



Deviation from the System of “Nourishing Life”: Religious Innovation in Japan

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Veröffentlicht am 29/01/2024

Abstract

In this response to Karénina Kollmar-Paulenz’s celebrated essay on non-European concepts in the global study of religion, I discuss the possibility for religious innovation in a socio-religious situation stabilised by objectified elite perspectives by reference to formative teachings and practices in Tenrikyō, a religion founded by Nakayama Miki in 1838. Nakayama Miki’s deviation from the knowledge system of “nourishing life” (*yōjō*), especially in regard to perinatal food taboos, analysed here on the basis of hagiographical accounts of the foundress, aimed to free humans from all food restrictions. By concentrating on the traditional Japanese “nourishing life” system and its food regulations as an identity marker of the “other”, proponents of freedom from them, as taught by the foundress, contributed in some way, paradoxically, to the stabilisation of the norms.

1. Introduction

Karénina Kollmar-Paulenz encourages all scholars of the study of religion to participate in the project of writing a global history of religion. She proposes to start by historicising descriptive and analytical terminologies and concepts developed in regions outside of Europe. In her celebrated chapter, she observes reification processes in early modern Mongolian discourses that led to the othering of those non-Buddhist religious groups whom the ruling elite perceived as being in competition with the newly introduced Buddhist religion. As Karénina Kollmar-Paulenz points out, the available textual sources make us, however, aware of “only one side of the dispute between indigenous and Buddhist actors” (2024: 14), since the indigenous actors used to pass on their knowledge orally and were not involved directly in the production of texts. Karénina Kollmar-Paulenz invites us scholars to look at the ‘other’ side, an approach reflected in my own work on premodern and early modern Japan. I seek to make the voices of the othered side audible by, for example, looking at the material culture of religious actors read as non-elite. As noted by Karénina Kollmar-Paulenz: “the perspectives held and socially enforced by the elites” means that they “were objectified in the historical process and became constitutive of the significant changes in the socio-religious field” (2024: 10). The othered side might, in consequence, appear as forever muted by the ensuing elite discourses and laws and regulations, and the religious field as a whole seemingly lapsing into stagnation.

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To quote this article: Triplett, Katja. 2024. “Deviation from the System of ‘Nourishing Life’: Religious Innovation in Japan.” *ARGOS* 3 (2) Special Issue *Towards a Global History of Religion*, 109–116. DOI: 10.26034/fr.argos.2024.4761 .

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How is it at all possible for something new to arise in a socio-religious situation stabilised by objectified elite perspectives? In this short essay, I will develop the question further by reference to the case of a religion that emerged in nineteenth-century Japan, as a critical appraisal of Karénina Kollmar-Paulenz's approach.

2. The problem of religious innovation

External factors may force changes in the social field of religion and lead to new cultural expressions. This in itself is not the only case of the emergence of more fundamental changes as resistance from individuals and groups against internal objectified elite perspectives is not always futile: One way to observe religious innovation is to shed light on breaks away from orthodox tradition and on charismatic individuals' and their followers' conscious formation of something new. Such breaks with tradition, or perceived breaks with tradition, do not necessarily result in the formation of a new religion, they can also be seen as reforms or revitalisation of existing doctrine, social structures, and material culture. A useful term to academically describe the more radical changes within the social field of religion is to refer to them as innovations.¹

Whereas most studies on new religions and innovation in religious traditions consider religious doctrine, it may be fruitful to shift the view to social fields that at first glance are not primarily connected with religious innovation. Considering "possible connections, interdependencies and transfer processes between various knowledge cultures [...] in both non-European and European societies" (Kollmar-Paulenz 2024: 32) is one of the research topics that according to Karénina Kollmar-Paulenz belong to writing a global history of religion. I will, therefore, in my appraisal of her work, focus on linkages between the knowledge systems of nutrition, physical and social hygiene, and religion in nineteenth-century Japan.

Deviation from the knowledge system of "nourishing life": the case of Tenrikyō

In nineteenth-century Japan an intricate system of prescribed and prohibited foods appears to have been quite stabilised. It formed part of a larger knowledge system of "nourishing of life" (*yōjō* 養生), meaning health maintenance by right moral conduct, originally adopted from China. The system prescribed adherence to traditional customs and rites including the correct diet for all members of human society. We find special prescriptions for age groups, gender, the sick or dying, and special occasions such as weddings. The regulations about food intake concerned especially pregnancy and birth.

The break with the century-old tradition that had been shaping human society is one of the key moments in the establishment of the Japanese religion Tenrikyō, the "Teaching of the Divine Principle", founded by the charismatic Nakayama Miki² (1798–1887) in a small village in the

¹ For a critical evaluation of interpretative venues in regard to religious innovation, see Williams et al. 1992, 7–10.

² Nakayama is the family name, Miki the given name.

Yamato basin in Japan.³ Nakayama Miki was a married farmer with several children and owner of a stately homestead. As a pious lay Buddhist, she had a deep understanding of traditional Japanese religion. After becoming a religious leader of an independent religion that was later called Tenrikyō, she famously wrote down some of her teachings (*Ofudesaki*) in the form of waka poetry. Among her many teachings is the encouragement to deviate from the traditional pattern of perinatal food taboos.⁴

Perinatal food taboos in Japan were also part of a complex arrangement of health maintenance rules linked with Japanese esoteric Buddhist and local *kami* (gods) rituals. The tradition of perinatal regimen in Japan were (and are, outside Tenrikyō, to some extent) part of a whole range of prescriptions for pregnant women and young mothers. From the late 17th century onward, in early modern Japan main-stream ideology “[t]o safely deliver a healthy child was portrayed as an ethical achievement that was of profound social significance” (Burns 2002: 179). This concerned especially the idea of a contagion moving from mother to foetus called “womb poison” (*taidoku* 胎毒) and the fear connected to it of pollution by life-harming things (*kegare*). The pregnant woman was to turn to life-affirming things (*hare*) and carefully learn about risky and beneficial foodstuffs. The knowledge about well-being of mother and foetus was found in more or less fixed formulations of “womb education” (*taikyō* 胎教) passed on orally within the family and the circle of caretakers as well as in printed manuals.

Womb education in 19th-century Japan

19th-century “womb education” included wrapping the pregnant belly with a binder (*hara obi*) in the fifth month and taking particular birthing positions. Much attention was paid to postnatal prescriptions such as remaining in an upright position, called “high pillow” (*takamakura* 高枕), for many days after giving birth and to food taboos (*imi* 忌み). The custom of spending many weeks in a tiny parturition hut or maternity house, referred to as *ubuya* 産屋, was thought to guarantee an easy and safe birth (see Tonomura 2007). The custom was so widespread that by the 19th century, people used the word *ubuya* as a synonym for “childbirth”.

Food regimen included not just single food items but specific combinations of foods. In the popular etiquette manual “A Record of Treasures for Women” (*Onna chōhōki* 女重宝記, 1692) written by the physician Namura Jōhaku 苗村丈伯(?–ca. 1748), perinatal food taboos are divided into several categories. Ignoring restrictions was believed to have both immediate and long-term consequences for the child such as impairments, an immoral character, affliction with childhood diseases including the feared smallpox. Looking more closely at the foods to be avoided, we see

³ In 1896, Tenrikyō had over 3 million followers in Japan, amounting to about 7 % of the population. The high success of the religion led to state repression of the followers and their activities. Today, there are about two million followers worldwide.

⁴ I developed parts of the following discussion at the workshop “Nourishing Values, Feeding Differences, – (Religious) Foodways Compared,” organised by Jörg Albrecht, Thomas Krutak, Bernadett Bigalke and Nikolas Broy and held at the Institute for the Study of Religions, University of Leipzig, 2–4 March 2023.

that the shape or colour of the food item was believed to be linked with the affliction. For example, consuming crab can lead to lateral birth because a crab moves sideways (Lindsey 2007: 128–131). When a pregnant woman would eat persimmon, a yellow-orange fruit, the child was believed to suffer from jaundice after birth. The sources of this kind of knowledge in the early and mid-19th century were, apart from etiquette manuals and medical writing by midwives who were female as well as physicians who were predominantly male, family members and other caretakers.

Interlinked with the health-maintenance system of nourishing life which often amounted to medical prescriptions, the well-being and protection of the mother-to-be and the unborn child was held to be ensured by Buddhist deities. The etiquette manual “A Record of Treasures for Women” introduced above, that the foundress of Tenrikyō may have known since it circulated as a mass-printed book, shows charts of Buddhist deities in charge of the unborn child by month of pregnancy.

Bodhisattva Jizō was believed to be the protector of the unborn baby in the fifth month of gestation. This was the month the child was believed to have a human form and no longer the form of Buddhist ritual implements like the vajra or a monastic’s ringed staff, as during the first to forth months. The fifth month was also when the special binder (*hara obi*) was ceremonially wrapped around the mother’s belly. She then counted as ritually impure and was not supposed to visit a Shinto shrine for some time. The wrapping visibly marked the social, physical and also religious liminality of the mother-to-be. Despite the pregnant woman’s ritual impurity, there were some *kami* believed to protect young mothers, and a set of rituals to ensure safe childbirth (*anzan kigan* 安産祈願) (Göhlert 2014).

Perinatal prescriptions can be characterised as remarkably consistent throughout the centuries. The knowledge imparted in etiquette manuals was intended for the general public, meaning lay Buddhists who were also attending services at Shinto shrines or had someone do on their behalf. Apart from Buddhist monastics, other groups of religious virtuosi offered healing services as well. The cured often revered the more successful male and female healers as living deities (*ikigami* 生き神).

To sum up we can state that the system of health maintenance, interlinked with religion and ritual, was all-encompassing and determined much of the social life of people in Japan. Nakayama Miki, the foundress of Tenrikyō, however, is reported to have forcefully dismissed the conventional ways when assisting in births, proclaiming that the single creator god, Tenri-Ō-nomikoto 天理王命, also referred to as Oyagamisama 親神様 (“God the Parent”), who spoke through her, permitted a departure from the tradition. Followers of the religion state that Tenrikyō was founded in 1838 when Nakayama Miki first had the revelation that she was the “Shrine of God”, but the religion started to spread after she had abolished all prescriptions and traditional customs around and during childbirth in her social context. She referred to this as *obiya yurushi* をびや許し: *obiya* from *ubuya* (“childbirth”), and *yurushi* meaning “to free,

permit". The official Tenrikyō translation of the term into English is "Grant for Safe Childbirth" (Oyasato Institute for the Study of Religion 2010: 118–120).

Obiya yurushi – the grant for safe childbirth – according to the Hagiographic accounts

The hagiographic account of the foundress' life state that Nakayama Miki, affectionately referred to as Oyasama ("Parent"),⁵ first granted it in 1854 to her pregnant daughter Oharu, who had to urgently leave her maternity hut because of an earthquake and went to her mother's homestead to give birth to her first child. Although another earthquake severely damaged the birthing chamber at Miki's homestead on the day Oharu gave birth, Oharu delivered the child without any problems. The final episode of the introduction of the *obiya yurushi* in the hagiography introduces Yuki, the pregnant wife of one of Oyasama's followers. In the hagiography, the cases of Oharu and Yuki are juxtaposed: Whereas Oharu recovered immediately from childbirth, Yuki, who as it turns out had adhered to traditional food taboos, did not. Yuki became very ill but was, in the end, cured by Oyasama (Tenrikyō kyōkai honbu 1986: 36–38). The stories emphasise that the crucial point is submission to God the Parent who created humankind. Humans were supposed to be free from worry. The message is: People should see women's reproductive bodies not as problematic and should not emphasise the danger of pregnancy, birthing, and puerperium. Instead, they should follow Miki's teachings, rely on God, and not have any doubts or fears.

Miki first bestowed the Grant by stroking and blowing on the belly of the pregnant women. Later, Miki imparted the Grant by placing sugar candies into small paper envelopes. This is related in an episode of Miki's life recorded by her followers. The episode, listed as no. 151 in *Anecdotes of Oyasama*, reports on an *obiya yurushi* ceremony that took place when Miki was 87 years old and widely revered as an *ikigami*, a living god with healing powers. The anecdote relates:

“ One of the attendants handed a pair (of scissors) to Her, and Oyasama cut the paper squarely. Then She brought out about one hundred and fifty grams of small sugar candies. She put three candies on each of the three sheets of paper and wrapped them, saying:

'This is for the Grant for Safe Childbirth. A high pillow or a binder is not necessary. And, as this is the season of persimmons, do not be afraid to eat them.' (Tenrikyo Church Headquarters 1976: 123)

The Grant for Safe Childbirth with using sugar candies (*konpeitō*), as well as other "sacred food" (*goku*) bestowed by Tenrikyō followers, was eventually, in 1904, replaced by uncooked rice. The reason for replacing sugar with rice kernels is not entirely clear. However, it seems that at the time state authorities prohibited the distribution of "sacred food" and the Grant for Safe Childbirth in the form of sugar candies as they suspected illicit ingredients in them

⁵ The characters used to write "Oyasama" are interestingly 教祖, which literally mean "founder/foundress of a religion".

(Forbes 2005: 55–80). Apparently, distributing regular rice kernels seems to have been in line with the state regulations although state repression of Tenrikyō continued to impact the life of the Tenrikyō followers.

Tenrikyō believers placed rice kernels on the most sacred place of the main Tenrikyō sanctuary to make the Grant and then packaged and distributed it. Today, those requesting the *obiya yurushi* service from Tenrikyō Headquarters in Tenri, Japan, will receive three small packets of blessed rice that the mother-to-be consumes in three stages through the birthing process and after.

3. Religious innovation and the stabilisation of norms

From the point of view of Tenrikyō, the deviation from the traditional health-maintenance system that includes food taboos was a complete break with the taboo tradition; the break was held to be required by God the Parent and adhering to the taboo tradition was believed to be a sign of not trusting the true God. The establishment of the *obiya yurushi* is undoubtedly seen as one of the decisive, if not defining, moments in the establishment of Tenrikyō. Does this mean that Nakayama Miki and her followers destabilised objectified elite perspectives and managed to have a novel impact on the socio-religious situation, for example by empowering women and enabling their bodily autonomy? In other words: Did Nakayama Miki's rather radical views have a lasting impact on Japanese society, given that many women and families seem to have suffered from the stringent food regimen and birthing practices?⁶

One could also suggest that the ingestion of blessed rice with the full trust in God the Parent could be interpreted as a mere replacement of the traditional “nourishing life” system. The system itself continued to play an important role as the emphasis of the freedom from it only worked with contrasting the new practice commanded of the foundress by the true God, with the ‘superstitious’ food and birthing practices prevalent at the time (and, to some extent, persisting to this day; see Seaman 2009). Because the access to the ritual service of producing and distributing the *obiya yurushi* is highly controlled it remains successfully part of a strategy of self-assertion and management of the religion Tenrikyō in a multireligious environment. Tenrikyō followers emphasise that the freedom from religiously motivated food restrictions is one of the unique characteristics of their religion. However, by concentrating on the traditional Japanese norms as well as on food regulations as an identity marker of the ‘other’ religions in the world, they contribute to the stabilisation of these ‘other’ norms.

To conclude, I argue that part of a global history of religion must address not only contentions within the circle of the intellectual elite and among adherents of different religions but also in commensality and its material culture.

⁶ For a discussion of the related question of women's social empowerment, see Ambros 2013.

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