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Women and Religion in Japan

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Mag-whats? Kitamura Sayo's Masculine Brashness and Motherly Endurance

From the rags of a farmer's wife to ragging on the emperor himself, Kitamura Sayo's life was chaotic from the start. The founder of a new religion in Japan called Tenshō Kōtai Jingūkyo, or 'the dancing religion,' Kitamura was the outspoken prophet and center. Argumentative, tough, and controversial, Kitamura came to prominence in Japan's tumultuous postwar period. In predicting the end of World War II, Kitamura became the figure Ōgamisama, or Great God. Such a Great God was the spirit Tensho Kōtaijin preaching through Kitamura's body, requiring her to wear male clothing in order to justify her brash speech and outspoken attitude. Certainly someone who openly called others "maggot-beggars" was an unnervingly bold woman not afraid to speak her mind. Kitamura Sayo's religious marketing deliberately targeted Japanese gender roles by portraying her as an abrasively masculine figure and disrupting long-standing expectations of Japanese women. However, Sayo's controversial religious reputation was still derived from a rigid conception of masculinity being dominant because it was controlling and insulting, reinforcing the idea that masculinity helped her consolidate power, and femininity helped her become more palatable in Japanese media to spread her religious messages. Considering these two ideas in Japan's tumultuous political and postwar landscape, Sayo cuts a striking figure because she was an opinionated and therefore solid anchor for the people. In a postwar period where people sought faith and stability, she ushered in a radical era of speaking

out against authority, staunchly following her god-bestowed way, and irritating her audience along the way.

Kitamura Sayo was born Ekimoto Sayo in 1900 to a prosperous farmer. Even as a young girl, she was described as strong-willed, and quick to call out dishonesty. Between her childhood, when she practiced Jodo Shin Buddhism, and her adult life leading Tenshō Kōtai Jingūkyo, three key events changed her life. First, she was married off to a timid farmer who had the bonus of his extremely controlling and abusive mother-in-law. The mother-in-law saw her son's previous wives as expendable workhorses because they were merely peasant wives, and would force divorce "on grounds of laziness, overeating, and general incompatibility" (May 122). Yet Kitamura's strong personality did not back down against the mother-in-law's abuse, and she resolved to be "a good wife" (122). After ten years of abuse, the mother-in-law became too feeble to harass Kitamura further. It was one of the first of many battles Kitamura would wage, and an important component to understanding her strong stance against injustice and sense of god's path. Because Kitamura was abused as a wife, she understood her status to be lower than a man's and worked within her status as a woman to endure and do the best she could. In other words, those years of marriage were, as she later remarked, a method to "polish my soul and to make myself as I am today. When my resentment for her changed to gratitude, the Road to God opened" (May 123).

But that was not the end of Kitamura's struggles. In 1942, Kitamura's barn burned down, her only source of livelihood. Seeking reason and guidance, she visited an Inari shrine in an attempt to find the culprit but eventually found a more engaging pursuit: religious ecstasy. More specifically, she became aware of a strange presence in her stomach and was told she would "transform into a living divinity" (Ambros 143). This spiritual stomachache eventually

manifested as Tensho Kōtaijin, or the Absolute God of the Universe. It was a lofty title for Kitamura, and one that in combination with her headstrong stance against injustice and her struggles as a farmer's wife, she interpreted as her calling to a new religion.

If Kitamura's life was difficult, Japan's government was even messier. Following Japan's loss in World War II, attempts to rebuild were often top-down efforts. "Collective responsibility" was a popular term, often used to explain without calling to action. In meetings of scholars and religious leaders, "participants would often pass resolutions offering collective apologies and repentance for their inability to stop Japan's path to war and speak out against the government's militaristic agenda" (Dorman 185). Meanwhile, Kitamura took a radically different stance by declaring General MacArthur to be a divine messenger of justice against the corrupt Japanese government. While it might read as outlandish, Kitamura bolstered her views by correctly predicting the end of the war, gaining her followers and respect. By 1945 she was regularly preaching and earning wider notoriety. 'Notoriety' is perhaps an understatement to describe the stunts she pulled, especially refusing rice quota requirements because "she had no rice to waste on maggot-beggars" (Dorman 173). Evidently she was fond of the insult 'maggots', as it became her primary and most famous insult for the corrupt, the criminal, and those who did not follow her path to god.

As Kitamura continued to preach, an interesting dissonance emerged between her very public persona, and her secular housewife life. For all of her preaching against the emperor (yes, he was also a maggot) and authorities, she dressed in men's clothes for public sermons because "feminine clothing was inappropriate when preaching in such gruff language" (Ambros 143). This ascribes quieter and more palatable traits to women, and even suggests that in order to more effectively spread Tenshō Kōtai Jingūkyo, Kitamura deliberately distanced herself from her

femininity to legitimize her religion. In being as disruptive as possible, people saw her as a harbinger of change after World War II, and a voice for the downtrodden. And yet this change was conditional: Kitamura had a relatively conservative vision of women, justifying her mannerisms like interrupting, singing, and being all-around annoying by saying they were the work of the holy spirits in her (by this time, two more had taken up residence in her stomach to make a very cozy home for three). Such spirits are thus implied to be masculine, and speaking through a feminine body out of arbitrary choice. Kitamura also upheld the abuse she suffered under her mother-in-law as evidence of strength of character, positing that because she was a good wife and learned gratitude rather than resentment, she was able to articulate her spiritual journey. Furthermore, in raising her son, she was often described as the 'wise mother' trope, teaching him chores and forming his character. In her secular and private life, Kitamura's foundation of 'good wife, wise mother' was a strong influence that bled over into her religious teachings as well. She believed mothers would be free from pain during childbirth if they only recited her prayer, Na-myō-hō-ren-ge-kyō, and her religious classes did not teach boys handicraft. Structural aspects of Tenshō Kōtai Jingūkyo therefore ascribed certain gender norms to girls and boys based on the belief that women who endure the pain of being a woman will be brought closer to the divine path.

Kitamura also practiced a kind of humbleness in her religion that she often tied back to her status as a woman, especially a peasant woman. In an interview on Tenshō Kōtai Jingūkyo, her words are promotional yet self-deprecating: "I was told to become greater than both Buddha and Christ, so I expect too much. I'm still a farmer's wife… I do my own washing…This kind of thing is done by those who are faithful to their daily life" (Kitamura 17). Again, her daily life as a wife and mother influence her view on how people should practice. Daily chores are essential

because she was a peasant, and her rationale is because she is still 'just' a farmer's wife. By deliberately minimizing her current status by referring to her past as a mere wife, Kitamura is able to portray herself as just another comrade within her religion, which was an essential part of its communal foundations. This is echoed in her disgust for idol worship and refusal to take donations (she still took gifts). This may have also been her way of contrasting her 'masculine' brash sermons and protests with a more palatable feminine image she presented to the media. For all of her flair, Kitamura still maintained good relations with Japanese religious authorities in order to register Tenshō Kōtai Jingūkyo as a legitimate religion (Dorman 180). She also ascribed the more humble and communal aspects of Tenshō Kōtai Jingūkyo to her life as a woman and wife: "To keep the way of humility is essential for man. I was married to a man whose mother changed daughters-in-law six times. I was the seventh wife. I raised one boy. It is essential for us to be trustworthy wives and trustworthy parents. This is practice" (Kitamura 9). By specifically citing her difficult past as a wife and implying that despite her hardships, she was still a grateful and humble wife, Kitamura paints herself as legitimized through her struggle. Thus her more brash persona is tempered in some part by her life as a woman, and such experience is what enables her to speak more brashly as a man but also separates her as a wife and mother from her public preachings.

Kitamura Sayo's personal experience as a wife and mother deeply influenced her religion Tenshō Kōtai Jingūkyo. Though notorious and deeply annoying to many, her mission of social organization and community combined with her fiery personality and unabashed name-calling drew followers in. Yet the community and religion she formed was stratified because of her experience as a wife and mother, and her separation between feminine housework and masculine preaching. In her public persona, Kitamura was emboldened through wearing men's clothing and

preaching in masculine ways, specifically aggressive and disruptive ways, to spread her religion and declare herself the vessel of not one, not two, but three absolute gods. Yet she also presented herself to the media and to her followers as a hard-working and humble person because of her experience under her abusive mother-in-law and resolution to be a good wife and wise mother. We see this same separation of gender reflected in her granddaughter Kiyokazu, who was the successor, declaring that “A woman can have the same work as men as long as she does not forget her own responsibilities… If she can do her work, and in addition do men's work, that is fine” (Tolbert 36). Kiyokazu reflects decades of preaching that her grandmother began, both working within yet reinforcing ideas of women in Tenshō Kōtai Jingūkyo. For her 450,000 followers today, Kitamura remains an enduring figure of rebellion and a controversial yet charismatic center that used gender both for personal gain and wider promotion.

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