

# Center for Feminist Theology and Ministry in Japan

Number 76

August 2012. 8

c/oKyofu Kaikan  
Shinjuku, Tokyo, Japan  
home page: <http://cftmj.cocolog-nifty.com>

The 55th Regular seminar (July 14, 2012)

## “Nyoninkinsei” Today ——Searching for the Roots of Sexual Discrimination

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### Introduction

My name is Junko Minamoto. I would like to talk to you concerning some of the issues surrounding the concept of “Nyoninkinsei”. “Nyoninkinsei” means the exclusion of women from particular places, most of which are of religious significance. Examples of this are: women are forbidden to climb “Mt. Oomine” (or its proper name, Sanjogatake), a mountain on which traditional mountain asceticism [Shugendo] is practised; women cannot appear on the floats in the procession of the Gion Festival, a festival of the Yasaka Shrine in Kyoto; a woman cannot give a testimonial to the champion sumo wrestler in the sumo wrestling ring even though she may be the Chief Cabinet Secretary or Governor, because sumo was originally, as a court function or a rite of agriculture, a religious ceremony. “Nyoninkinsei” is deeply connected with religion. How was it formed? What is its meaning? What is women’s reaction to it? I would like in this paper to examine the roots of this prohibition and the issues it causes today, through examining my experience of the movement for the opening of “Mt. Oomine” to women.

### (1) The history of “Nyoninkinsei”

#### Menstruation and childbirth as unclean

When and why did the exclusion of women begin? It is written in the Engishiki (10C), in the items on the rite of court, that women are turned away from court because of menstruation and childbirth. In these same rules, the dead (bodies and carcasses of animals called Rikuchiku [cattle, horse, sheep, dog, chicken, pig]) are also turned away. Death, menstruation and childbirth were regarded as unclean and uncleanness was excluded from the court in order maintain its purity and to consecrate the rite of the court, that is to say, the power and authority of the emperor.

Why were menstruation and childbirth regarded as unclean? No reason is given for it in the Engishiki. It is easier to understand why death was regarded as unclean. Uncleanliness was also mentioned in the Kojiki. We can understand that a living body is changed to a foreign object by death and that a state of decomposition is not clean. However, menstruation and childbirth, exclusively related to women and the birth of new life, is the opposite of death. Childbirth should mean blessing and hope. It is hard for us to understand that menstruation and childbirth were regarded as unclean, but we should remember that childbirth was dangerous in the past and caused the death of a lot of mothers and babies. Because a girl's first menstruation was regarded as proof that she had become a grown-up and was able to be a mother, it was a custom to make sweet red bean rice to celebrate it. Though it is still uncertain why menstruation was considered to be unclean, it was the people who established Engishiki and desired to consecrate the emperor system, who defined it as such. Nobutsuna Saigo mentioned, in his book *The Myth and the State*, that "the reason why the rite of court avoided uncleanliness so extremely is that uncleanliness was regarded as a power to dirty the clear (sumeru) state." The word "sumeru" has a double meaning; "govern" and "clear." Defining menstruation and childbirth as unclean and contrasting this with the purity of the consecrated emperor system, tells us something of how women were viewed from men's perspective. However, in order to maintain the emperor system, women must bear children. Perhaps, childbirth was considered as something to be avoided because of men's inability to bear children.

The Engishiki states that the uncleanliness of menstruation continues for seven days and that of childbirth for thirty days. These ideas were adopted later into folk customs. During these periods of uncleanliness women were excluded from the main house where they lived with their family and were housed in separately built huts. These women could, however, return to their ordinary living space after that period; menstruation and childbirth only temporarily excluded them from the community. By contrast, the holy places of Buddhism excluded women indefinitely; the period of uncleanliness was without limit.

### **"Nyoninkinsei" in Buddhism**

Though Japanese Buddhism can be said to have become established primarily when women became nuns, male priests were predominant in the six sects of Nara which were founded in the temples on the plains during the Nara period. In the ninth-century Buddhism of the Heian period, Saicho and Kukai who founded temples in mountains, prohibited women from Mt. Hiei and Mt. Kouya. It was considered that these mountains were places for male priests to live and train and a stone was set to mark the boundary. The words "Women, oxen and horses prohibited" was inscribed on the boundary stone of Mt. Hiei; women, like "oxen and horses" were refused entry to the mountain area. As for Mt. Kouya's boundary stone, the words "Leeks, liquor and nuns prohibited from this temple" was inscribed; even nuns were not permitted to enter the mountain area. The prohibition on both mountains were without time limit; women were prohibited from entering the mountain area whether or not they were considered unclean.

Saicho and Kukai established their prohibition because in Buddhism, women are considered to be

unclean, to have five hindrances and three ways of obedience. The five hindrances are taught in the scriptures of Buddhism: women have five hindrances and therefore they cannot become Bontenou [King Brahman], Taishakuten [Indra], Maou, Tenrinjouou [chakravartin] and the Buddha body. The three ways of obedience describe how a woman must live her life; obeying her father before marriage, her husband during marriage and her son after her husband's death. The source of this teaching is the Code of Manu.

What was Saicho and Kukai's intention in keeping women off Mt. Hiei and Mt. Kouya? What it suggests is that male priests have difficulties when women are present in their training places and that they cannot continue training with women, even if those women are trainees. Similarly, women were prohibited from the Sangha which was established by Buddha. This may have led to further prohibitions against women.

The ban on women's access to Mt. Hiei and Mt. Kouya was removed in 1872 (5th year of Meiji), after the proclamation of the Grand Council of State was issued. However, the Buddhist authorities on the mountains didn't themselves question the prohibition but simply removed it in order to fall in line with state policy which had ordered that they should: "Remove prohibition against women's entry into shrines and temples and open them to women for climbing and worshipping". This reflects the Buddhist reaction on the removal of the prohibition against meat-eating and marriage that same year ("Leave the matters of meat-eating, marriage and growing one's hair etc. to one's discretion"), and it shows that the Buddhists' concern here was simply to follow national policy.

### Shugendo and "Nyoninkinsei"

Shugendo was established at the end of the Heian period. Influenced by shamanism, Taoism and esoteric Buddhism, it bases itself on the worship of mountains as the spiritual places of the divine spirits and the souls of ancestors. It is supposed that Enno ozunu, known also as, Enno gyoja (634-701) was the founder.

In the Kamakura period, the training places spread to Mt. Oomine. It is said that the prohibition against women's entry was not set till the Muromachi period. This is not certain but we know that it was in place after that era. Women came to be regarded as unclean from then on. In early-modern times, religious bodies were organized and "Kou" [religious associations] that had started to climb mountains for worshipping were formed by lay-persons. Even now, religious associations in various parts of Japan climb Mt. Oomine. In those days, licensed prostitution quarters flourished. They were also built near the boundary gate of the sacred places of Shugendo and Buddhism. In these quarters, prostitution called "Shojin otoshi" [the end of a period of abstinence] was practiced by worshipers after training. I think this is one of the roots of the post-war incidence of Asian sex tours.

The modern state promulgated "the Edict for the Separation of Shinto and Buddhism" in 1868, making strategic preparations for State Shinto and theocracy. Moreover, Shugendo underwent the hardship of abolition through the "Edict for The Abolition of Shugendo" in 1872. The purpose of this was to forbid Yamabushi [mountain priests] from using black arts and deceiving villagers. However, Shugendo itself didn't decline.

After the war, Shugendo took its present form based on the “Edict for Religious Corporation” (1945) and the “Religious Corporation Law” (1951).

## **(2) How women are understood from the perspective of “Nyoninkinsei”**

Women, excluded from sacred places by the “Nyoninkinsei” rule, internalised this view of themselves as unclean, even when they were not menstruating or in the time following childbirth. As a result, they came to accept that there were areas where only men could enter. Izumi Shikibu composed a tanka [a 31 syllable Japanese poem] expressing her feelings of envy at an ominaeshi flower; Shikibu can’t climb Mt. Hiei because she is a woman, while this flower can be taken there by a priest even though the flower’s name means “a woman.” [The Chinese characters for ominaeshi are flower and a woman or prostitute.] Izumi Shikibu knew that women were believed to have ‘the five hindrances’ and like most women accepted, without knowing the reason, that women could not climb the holy mountains. Women’s acceptance and internalization of such treatment and views, led them to assume a vertical relationship in which men, who are permitted to climb to the holy places, are superior to women who are not. The five hindrances ( itsunosawari ) referred to in the tanka were taught more generally in later Japanese Buddhism which also taught that women, because of these five hindrances, could not become Buddha; that is, women could not be saved. From the Muromachi period onwards, Japanese Buddhism taught that women had to embrace the Buddhist faith still more strongly because they were excluded from salvation. Rennyo of the True Pure Land Sect of Buddhism preached that it was difficult for women to be saved both because they were more sinful than men and because they were subject to “the five hindrances and the three ways of obedience” . For this reason the Amitabha Buddha offered “the Prayer for the Salvation of All Humankind” (Ofumi) in order to save women. In this way, despite seeming to be excluded from the faith, women were compelled to accept the Buddhist faith. Moreover, women who embraced the faith strongly were valued highly. The Ketsubonkyo Sutra, regarded as pseudepigraphic, indicates that women must embrace the faith and chant Buddhist sutras because they defile both the gods and the Buddha owing to their uncleanness.

However, it is difficult to explain why women are regarded as unclean beings that are hard to be saved and subject to the five hindrances and three ways of obedience. It seems to me that this is not how women truly are but how they were defined by men, including Buddhists and mountain ascetics, in order to support their own androcentrism. Why, when and how did women become defined in this way ? This question keeps going round in circles. I think, however, the answer is to be found in the system of patriarchy.

A shift to patriarchy began to restrict women’s freedoms. In a patriarchal society, the family system, for instance the inheritance of the position of family head and profession, continues through the male line. Moreover, while men were free from sexual restraints, a woman’s sexual partner was limited to the same man.

In addition to increasing patriarchalization, I would like to also consider that men were in awe of women’s sexuality and childbirth and suggest that we can examine the problem of misogyny in

relation to this feeling. Due to the differences between the sexes, men are not able to bear children. If childbirth is regarded as an object of men's awe, we can understand that women's menstruation and childbirth might come to be regarded as unclean. Sometimes women died in childbirth and had stillborn babies; childbirth was accompanied by danger. I realize to some extent that men, in awe of life-risking childbirth, might try to keep away from it. Thus women would give birth in a hut used exclusively for childbirth because it was considered too intense for men to be in the vicinity of.

Similarly, women's sexuality also provoked awe in men because they saw women's sexual desire as being different from that of men, perceiving them as being sexually insatiable. In conclusion, the lowering of the status of women was due to a combination of men's awe of women, misogyny, and a shift to patriarchy. Finally, women themselves began to accept this view.

### **(3) The movement to open Mt. Oomine to women**

#### **"Nyoninkinsei" of Mt. Oomine**

Mt. Oomine, whose formal name is "Sanjougatake of the Oomine Mountains," is located in Nara Prefecture and still now prohibits women. There is a Zaoudo [the main temple of Oominesanji, dedicated to the Bodhisattva of Zaou] on Mt. Oomine. The Zaoudo is run by three head temples (Syougoin, Kinpusenji and Daigoji), five managing temples (Ryusenji of Dorogawa, Tonanin, Kizouin, Sakuramotobo and Chikurinjin of Yoshino), three special representatives of the laity of Mt. Yoshino and Dorogawa, and representatives from the eight associations of the city of Sakai. In addition, believers and trainees from this district and various other places support this organization. The entrance door of the main hall of the temple is opened on May 3rd and closed on September 23rd every year.

The area from which women are prohibited stretches from Dorogawa to Ozasa. It measures 10 kilometres from east to west and 24 kilometres from north to south. The boundary gates are in Seijo-Oohashi, Gobanzeki, Ozasanoshuku and Rengetsuji. In Seijo-Oohashi, there is both a boundary gate and a boundary stone. The words "Women Prohibited" is marked from right to left on the gate, and the words "Women Prohibited From This Point" is inscribed on the boundary stone. However, the position of the boundary has been changed. The precinct of Ryusenji was opened in 1960, and the boundary line was moved back to Seijo-Oohashi in 1970, which is where it is now. The boundary was changed for the sake of convenience: it was inconvenient for the supporting members of Ryusenji to hold events because half of the supporting members of the temple were women; women were engaged in tree planting; tour buses with female guides had to make U-turns within the boundary, etc. The faction who insist on the prohibition of women list a number of reasons. First they argue that "Nyoninkinsei" is not discrimination against women but a custom relating to faith and a 1300 year old tradition. Secondly, they say that Mt. Oomine, as a mountain, is an object of faith and that believers will not come if the prohibition is removed. Moreover, the mountain goddess will be jealous if women climb the mountain. In addition, they assert that it is under divine will (the will of the founder Enno gyoja) that the prohibition be upheld and also that men cannot continue training if women are there. They beg forgiveness for men's weakness but insist that women will not be permitted to enter the

mountain area in their lifetime. In short, they oppose the movement by shifting the responsibility to tradition or folkways and speak without disguising their antagonism.

### The movement for opening

In 2003, we heard that “the Sacred Places and Approaches of the Kii Mountains” including “Mt. Oomine” were going to be inscribed on the World Cultural Heritage List. This gave rise to the call to open Mt. Oomine to women, a campaign which is still active. (The site was inscribed on the World Cultural Heritage List in 2007.)

The members of this group started with a signature-collecting campaign. In 2004, we handed or mailed 12418 signatures to 19 bodies such as the three head temples, the five Gojiins and other administrative bodies. We also held a symposium. Moreover, we published books, “Nyoninkinsei” Q&A (2005) and Contemporary “Nyoninkinsei” (2011). In addition, we set up a website to publicise our activities. However, at present many of the contributions to our discussions are from those opposed to our cause. We also sent a questionnaire to the members of the Nara Prefectural Assembly and to members of the Diet. The response was disappointing; the members of the Diet did not return a single questionnaire form.

We have listened to the arguments for keeping the prohibition, too. Until now, we have had opportunities to hear the views of Mr. Ryomei Fukui (Chikurinjin), Mr. Riten Tanaka (Kinpusenji) and Mr. Tainen Miyagi (Shougoin). However, only Mr. Miyagi has shown a positive attitude towards our movement. Mr Tanaka, Mr Fukui and others who have refused to engage with us, appear to be inflexible on the subject. We often feel discouraged, that whatever we do, they will never change their attitudes. Despite the campaign’s lack of success, we have looked for further publicity by creating a set of traditional Japanese playing cards on the theme of the prohibition of women (Nyoninkinsei karuta).

### Conclusion

Though equality for men and women is advocated today, we do not feel that it has yet been realized. Women suffer from disadvantages in many areas. As for sexual abuse, the damage caused to women victims is more serious than that of men. It seems that the sexual division of work is reinforced instead of being abolished. The backlash against gender equality continues to this day. I feel compelled towards the conclusion that there is a large segment of our society which is unwilling to accept the equality of men and women. Understanding our history is the first step in describing our reality and in coping with this problem.

The problem of “Nyoninkinsei” is an intractable one, nevertheless, we continue to inform and interest as many people as we can of its existence.