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Women in Japanese Religions

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Religion In The Days of Infamy: Religious Women in Japanese Incarceration

Just seven hours after the attack on Pearl Harbor started, the United States was already committing its own act of infamy. At three P.M, Bishop Gikyō Kuchiba, a Buddhist priest, was arrested in his own temple. Desperate to save whatever he could, he released his birds from their cages in the temple and was taken into custody as they flew free. He was only the beginning. Over one hundred thousand Japanese Americans were arrested en masse in the following years and relocated to what the government labeled ‘internment camps’, forced to suppress their religious practices and constantly under surveillance for fear of attack. Yet such fears stemmed from a fundamental refusal to understand Japanese religion not as a vehicle of treason, but a method of building community and resisting injustice. Nowhere was this more clear than in the ways religion changed for Japanese American women during World War II. As American Christian ideals painted Japanese American religion as a foreign threat during World War II, Japanese American women in incarceration were scrutinized for taking leadership roles in their religious communities, acting on behalf of their families, and adapting Buddhism and Shinto to survive in hostile wartime conditions. Yet despite their unfair treatment, women played a key role in their wider religious groups in circumventing gender relations and reinventing them in order to survive.

The United States had already seen Buddhism as a potential threat years before Pearl Harbor. Buddhism and Shinto were historically framed as obstructions to Americanization, which was explicitly male, white, and Christian. Like many instances of church and state, the reasoning behind this logic was part of a much bigger picture. Between Japan's victory in the Russo-Japanese War and World War II, Japan became a major threat to the United States because of its military prowess. How could a supposedly inferior race be seen as a security threat? Perhaps, the United States reasoned, it was due to their heathen people and practices. And yet internal evidence suggested otherwise from the very beginning. Through a series of flawed but crucial surveys, the United States had actually concluded that most Japanese Buddhists would be loyal to the United States — reports such as "Loyalty of Immigrants in the Event of War" compared "Citizen Buddhists versus Christians" (Williams 29) concluding that, as many could already surmise, religious affiliation was not a determining factor in loyalty. And yet what was referred to as "principles of Christian decency" persisted, despite its total disregard of constitutionality and justice (Ravela 2).

Then what could be used to poke holes in Japanese Americans' supposed loyalty? Buddhism and Shinto, too foreign for American comfort, were seen as vehicles for an anti-American majority within the Japanese American community. By encouraging Japanese Americans to practice foreign religions, they encouraged a population that did not buy into the American dream and therefore a population of traitors. All this flimsy logic was intended to make people buy into the myth of the American nation under attack. By positioning religion as a core part of American life and constructing Japanese Buddhism and Shinto as a threat to American's personal safety, the United States government effectively made anti-Asian sentiment

a means of protecting American personal and religious life. Talk about conflation of church and state.

As Buddhists and Shinto practitioners began to be taken into custody under Roosevelt's Executive Order 9066, female priests were especially suspect. Consider the Buddhist leader Ryūto Tsuda, who rose to prominence for her healing abilities and was known for starting a new sect of Buddhism in America. She was noted during interrogations to be "bright, sharp, and shrewd…a religious woman of the fanatical type… she is dangerous to the public peace, safety and internal security of the United States" (Williams 41). On top of being suspected as a Japanese American, it is important to note that Tsuda was doubly criticized for her intelligence and leadership, qualities the United States government suspected Japanese people did not inherently possess. In fact the United States saw Japanese Americans as a racially and economically subjugated group because of their ties to Hawaiian plantation labor and language divide (Williams 29). Tsuda's attitude was not compatible with what the government constructed a "good American" to be, so she was arrested just weeks after the attack on Pearl Harbor along with nine American Buddhist and Shinto clerics.

In a more stunning example of how little the United States cared to learn about a religion that was supposedly their greatest enemy, another female religious leader Haruko Takahashi was arrested on suspicions of being a traitor because she was a Shinto priest. Her role as a community leader also made her a prime target because she was seen as someone who had the potential to organize the people against American interests. Like Tsuda, Takahashi was similarly attacked during interrogation for speaking "very little English" and "worshiping the Japanese Emperor" (Nareau paragraph 3) because she practiced Shinto. Takahashi was marked as dangerous because she was a community leader that embraced foreign religious practices, ironically demonstrating

the central role women played in religious community organization. As scholar Amy Nishimura puts it, women went from priestesses and disciples, positions of authority within their religious organizations, to becoming gendered as witches and traitors. Removing religious leaders first had a profound impact on the community: Thirteen out of Honolulu's nineteen religious schools were closed during the war, a major blow to not just Japanese American religion, but culture and community livelihood.

Japanese American priests were among the first groups to be rounded up, but in subsequent months thousands of the Japanese diaspora regardless of generation or loyalty were 'evacuated' into 'internment', or incarcerated in camps that suppressed and shamed their Japanese identity, especially on religious grounds. Anything deemed too religious was too Japanese, and vice versa. Japanese flags at shrines were painted black, and religious items like *tokonoma* were dismantled. In such an environment, sometimes the only rationale left to plead was emotional. Japanese American women in incarceration sought ways to continue practicing their religions, appealing on behalf of their families' livelihoods in order to do so. In many places, Japanese American women still did not have authority positions in religion, which may have allowed them to stave off incarceration longer than male Buddhist and Shinto practitioners. A scholar of Buddhist American studies Karma Tsomo writes that in order to compensate "during the male clergy's absence, temple wives or *fujinkai* (Buddhist women's club) members stepped in to perform funeral rituals and other services" (7), stepping up to fill men's vacated roles in the community. Even though men had a primary role in Japanese American Buddhism and Shinto, their persecution during the war meant women took on those primary roles as new heads of the family unit, *ie*.

Reimagining *ie* meant women had to take on authority in a time of uncertainty, with young children to take care of and economic futures suddenly up in the air. As a Japanese American incarcerated as a child, Mako Nakagawa remembered her mother's struggles as fruitless labor. "Most of the Issei women paid just a dear, dear price with getting no recognition for the kind of pain that they went through. And not only was she in dire straits [because the money was frozen], she had four little girls. The oldest one was just eleven and the youngest one was just a baby yet" (Densho interview, 5:13). In situations where mothers became the sole means of survival, they expanded the role of good wife and wise mother beyond just caretaker but also scribe. Some records of Japanese arrests only exist through family records, one example being the arrest of Rev. Tokumon Aoki through the eyes of his wife Hisa Aoki: "[Our daughter] Yoko was calmly standing behind us, but [our younger daughter] Sachiko was in the corner of the room and from time to time looking up with terrified eyes" (Williams 89). The emotional impact of Japanese American people being torn apart was documented through referencing specific familial details like children, things that wives (who were often taken later than their husbands because they were seen as secondary) were often privy to.

Yet such duties only compounded Japanese American women's difficulties in incarceration.Things like cooking and cleaning, considered 'women's work,' became exponentially harder in overcrowded and dirty living conditions. Ada Otera Endo, one Japanese American, described this as "the inequity of the whole thing. A woman is left, stuck with everything. A man is free as a bird, and they don't share with the care of the children or worry about their future or anything like that" (Densho). Women were often expected to go beyond being a good wife and wise mother, becoming survivalists and spokespeople. "Her daughter told me that her mother should not pray, for the FBI might arrest her," one person in Manzanar

recounted, highlighting the difficulties not just women, but anyone faced under constant surveillance. With nowhere else to worship, women often prayed in barracks. Although the United States government tried their best to promote Christianity, Shinto and Buddhism persisted. Seventy percent of incarcerated residents were Buddhist, and Shinto was even harder to pin down, since the divide between folk Shinto, sect, Shinto, and state Shinto was so vague. This begged the question of what religion was, and what role faith played in surviving the ordeals of the camps. Many families perceived their religious practices as one dot of normalcy in their upheaved worlds. But for many incarcerated women, religion became a shared escape and source of comfort in their plight. Hisa Aoki writes, "I must not give up. That would be against the will of Buddha…the protective light which is provided by Kannon now provides some little support for me" (Williams 101). By invoking the name of Buddha as a motivator, Aoki demonstrates how women used religion as a source of strength despite facing daily indignity and inequality. Still, Buddhism remained barely tolerated in camps and Shinto was banned altogether.

It was the efforts of a younger generation that maintained Buddhism through hōben, or 'expedient means.' The Young Buddhist Association (YBA), led by second generation Japanese Americans, organized events that blended religious activity with community building, such as sports tournaments, mixed choir, and elderly care groups. Such groups took a more forward-facing focus to religion and included newer events like a *Bussei* Coronation, a beauty pageant that incorporated Buddhist teachings. Some saw it as the Americanization of Buddhism, a controversial accusation given how American government treated Japanese Buddhism. Still, a more youthful group followed more radical ideas on gender and race, not only hosting mixers and quiz shows with young Buddhist men and women but invoking interracial solidarity with white Buddhists who visited incarceration camps. Including women was, like many other aspects

of organized religion, a byproduct of advertising religion to a wider audience. While Buddhism in incarceration camps took on new forms such as adopting Christian style 'hymns' and service books, it was to subvert American suppression of more explicitly foreign forms of practice. Newer forms of a religion necessitated including more people — women — in its scope to adapt to a rapidly changing world. Even today, changes continue to be made to Buddhist practices. For example, the *fujinkai* is referred to today as the Buddhist Women's Association (BWA) because many people associated with it do not speak Japanese (Tsomo 7).

In focusing on women's religious practices in a time of unusual and unjustified persecution, the Japanese American experience highlights how Buddhism alienated, brought responsibility to, and comforted women. Yet women still faced tremendous difficulties during incarceration that were heightened by their intersectional identities as women, Buddhists, leaders, and family caretakers. Women faced a disproportionate amount of labor that often went unnoticed, and often found creative ways around structural disadvantages in order to take care of themselves and their families. After World War II, many were never compensated for the physical, economical, and emotional trauma the America they had professed loyalty to had put them through. Many were relocated to the Midwestern United States, an especially lonely life for Japanese American mothers following fathers and raising children in a strange new background. Yet many made new lives establishing Buddhist temples. Such temples welcomed many different backgrounds and preached interracial solidarity, a stark contrast to the cold response the United States had given Japanese Buddhism years ago. While women have historically been understood as wives and mothers, they expanded beyond such roles during incarceration in order to ensure the survival of their families and community. Although not focused on or undocumented in many sources, their resilience is all the more poignant.

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