

BOOK REVIEW

Women in Japanese Religions

Barbara R. Ambros

New York University Press, 2015
240 pages.



Textbooks of Japanese religions have long failed to adequately address the lives and roles of women.¹ This not only reflects a blind spot in the broader humanities that has existed up until recently, but also an orientation in our field toward endocentric religious institutions. That said, a wealth of literary, political, and legal texts have been critically translated in the modern study of Japan, many of which contain extended references to women in religious settings. The last two decades, moreover, have seen an increasing number of studies focused on women and gender in Japanese religions. In her new book, Barbara Ambros incorporates both sets of materials, adding many insights along the way, into a sweeping history on the role of women, and discourses about them, in Japanese religions. No doubt, *Women in Japanese Religions* will serve as a valuable reference for graduate students and scholars. Here, however, I want to emphasize the book's application in the undergraduate classroom, based on my own experience of assigning it recently for an upper division course on the subject at UCLA.

Ambros covers the *longue durée* of the archipelago's religious history, beginning in its prehistory and ending in the so-called "lost decades." Instead of reviewing each chapter, I will touch on three types of content that shape the volume: broad trends relevant to each time period, historical cases of women in religious life, and discourses concerning gender-related issues.

In order to contextualize the lives and roles of women in Japanese religions at different stages in the archipelago's history, Ambros guides her readers through important social, political, legal, and economic trends indicative of each period. As she demonstrates, the implications of these trends are not always readily apparent. An early example is the dissonance between patriarchal models imported from the Tang court with contemporaneous Japanese practices. While doctrines such as women's five obstructions (Buddhist) and the three obediences (Confucian) appear in early textual sources, it was not until Japan's medieval period that they became normative social values. Changing marital patterns over time also significantly affected women's domestic standing, as is evident in the shift from uxorilocal (husband residing with wife's family) and neolocal (joint residence apart from parents)

¹ An exception is William Deal and Brian Ruppert's (2015) recent addition to the field, which includes sections on women throughout the book.

marriages in the Heian period to virilocal (wife residing with husband's family) in the Kamakura period. Ambros convincingly argues that the later development brought the wife into a set of expectations centered on the patrilineal household (*ie*), albeit not without certain privileges that simultaneously empowered her within this new structure.

In navigating the complexities of these and other trends, Ambros is careful not to draw simple conclusions about any given period in history, stating in the opening pages that "this volume resists a narrative of mythical independence that is shattered by historical oppression and then, conversely, overturned by modern liberation" (p. 2). In later chapters, for example, she argues that the "good wife, wise mother" ideal of the modern and postwar periods increasingly situated women in the home while removing them from areas of public life. These values were, then, mirrored and reinforced by religious organizations. Shinto weddings became ritualized performances of a subservient bride supporting a strong husband. In newer religions like Reiyūkai, female subjugation, in fact, became a defining motif for marriage relations. At the same time, Ambros (following the work of Helen Hardacre) points out ways in which women have used this roleplay to exert greater influence within the household.

The book complements these historical trends with rich examples of women in meaningful, often powerful, roles at each stage in the archipelago's religious and cultural history. It reviews the early case of Himiko as well as female sovereigns in the Asuka (Suiko) and Nara periods (Kōmyō and her daughter, Kōken/Shōtoku). Particularly fascinating are the author's descriptions of imperial princesses acting as spiritual liaisons between the court and the deities of Ise and the Kamo shrines, though these positions began to decline in the tenth century.² Despite social and institutional trends limiting women's independence in the medieval period, the prevalence of female spirit mediums (*miko*) and the revival of elite convents—Ambros draws from the recent works of Lori Meeks—illustrate their continued influence in ritual and institutional settings.

A third prominent subject in the book concerns religious discourses, often ripe with ambiguity and complex social values regarding gender. Ambros discusses varying narratives about Amaterasu and Ame no Uzume in the *Kojiki* and *Nihon shoki* to suggest possible readings of ritual purification, violence, and sexual power in early mythology. Later on, Buddhist *setsuwa* often cast women as demonic and untrustworthy, while miracle tales (*reigenki*) alternatively presented them as pious and devoted. Notions of female impurity, furthermore, were projected and perpetuated through disseminations of the *Blood Pool Sutra* (*Ketsubon kyō*) beginning in the late medieval period. Yet Ambros also observes that these scriptures were commonly promoted by women themselves (such as Kumano *bikuni*), and did allow for some level of soteriological intervention through ritual practice.

Now I will turn to some remarks on classroom use of *Women in Japanese Religions*. The book contains an excellent list of suggested primary readings in English translation that complement each chapter. In addition to supplementing a syllabus, this gives students a convenient starting place for potential research materials.

Generally speaking, the chronological structure of the book is a strength in that it provides the necessary historical context, but it can also feel restrictive at times. The issue

2 Allan Grapard (2016, pp. 34–43) has recently attributed a similar decline of female shrine oracles in the case of the Usa cult to the rising intervention of Buddhist priests.

of women's exclusion from numinous mountains (*nyonin kekkai* or *nyonin kinsei*), as one example, receives treatment through medieval legends of Toran, but discussion of its actual implementation (most likely heightened in the Edo period) would also have been useful. Ambros's examination of myths, legends, and didactic tales, as another example, suggests much about beliefs and attitudes toward women up through medieval Japan but drops off in later chapters. Of course, content is restricted by the concise nature of the volume, and these elements can be complemented by other sources.

On the whole, readers will find that Ambros gives careful, nuanced treatment to her subject with an array of historical instances and trends that defy simple conclusions. Her book will undoubtedly push students and scholars alike to reassess the multifaceted roles and portrayals of women within the social, political, and institutional settings of Japanese religions past and present.

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Reviewed by Caleb Carter