so too power in the ruling classes was distributed between men and women in rather interesting ways. The woman was the medium of direct contact with the deity and announced the divine will to humankind. The realization of this will on earth was entrusted to the man. Thus priesthood was embodied in a male plus female relationship, usually brother and sister. This system is found first in the clan systems (*uji*), then in territorial administrations of the provinces (*kuni*), and in the centralized government of the Yamato Empire.

However, in time this man plus woman system underwent changes. The more dependent everyday life was on the mystical, magical elements in religion, the more important was the woman's role. Proof of this is that many of the *miko* (female shamans) were deified and the ancient chronicles speak of female rulers such as Himiko and priestesses such as Tamayori-hime. However, as the rights and privileges of the various petty rulers were gradually absorbed by the Imperial family and a centralized empire formed, politics assumed an increasingly rational character, although it was supposed to be determined ultimately by divine will. Thus began the formal and conceptual rift between politics and religion, as a result of which women retired more and more from this form of society, for example, in the case of cult princess Saio. At this stage the woman was only the emperor's representative in the religious sphere, and the same process could be observed in the independent provinces.

The second period of Shinto history began with the Taika Reform which brought about a change from the old form of government to a centralized absolute monarchy. In order to achieve political unity in the state, the power of the earlier provincial

lords fell to the emperor. This meant that the individual cults of the local gods of the clans (*ujigami*) had to be organized into one central system. Thus such local deities, originally worshipped only by certain clans, took on an official and national character. The Department of Shinto Affairs (*Jingikan*) was set up to organize religious life and to see to the administration of the shrines. In this sense the religious cult had now become the rationalized concern of the bureaucrats instead of being the spontaneous act of a naturally religious person. In former times individuals endowed with charisma had summoned the gods and these had taken possession of certain chosen persons. But in State Shinto, fulfilling the rite correctly meant that the gods could only appear at a certain time and in a certain place. For this reason, the rites had to be performed by official priests, and the bureaucrats of the *Jingikan*, sometimes assisted by other court dignitaries, male or female, officiated at ceremonies in the shrines at the Imperial court and at other shrines of major importance, while the rites at local shrines were the responsibility of the provincial governors (the *kokushi*) and priests such as the *kannushi*, *negi* and *hafuri*. These official priests were as a rule men, but in many old shrines the tradition of having a priestess persisted until the tenth century CE. After this time priestesses were very rare, but at Ise, the Imperial ancestral shrine, the body of priests was led by a priestess up until the Middle Ages.

Three factors are responsible for the decline in the number of priestesses at most shrines: 1) since the descent of the divinity could now be calculated "mechanically", as it were, women were no longer really necessary in the priesthood; 2) the Chinese legal system, recently introduced to Japan and on which the priesthood was based, was strictly male-oriented; and, 3) Buddhism strengthened the notion of the

uncleanness of woman, due to her biological and psychological make-up.

The newly created bureaucratic state took over the religious rites and the priesthood and organized them, thus rendering them static; but charismatic figures, mostly women, continued to be active among the people, outside the system of organized Shinto. We may find them in secularized types such as dancers, puppeteers or courtesans, or even as pillars of popular Shinto, the belief of the people.

Each new step in the modernization of the cultural, political or economic fields ousted women further from significant positions in the priesthood, because their religious authority, often inherited, was based on the supposedly superstitious religious notions among the people.

The third period, beginning with the Meiji Restoration, also considerably affected the position of women. The newly restored Imperial dynasty, with its new national awareness, strove to establish pure Shinto as the national religion, and abolished such mystical elements of Shinto as the concept of inherited charism and also the practice of magical rites. Women could no longer be a member of the official priesthood.

Since the Second World War, however, women have once again been accepted into the priesthood. No distinction is made between them and their male colleagues and both men and women fulfill the same functions. It must be admitted, though, that women are generally seen as substitutes for male priests. Thus women have achieved a new position in the Shinto religion by renouncing their specific femininity, which was the source of their traditional function and role within the religious community.

At present, there are about one thousand Shinto priestesses in Japan and equality of the sexes is progressively being pursued. However, there remain two problems from a feminist perspective.

1. The participation of women is limited at the higher ranking shrines, such as Ise and Atsuta, which had prerogatives during the period of National Shinto.
2. Shinto is still sensitive to contamination by "impure blood," so that priestesses have to take precautions so as not to defile the cult during menstruation. Their menstrual periods are controlled and regulated through the use of medications.

While the traditional functions of women within organized religion may have all but vanished, the miko, female sorcerers, are once again active among the people. They will tell fortunes and prophesy, for a consideration, and also function as medicine women. The great number of female founders of sects should also be mentioned. Their new teachings on religion and values and their faith healing claims appeal to the mass of the people. Religious communities founded by such women existed even before the Meiji dynasty. This particular type of charismatic women see themselves as mediators between gods and people, and filled with prophetic awareness, as foundresses of universal religious communities. This is a new phenomenon in Japanese religious history, but it is interesting to note that such "new" religions show in their community life old elements of primitive magic and base their authority on the tradition of the "classical" religions.¹

SHINTO AS THE CAUSE OF JAPANESE SEXISM

Shinto, the original indigenous religion of Japan, survives even to this day and lies at the basis of Japanese industrialized society. In this section I shall consider the following two points: what is the principle of Japanese society which sustains Shinto, and what is the significance of this principle within the global society. As I mentioned above, Shintoistic society is pervaded by an

ethnic religion and a life community spirit. Within such community, therefore, the individual member has a comfortable view of religion based on the conviction that good fortune and well-being are guaranteed as long as the individual remains within the community which is protected by the deity. Individual Japanese maintain the sense of a unitary society without differentiating from one another or from the world. In Europe, Christianity in the process of the civilization of the Latin and Germanic societies, abandoned the blood-relational clan community and the old group consciousness of nondifferentiation. At the same time in Arabia, Islam replaced its primitive ethnic religion. In India also, although it occurred during a short period of its history, Buddhism awakened to the concept of the individual and replaced the varied forms of ethnic religion which had previously responded to the spiritual needs of the community.

In Japan, imported foreign religions such as Buddhism, Confucianism, Taoism, and even Christianity could not dismantle the Shintoistic unitary community spirit. On the contrary, the Shintoistic community enforced a sense of familial solidarity by means of the extended family. Moreover, by placing the emperor at the top of society and regarding him as divinely descended, Shinto affirmed the absolute and sacred nature of the nation, while Buddhism and Confucianism assisted in the formation of this ideology by underlining its authenticity. The characteristics of the Japanese unitary society as a pseudo-national community is understood in terms of an all-embracing maternal principle, according to Kawaii Hayao.² Westerners divided society dualistically into sacred and profane, good and evil, superior and inferior, and as a result suppressed the weaker elements in society, while the Japanese glorified the equality of the members of their society sustained by the family principle which embraces everyone indiscriminately. In this sense modern

Japanese capitalism is the offshoot of Japanese Shintoistic state ideology. As long as one stays within the social order undergirded by this maternal principle, peace and prosperity are guaranteed, just as children are embraced equally at the bosom of their mothers. Thus, Japan grew to be a civilized nation where basic education spread to the remotest area without laying financial burdens on the people.

Looking back on the history of Japan, there are not a few who attempted to cut off such maternal bonds and who tried to assume autonomy. But within Japanese society, one generally finds it difficult to take up the issue of individuality or distinctive personality. On the contrary, it is a condition for survival not to be too different from others. A man who desires to be a person with individuality experiences strong resistance from society similar to the efforts required of a woman trying to overcome assigned roles. Moreover, Japanese consider that everything in the world is built on relationships. This is underlined by Confucian moral theology which postulates five human relationships and cardinal virtues. Within these relationships, everyone, man and woman, superior and inferior, is expected to sacrifice oneself. Consequently, this has resulted in creating a general feeling of victimization. From a woman's point of view this psychic structure makes it difficult to objectify sexism. It is evident that no person among the more than one hundred and twenty million Japanese can remain a child at the mother's breast. Hence, the ultimate task of Japanese feminism is an anthropological issue of how each individual can establish his or her own identity.

In spite of Shinto's maternal principle which operated within Japanese society, the formation of public order and institution of the national community was in the hands of the male with an androcentric frame of mind as I described above. It is my opinion

that the thrust for such patriarchalization of Japanese society sprang from the political will to power of the imperial family who promoted this centralization. The source of power of the imperial family is the divine authority derived from the ancestral deity, Amaterasu, as the *Kojiki* and *Nihongi* describe. Since Amaterasu is the ancestral goddess of the Imperial family, the Sun Goddess who governs the universe and who occupies the highest position in the Shinto pantheon, she serves to hide Japanese sexism. It is similar to the Christian cult of the Blessed Virgin Mary which is deeply involved with the issue of sexism.

Amaterasu, who was originally the mother of the god of the rice plant, a priestess who played a simple role, was raised to the state of noble virgin goddess thereby proving the sacredness of the imperial family. This was a creation by those who held control of the value system within patriarchal power. This is akin to the process of the glorification of Mary, the raising of the simple mother of Jesus first to the status of eternal virgin and mother, and then to the final glory of assumption into heaven.

The reason why Shinto can sustain meaning in Japan today can be found in the coexistence of the formal side of the androcentric national cult with the ethnic religion represented by woman in the background. Moreover, for the sake of the spiritual peace of the community, Shinto allowed both god and Buddha to survive together within it, thus strengthening its own authority in the community.

As Japan underwent the processes of modernization, religion was deeply involved in the formation of its ideology:

Shinto and Buddhism were utilized to achieve centralization and form legal institutions; Confucianism was used in the establishment of the feudal system in the modern period; and Shinto repeatedly played a decisive role in the Meiji restoration. Outwardly, the religions had no role to play in the rebirth of Japan from defeat in war to the democratic state it is today, except for the period immediately after defeat. However, religion always justified the central institutions and the familial system. Inwardly, Shinto maintained its strong hold on the Japanese people, justifying and supporting sexism and class discrimination, and reinforcing fascism.

Shinto belief deified those who died a heroic death. Thus it exalted the soldiers who died in the "Holy War" of Japan as deities. Hence, both men and women were compelled to interiorize the meaning of serving their country. One of the important causes of the immaturity of the Japanese with regard to autonomy and independence lies in their consciousness of the national and familial community which is peculiar to Japan. Shinto, together with Buddhism and Confucianism which were accepted by Japan, should be criticized and indicted from the feminist perspective, since they fermented, reinforced, and justified this understanding.

NOTES

¹ For a detailed account of women's position and roles in the history of Shinto, please refer to my *Die Stellung der Frau im Shinto* (Harrassowitz, 1976), p. 19ff.

² Kawai Hayao, *Bosei shakai Nihon no byōri* (Chuōkōronsha, 1976).