

Miko: Shrine Maidens and Cultural Stewards

Miko, or shrine maidens, have been a part of Japanese culture since the early periods of Japanese history and the common practice of Japanese folk religions. Miko offer a unique lens with which to examine the evolution of Japanese religious history. With the creation of Shinto from these folk religions and practices, miko were pulled into the fold. They would experience a radical shift around the time of the Meiji Revolution, when their shamanic practices were banned. Afterward, their role went from medium to what would be considered a steward of Japanese religious history, preserving the shrines and engaging in ceremonies showcasing the traditions, dancing, and ceremonies of old. In a sense, miko were forced to change their role in society due to government intervention. I will address Shinto as a whole, as well as grouping miko under one category, to prevent confusion and to avoid an unnecessarily lengthy discussion about the various sects of Shinto.

Readings

In writing this paper, many works were consulted. Perhaps one of the best primary sources of information came from Carmen Blacker's *The Catalpa Bow*, which discussed much of the shamanic traditions of Japan. Much of Blacker's discussions also cast a great deal of light on miko. Blacker discussed their origins throughout the book as well as their practices. Blacker also traveled to Japan to view the modern rituals of miko to give her a better perspective of the practice and how the modern public viewed them. As well as this, William F. Fairchild's article, "Shamanism in Japan," discussed a lot of the origins of miko as well as their early history. He also discussed the divisions within miko groups as well. Gerald Groemer's article, "Female Shamans in Eastern Japan during the Edo Period," discussed the history of the miko during the Tokugawa period. This article also helped to fill in some of the historical and narrative gaps about the miko that writers, like Blacker, tended to skim or skip over for the sake of discussing

shamanic tradition. It is in his article that we see the beginnings of limitations on miko, as well as a focus on the miko during the Edo, or Tokugawa, period.

A variety of other secondary sources were also read in preparation for this research paper, including Ian Reader's *Religion in Contemporary Japan*, which discussed current trends in Japanese religion as well as his own experiences at more current festivals, as well as Reader's *Shinto: The Religion of Japan*, which lays out many basic points about the Shinto religion, but also highlights the role and practices of miko currently, with some historic information. Also read was Pradyumna Karan's *Japan in the 21st Century*, which discussed the numerous performances that miko perform, but also provided information about limitations placed on miko during the Meiji period as well as what attracts many women to be part-time miko in the current era. Finally, Kokugakuin University's "Encyclopedia of Shinto" website helped me learn about the statistics regarding regarding women in the Shinto faith, as well as general information about miko from a Japanese source.

Miko: Their Role, Their Origins, and Their Early Practices

Miko serve as assistants and general labor for shrines, as part of their duties to the Shinto faith currently, but also engage in ceremonial dances designed to entertain kami during Shinto festivals¹. Numbers of Japanese women engaged in religious work is not well documented. Though there are numbers regarding how many female priests and priestesses, little is known about many of these officiants are miko. The latest survey of women in Shinto clergy from 1993 stated that there were 1,825 female clergy members in the traditional Shinto faith, as opposed to the new religions derived from Shinto, which often have much larger numbers of female clergy, often roughly equal to or more than male officiants². Pradyumna Karan, a scholar on Japanese

1 Reader, Ian, *Shinto: The Religion of Japan* (Kent, England: Global Books, Ltd., 1998), 50.

2 "Rates of Women in the Shinto Clergy," Encyclopedia of Shinto, Kokugakuin University, 2006, <http://eos.kokugakuin.ac.jp/modules/xwords/entry.php?entryID=516>.

culture, notes:

“There are no figures to show how many miko work at Japan's 80,000 shrines. Although about twenty women graduate from Kokugakuin University as priestesses every year, only one or two actually get jobs, mainly because of the perception that men are more suited to the position. Some miko are high school girls serving part-time when things get busy at the shrines. Others work as miko as a profession for a longer time, but usually not for a whole lifetime.³”

Miko started out as shamans or oracles, relaying words from the kami, who would possess the miko's body to relay their messages. This role was filled by young women and unmarried princesses, particularly at the Ise and Kamo Shrines⁴. Purity and virginity was required to preside over these shrines. Their duties also included purification of the recently deceased and channeling the spirits during funerary rites.

It is believed that miko shared many of the shamanistic practices from early Ainu, Ryūkyū, and Korean cultures (likely arriving into Japan during the Jōmon period, like most other cultural influences at the time), particularly the *son-mudang* of Korea, the Ainu *tsusu*, and the Ryūkyū *yuta*, who all shared a similar origin within northern Siberia, where feminine shamanism was more prevalent, and “where sacral power was believed to reside more easily and properly in women, and where in consequence were recognized to be the natural intermediaries between the two worlds.⁵” Thus, the origins of the miko can be traced through cultural diffusion from Asiatic religious culture, where women were seen as caretakers of religious affairs and could be counted for human-spirit communications. There are also some esoteric Buddhist beliefs that crept into Japanese folk religions when Buddhism first came over from China. Members some sects had performed exorcisms, using children or young women for this purpose or for telling prophecies⁶.

3 Karan, Pradyumna, *Japan in the 21st Century: Environment, Economy, and Society* (Lexington, KY: University Press of Kentucky, 2005), 72.

4 Earhart, H. Bryon, *Japanese Religions: Unity and Diversity*, Fourth Edition (Belmont, CA: Thomson-Wadsworth, 2004), 35-36.

5 Blacker, Carmen, *The Catalpa Bow: A Study of Shamanistic Practices in Japan* (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1986), 27-28.

6 Blacker, Carmen, *The Catalpa Bow: A Study of Shamanistic Practices in Japan* (London: George Allen and

Miko also practiced what is known as ecstasy, an erratic, frenzied dance that goes back to the legends from the *Kojiki* of Ame no Uzume no Mikoto coaxing Ameterasu out of her cave with her dancing while being possessed by a god or spirit and exposing herself to the delight of the other gods⁷. Miko in later periods would undergo ecstasy during ceremonies and dances, like the kagura, which were sacred dances of the gods, where miko would hold certain objects, such as bamboo grass, gohei wands, bows, and other objects (all of these objects are known as torimomo, or hand-held objects) symbolizing their possession by the gods⁸. However, not all miko practiced ecstasy. William Fairchild, in his article, “Shamanism in Japan,” noted that while not all miko were shamans, most were, though as years passed, this trend became reversed, especially in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries.

When Shinto was formally organized, many of the Japanese folk religions were absorbed into the new religion. With the emergence of professional priests within Shinto, miko were relegated to the role of shamanic-diviner⁹. Officials, favorably disposed toward Shinto, would make sure that ecstasy would remain legal only within the shrines, most likely to reinforce the dominance of Shinto, and to funnel money into the shrines, as miko were highly valued for their services in communicating with the dead and were honored with payment. Miko also set up miko-mura, or miko villages, that would act as a base of operations for miko that traveled around Japan, who would deliver prophecies and messages from the dead¹⁰. In 780 and 807, official decrees from the Japanese government banned the practice of ecstasy outside of the temples, a decree that would stay in place until the end of the Tokugawa, or Edo, period¹¹, when their role

Unwin, 1986), 298.

7 Fairchild, William, “Shamanism in Japan,” *Folklore Studies* 21 (1962): 47.

8 Ibid, 52.

9 Kitagawa, Joseph M., *On Understanding Japanese Religion* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1987), 122.

10 Blacker, Carmen, *The Catalpa Bow: A Study of Shamanistic Practices in Japan* (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1986), 127.

11 Fairchild, William, “Shamanism in Japan,” *Folklore Studies* 21 (1962): 53.

would drastically change.

Miko During the Tokugawa Period

During the early Tokugawa period, miko began to feel the weight of government regulation. Kōmatsu Kandayū (Sometimes written as Kōwaka Kandayū, but will be written as Kōmatsu to prevent confusion, as Kōwaka may have been an “artist’s name, as he was a performer of kōwaka dances¹²⁾ was granted a “vermillion-seal certificate¹³⁾” in 1618 by Tokugawa Ieyasu, which is interesting, as Ieyasu had died two years prior. This certificate granted Kōmatsu a large degree of authority over the miko, and granted him the title of Head of the Masters of the Sacred Dance (referred to later on as Heads). Kōmatsu set about his task of enforcing his authority the miko, only to find that this was not so easily done. Miko often had different occupations than being a shaman, and this made them difficult to regulate. As well as this,

“Who controlled what was not something that had ever been frozen in time and stipulated in contracts or verifiable documents. Instead, ‘tradition’ was a historically contingent amalgam, the result of complex habits, gradual change, piecemeal legislation, unsystematic court rulings, unpredictable political successes and failures. The vagueness and contradictory nature of extant practices and rights meant that [Kōmatsu], in order to sustain or extend his influence, constantly found himself embroiled in disputes and lawsuits regarding the extent and degree of control over certain types of performers or specific genres and activities.¹⁴⁾”

Kōmatsu had to deal with complex legal entanglements to assert any degree of authority over the miko. To settle this affair, Tamura Hachidayū, one of the later Heads, decided to implore the bakufu in 1712 to issue official certificates, adorned with his seal, to be carried by the miko under his authority. This would grant Tamura the freedom to carry out his position, prevent confusion and disputes, eliminate miko not under his authority, and place those under his authority under more stringent control¹⁵⁾.

12 Groemer, Gerald, “Female Shamans in Eastern Japan during the Edo Period,” *Asian Folklore Studies* 66 (2007): 30.

13 Ibid, 30.

14 Ibid, 31.

15 Groemer, Gerald, “Female Shamans in Eastern Japan during the Edo Period,” *Asian Folklore Studies* 66 (2007): ,

His plan succeeded, and by the mid-eighteenth century, Tamura, and by extension the Tokugawa bakufu, controlled the miko. However, this was short-lived. His influence began to decrease after the mid-eighteenth century, and miko began to travel to distant areas to work. His policies had also bankrupted portions of rural society in the Kantō region, and miko not under the control of Tamura began to practice more openly, spurred by local demand for shamanistic services. While the bakufu had begun to impose state control of miko in 1700s, greater control over the miko and their practices was soon to come.

Miko in Transition

During the Meiji period, the influence of miko greatly changed. In 1873, an imperial edict, the Miko Kindan Rei¹⁶, or Miko Prohibition Order, was decreed, banning spirit possession and oracular practices by miko, which also included ecstasy. The goal of the edict was to purge Shinto of ancient superstitions¹⁷ and to appear more enlightened and modern. This edict would drastically reduce the influence that miko would have. Without the role they played as spiritual mediums, they would also lose their sense of identity. This edict also caused the dissolution of miko-mura, who had come to depend on shamanic practices to help the community thrive and grow.

Despite promises within the Meiji Constitution for religious freedom, miko were prevented from practicing their craft by the government. However, this did not cause the elimination of the miko practice of shamanism. Many went underground, thanks to the support of rural Japanese, who put strong belief in the practices used by miko¹⁸. These prohibitions lasted until the end of

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16 Lancashire, Terrance, *An Introduction to Japanese Performing Arts* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate Publishing Company, 2011), 28.

17 Blacker, Carmen, *The Catalpa Bow: A Study of Shamanistic Practices in Japan* (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1986), 127.

18 Blacker, Carmen, *The Catalpa Bow: A Study of Shamanistic Practices in Japan* (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1986), 128.

World War II and the American occupation of Japan. Religious freedoms were created under the new constitution, and the miko were allowed to practice freely once more. As well as this, the practice of state-sponsored Shinto was abolished, and with it, the trappings of Meiji-era thought regarding the religion.

In the postwar years, religiosity boomed, with 474 new religious organizations (many of the Christian) popping up from 1945-1964¹⁹. This was due to the Americans inserting religious freedom into the new Japanese constitution during the occupation. As a result, many of the previous freedoms that were taken away from the miko were now legal once more. However, it became obvious that shamanism was quickly falling out of vogue.

Carmen Blacker, author of *The Catalpa Bow*, wrote in her book about going to a matsuri, a temple-sponsored festival, in 1963, where she witnessed the oracular practice of a miko. She stated that the quality of the performance had diminished from five years earlier to where the performance was “languid” and “feeble²⁰.” An issue with this was that this young woman was the only miko in the shrine or in the general area. Many women were not as drawn to becoming a miko. This was not a problem with the profession itself, but rather a sign of the times. Women were now free to work in a larger number of professions, and being a miko was thus no longer one of the few options available to women for work. As well as this, the new religions allowed for women to be more than just a shrine maiden, they could now also be priestesses.

Blacker stated that view of miko and shamans drastically changed due to lack of interest in the divine. Where miko once had a dominant place in society, few remained that dedicated themselves to practicing shamanism. Where once holy places resided, now roads cut through.

The knowledge that the miko had was fading into obscurity, and Blacker lamented that “[in the]

19 Hardacre, Helen, “Religion and Civil Society in Contemporary Japan,” *Japanese Journal of Religious Studies* 31/32, 399.

20 Blacker, Carmen, *The Catalpa Bow: A Study of Shamanistic Practices in Japan* (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1986), 262-263.

future, we can expect to find only scattered vestiges of this ancient cult, only sparse reminders of the other world to which the shaman's faculties gave access²¹.”

Miko Today

Miko in the present do not have as much authority as they used to have. In traditional Shinto sects, some miko are simply part-time workers that participate during festivals. The interest in miko has been revitalized by off-shoot religions based on Shinto. These religions are often much more liberal and progressive than traditional Shinto shrines, allowing women to have a larger role in officiating ceremonies.

Despite their lack of popularity, miko still perform many of the functions that they performed before the Miko Kindan Rei was implemented, including, in some sects of modern Shinto, the shamanistic and oracular practices of the past. The traditional Shinto sects tend to emphasize symbolic shamanism, using the dances with torimomo as symbolic of the miko's connection with the kami. The ceremonies that the miko participate in have been infused with a modern flare. The large yearly festivals have a carnival-like atmosphere to them. There are now games and entertainment (such as cartoon film festivals for children) that patrons can partake of during the festival, as well as the sale of a variety of toys, charms, food, drink, and libations²².

The largest interest in miko these days seems to be their role in presenting Japan's cultural history to the public. Karan wrote that, “Part of the appeal for [being a miko] seems to be the chance to experience traditional Japanese culture, including dance, tea ceremony, and flower arranging.²³” Serving as a part-time miko then gives some young women a chance to experience the past through reenactment. The part-time miko also help to educate the Japanese public about

21 Blacker, Carmen, *The Catalpa Bow: A Study of Shamanistic Practices in Japan* (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1986), 316.

22 Reader, Ian, *Religion in Contemporary Japan* (Honolulu, HI: University of Hawai Press, 1991), 66.

23 Karan, Pradyumna, *Japan in the 21st Century: Environment, Economy, and Society* (Lexington, KY: University Press of Kentucky, 2005), 72.

their cultural history. In this sense, these reenactments serve a valuable public history function in Japan, in that they showcase the religious history of Shinto, while allowing the public to watch the ceremonies performed by miko reenactors. These ceremonies no longer offer spirit possession, but rather representation of the spirits through the miko's performance.

This experience is not solely limited to the Japanese, however. In a documentary from Temple University's Japan campus, a student named Kaylah (no last name given), who was studying Japanese and Asian studies, asked a local priest if she could work at the shrine. At first, the priest was reluctant, and only allowed her to clean, but as the priest came to trust Kaylah, he allowed her to participate in the normal functions that a miko would engage in, including purification rites and dancing, thus allowing her to engage in and learn about customary miko traditions, as well as about Shinto in general.

Many Japanese visitors, however, did not like the idea of a *gaikokujin*, or foreigner, working at the shrine, and complained to the priest, and stated that because she was Japanese, Kaylah was not allowed to work there. The priest had come to respect Kaylah, and allowed her to continue working at the shrine²⁴. The fact that Kaylah was able to work at the shrine shows a potential interest in opening up the religion to non-Japanese practitioners and officiants, though many Japanese traditionalists are not exactly thrilled with this idea.

Miko have also become somewhat of a pop culture icon. Many animes, mangas and video games feature miko as prominent characters, such as Rei Hino and Kikyo of the animes *Sailor Moon* and *Inuyasha*, Sayo-chan (or Pocky in the United States) in the video game series *Pocky and Rocky*, and several characters from the manga *Shrine of the Morning Mist*. As well as this, modern culture has spawned the idea of *kuro miko*, or dark miko, who tend to use dark rituals to

24 Crenshaw, Isaac, "Miko," Temple University Japan Campus, Youtube video, published 8 August 2013, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tRzkqRzeh8g&list=PLnF1ykUbDu0QFCRWziGfOTfoAmjI7qHHm>.

summon demons and fell magic. Many of these characters serve as the antithesis of another existing miko in the same setting. All of these characters are portrayed to have some sort of mystical element to them, as well as some degree of martial proficiency. This is potentially a sign that miko have become more than just a cultural icon, but also have become something for the Japanese people that is symbolic of their heritage.

Conclusion

Miko have had an interesting evolution for well over two millenia. They began as practitioners of oracular practices with a link to continental female shamans. Over the years, miko became ingrained into Japanese society. They carried out a variety of religious duties for the rural public, and created their own segmented communities. However, as time went on, their roles were interrupted by government interference, seeking to control the miko at first, and then banning many of the practices that they had practiced openly for many centuries without issue, causing miko and shamanic practices to go underground. After the occupation of Japan, following World War II, miko were allowed to practice shamanism once again. Miko have since become few in number, with part-time workers filling in the numbers during festival time. Through this position, the women that reenact the ceremonies and the public at large learn more about Japanese religious history, thus serving a public history in Japan. As well as this, they also have gained status as an icon in popular culture and a symbol for the general public. Miko, are a very interesting group of people within Shinto. They have experienced quite a bit of change, both good and ill. However, they continue to be a source of cultural and religious history for Japanese citizens, whether they are members of the Shinto faith or not. The festivals that they engage make sure that the Japanese will know about miko for years to come.

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