Spirit Possession, Exorcism, and the Power of Women in the Mid-Heian Period

Brittany Brockman

East Asian Studies Capstone 400

Professor Maus

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“With a look of complete self-confidence on his face an exorcist prepares to expel an evil spirit from his patient. Handing his mace, rosary, and other paraphernalia to the medium who is assisting him, he begins to recite his spells in the special shrill tone that he forces from his throat on such occasions. For all the exorcist’s efforts, the spirit gives no sign of leaving, and...fails to take possession of the medium...the exorcist is worn out. ‘The Guardian Demon is completely inactive,’ he tells his medium. ‘You may leave.’ Then...leans back against a pillar for a nap.”

-The Pillow Book of Sei Shônagon

Japan borrowed heavily from Chinese and Korean culture during the Asuka and Nara periods in the sixth through eighth centuries. Along with the incorporation of ideas from the mainland, the political power of women declines from the end of the Nara period, and this trend extends even into the nineteenth century. The draining effects of the adoption of these ideas on the political and social agency of women in the Mid-Heian period can be seen in the beliefs about spirit possession and the ritual of exorcism used to cure it. Heian women were not helpless, however, and there is evidence in spirit possession of the remnants of a powerful native shamanistic tradition as well as the ability of women to protest against social constraints such as emotional repression, as well as neglect by husbands resulting from the polygamous marriage system.

The corresponding ritual of exorcism, which incorporates many elements borrowed and assimilated from the mainland is representative of male power, and demonstrates the response of men to the women’s protest. This was largely an attempt to maintain the social status quo by allowing the protesting woman to express herself by means of the spirit, and subsequently

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subduing that possessing spirit and curing the victim. This process allows for emotional release of the victim and possessor, but the resulting exorcism of the spirit does not directly increase the power of women. However, by calling attention to the neglect or injustice they are suffering, women could force the men to react. Though the men might not be obligated to change their ways in response to the spirit possession, if the men were to ignore the protest made by the woman in this way, the results could be very damaging to the reputation of the man, and potentially fatal to the woman. Men are also often seen as the underlying cause of women’s dissatisfaction, which gives them power over women in that their actions can determine whether the woman is happy or not. Women were thus encouraged to act in a way that would be pleasing to men so that their husband would not neglect them.

Religious syncretism and the state of the power of women during the Mid-Heian period can be seen in the Heian court’s religious beliefs about spirit possession which derive from Shinto and native shamanistic beliefs, and the corresponding rituals of exorcism, which were almost always conducted by Buddhist priests. The type of spirit possession I discuss in this paper is that of the vengeful spirit, which did not come into being in the way that it is seen in the mid-Heian period until the eighth century. Given the prominence to which spirit possession of this type rose, there must have been a connection between the incorporation of foreign ideas which elicited a change of social structure and the incorporation of foreign religions, and the ability of nobles, particularly noblewomen to express themselves and their power politically and socially. Through beliefs about spirit possession and rituals of exorcism in the mid-Heian period, we can see how the influence of mainland ideas and religious syncretism affected the status and power of women. In this paper I argue that although the incorporation of religion and ideas from China and Korea reduced the political and social power of women, spirit possession and exorcism
practices allowed women to assert their power over men in the highly patriarchal social system of the mid-Heian period. Through spirit possession women gained the social agency to voice complaints that would be inappropriate under normal circumstances. Those who performed exorcisms were mainly Buddhist priests, who used a mix of Buddhism and native religion to attempt to exorcise the spirit of discontent from women.

In this paper I will first discuss some of the important scholarship on the history of Japanese religion, and closely examine where the line between the indigenous religious practices and the religions introduced from the mainland can be drawn. I will then examine the status and political power of women and how it changes from the Nara period into the Heian period along with the incorporation of mainland ideas and religions. I will examine how that incorporation is visible in the religious components of the exorcism ritual called yorigi-tō in which a male ascetic uses a medium, who is usually a young woman, to draw out the spirit, identify it, and subdue it. I begin with an explanation of the ancient indigenous practice of female shamanism, which I argue had an influence on the use of female mediums in the exorcism ritual. Then I review the influence of religions and ideas about social structure from the mainland which includes the background of the Buddhist ritual of exorcism. After that, I will discuss how syncretism and the changing power of women can be seen in ritual of exorcism. Finally, I will examine the ways in which spirit possession was used by women in the Heian period through examples from the tale of Genji.

State of the Field

One of the questions scholars of Japanese religion are most concerned in regard to the Heian period is how the different religious systems introduced to Japan before and during the
period were either assimilated into or influenced the native religion, and which religion emerged as dominant. Scholars use different methods to discuss the mixture of traditions present in Japan at that time. Some treat all of them as a system that is inextricably connected, and some pull the components apart to analyze them individually. For many years the early scholarship on Japanese religion tended to focus on Shinto or the native religion and Buddhism separately, and tended to treat them as though they were not connected. The book *Japanese Religion* edited by Hori Ichirō and others is an example of this method; each chapter is on a different religion present in Japan.² When using this method there is an inevitable loss of context, and a skewed view of the Japanese religious system emerges, which does not account for the Japanese assimilation of ideas from other countries for as long as there has been contact with other cultures.

While this approach which views Shinto, or the native religious practices, separately from Buddhism makes the topics easier to handle and more coherent, it diminishes the understanding of how the traditions work together. This trend in the scholarship has declined as more scholars are convinced that the religions should be studied in context. Within the current research there is much more focus on the interaction between the religions present in Japan, and scholars are researching into how they became so closely intertwined. This method of looking at the religions in context is the approach that scholars such as Kuroda Toshio, Anesaki Masaharu, Ivan Morris, and Allan Grapard have used in their studies.

Anesaki Masaharu in his *History of Japanese Religion* exemplifies this approach and looks closely at the influences of religion and superstition on the lives of the nobility in the

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Heian period. He suggests that the main distinction made in the Heian period was not between the different religious traditions, but between the intellectual mind and the religious or sentimental heart. He proposes that the overemphasis on the sentimental aspect of life as well as religion and superstition caused the Heian nobility to become weak and ultimately led to their fall from power. In this society that had such strongly held beliefs about the supernatural, claims of spirit possession were taken seriously among the nobility.

Scholars who consider the synthesis of religions in historical context, have also questioned why, in Japan, religious elements that are seemingly contradictory have been combined in ways that often appear arbitrary to scholars. Ivan Morris, who also employed a syncretistic view of religion in his book, *The World of the Shining Prince*, emphasized his belief that the religions were so completely assimilated that the people of the court made what would appear to be illogical choices if viewed from a separatist standpoint. Ivan Morris argued that the synthesis of the religions remained eclectic, and that although the traditions became intertwined, they did not become a coherent set of beliefs that people of the period could understand. He writes that “there was no idea that the acceptance of one set of beliefs might preclude adherence to another, or that either was incompatible with a mass of complex superstitions deriving both from native tradition and Chinese folklore.” He gives as an example the use of Buddhist priests and ascetics combined with mediums to exorcise spirits, which he believes to be products of the native religion. He argues that if logic were followed, they would have used Shinto priests to

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4 Ibid., 135.
perform the exorcisms, but since they used the priests of another religion he writes that they must not have had any feelings of exclusivity among the religions.⁶

Allan Grapard approaches the question differently than Morris by first looking at the way in which the religious traditions became integrated into a complex system, whose main function was to “protect the state—that is, the imperial lineage and the aristocratic families supporting it.”⁷ According to Grapard, the resulting rituals combined foreign and indigenous aspects into a system that was ideologically coherent to the Japanese aristocracy. He also identifies a trend from the mid-Heian period in which the rituals that protected the state were seen as also being effective for individuals because the state was likened to a human body and problems of the state to illnesses. The Heian nobility began to employ the public rituals privately, to benefit themselves, and the result was a complex set of rituals and restrictions of the mind and body.⁸ This system that Morris argued was not logical, but stemmed from the Japanese ability to assimilate ideas that were otherwise antithetical and to disregard incongruities in doctrine, was, according to Grapard, actually highly integrated and would have made logical sense to the Heian nobility who used it.

Another topic which has been addressed recently by religious historians is the meaning of the word ‘Shinto’ during the different periods of Japanese history. According to Joseph M. Kitagawa, early scholars such as Muraoka Tsunetsugu claimed that Shinto as a religion existed uninterrupted in Japan since ancient times. Kitagawa wrote in an article published in 1988, that “Shinto scholars claim that not only religious but also all communal and cultural features of early

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⁸ Ibid., 4.
Japan—at least those features apparent before the massive introduction in the fifth and sixth centuries...may be considered the domain of Shinto.”⁹ Kitagawa also argues that “the term [Shinto]…originated only after the introduction of Buddhism in order to differentiate between the indigenous cults and the newly transplanted religion.”¹⁰ More recent scholarship contests this view, and Nelly Naumann argues that there were “a great number of small, unconnected cultic or religious entities…but…there [was] no coherent ‘religion’ binding them together.”¹¹ Naumann avoids using the term ‘Shinto’ in her work when referring to the indigenous religious practices of Japan in order to avoid confusion with the religious system of Shinto, which did not develop until the Heian period, and was influenced by foreign religious practices.¹²

According to Allan G. Grapard, the term ‘Shinto’ may refer to either “various phenomena in which one can see a set of preliterate and highly locale-specific creeds and practices that have remained virtually unchanged through the centuries, and a set of sophisticated interpretations of the human experience,”¹³ or to

an elite tradition painstakingly built during the Heian period; this tradition is grounded in a few shrines which may or may not be related to the other tradition and was in constant interaction with the continental traditions of Buddhism, Taoism, and Confucianism. It served, among other things, the political purposes of an aristocracy that staked its

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¹⁰ Ibid., 229.
¹² Ibid., 64.
legitimacy in the realm of symbols and rituals and that wanted to establish a cultural identity separate from China and Korea.\textsuperscript{14}

This second interpretation means that ‘Shinto’ does not actually designate the indigenous practices of the Japanese people, and in order to avoid confusion, when discussing early Japanese religious beliefs the term should be clearly defined or avoided.

In the Heian period the term “Shinto” was not commonly used, though it exists in some sources. Kitagawa also argues that “the term itself…originated only after the introduction of Buddhism in order to differentiate between the indigenous cults and the newly transplanted religion.”\textsuperscript{15} According to Naumann, the term “Shinto” was first used in the Nihon shoki to refer to the cult of the emperor as a god, rather than to an indigenous religion in contrast to Buddhism. Naumann claims that “‘Shinto’ as a word designating a coherent religious system” was not introduced until the fourteenth century.\textsuperscript{16}

It is clear from the work of these scholars that the term ‘Shinto’ as it was used in pre-modern Japan did not refer to the highly varied, truly indigenous form of religious practice in Japan, but to the state’s reworking of the worship of indigenous deities, along with foreign religions, to support the legitimacy of the emperor. Therefore, in order to avoid confusion in this discussion about the syncretism of religious systems and its influence on the power of women, I will not use the term ‘Shinto,’ but rather refer to the native or indigenous religious practices of Japan. I will discuss the native religious practices relating to shamanism and the relationship

\textsuperscript{15} Ibid., 229.
\textsuperscript{16} Nelly Naumann, “The State Cult of the Nara and Early Heian Periods” in A New History of Shinto, ed. John Breen and Mark Teeuwen (West Sussex: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010), 64.
between female shamanistic traditions and the, usually, female medium used in Buddhist exorcism ritual in the mid-Heian period.

In *The Catalpa Bow*, Carmen Blacker treats Shamanic practices and spirit possession as operating on the same principles, and makes a strong connection between ancient Japanese female shamans and the mediums which became popular later, especially in exorcisms of the Heian period. In her view a shaman is anyone who has the ability to bridge the gap between this world and another world. Not all scholars believe that the concepts of shamans and spirit possessions are compatible, however, and some anthropologists, including Mericea Eliade and Luc de Heuch, even see the two as mutually exclusive. Doris G. Bargen sees the need to distinguish between the two traditions, and Ioan M. Lewis acknowledges that there are distinct differences but emphasizes the shared characteristics of the two which he sees as being varieties of “ecstatic religion.” In this paper I will use the view of Blacker that shamans and mediums work in the same way to argue that the mediums used in the ritual of exorcism during the mid-Heian period derived from the ancient female shamanic tradition in Japan that was stripped of most of its power by the incorporation of religious practices from the mainland.

The Heian Capital/Nobility

The Heian period is often viewed by scholars of Japanese history to be a time of inward reflection in Japanese cultural history, and many elements borrowed from China and Korea during the Nara period were assimilated and became integral parts of Japanese culture during that time. Among the most prominent and influential concepts introduced from the mainland was Buddhism, which, according to the *Nihon shoki* was introduced in 552. In the early Heian

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Period there was a sharp decline in the number of government sponsored voyages to China for Buddhist priests until they were suspended altogether. During the process of synthesis that began in the Nara period and reached a highly advanced level in the Heian period, the major religious traditions of Japan and those of the mainland including Shinto, Buddhism, Taoism and Confucianism, blended together in an almost uninhibited manner. This produced a complex system of religious syncretism in which all of the traditions intermingled to the point that the origins of many customs are difficult to trace because they incorporate aspects of several traditions in what, to us today, may be unexpected combinations.

The Heian period was a time of great refinement among the nobility, and distinctly Japanese tastes in art and literature can be seen in this period. Women of the aristocracy participated in society as artists, and as patrons of the arts and religion in many ways. However, their influence on politics was severely limited in comparison with earlier times in the Nara period and before. In ancient Japan the shaman queen Himiko ruled over much of the central part of the main island, and was even recognized as ruler by China. I will discuss her in later in the section on female shamanism. In this section I will outline the history of the political power of women during the Nara period, and the gradual decline of women in positions of power in the court. Then I will lay out the status of the women in the Heian period and discuss how they still exercised power socially, though politically the majority of noblewomen held very little power.

In the Nara period, during the nearly two centuries between the accession of Empress Suiko in 592 and the death of Empress Shōtoku in 770, men and women reigned in equal numbers and for approximately the same amount of time. According to Fukutō Sanae, to find women in power for such an extended period is unusual in pre-modern societies, and may be
unique to Japan. The empresses who reigned during those centuries may have been put in power provisionally, when the heir to the throne was only a child or there was uncertainty about who the proper successor was, but these women were able to assert authority equal to that of a male emperor. For example, Empress Jitō (who was at the time an imperial consort) fought with her husband in the Jinshin War, which was a battle for succession between the emperor Tenmu and his nephew in 671-672. She became Empress in 690 and moved the capital which “in effect establish[ed] the foundation of the bureaucratic ritsuryō (penal and administrative codes) state.” Recent scholarship also suggests that she forcefully took the throne and removed those opposed to or in competition with her.

In the seventh century female officials called miyabito also served at the imperial court, mainly as a system of communication between the court council and the emperor or empress, and they continued to serve in this function until the eighth century. Also, in court rituals men and women, though segregated, did nearly equivalent tasks. This attitude toward the incorporation of both men and women at court would begin to change as ideas about social structure from China began to gather strength and influence the mindset of the Japanese nobility. “Under the strong influence of rationalistic Confucian ethics and universalistic Buddhist doctrines, in 645 the Taika Reform first established the empire under the strong centralized authoritarian rule of one emperor over all Japan.” These foreign-influenced reforms did not immediately affect the

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19 Ibid., 15.
20 Ibid., 17.
21 Ibid., 17.
22 Ibid., 18.
power of women in politics, but the as Confucian ideas were adopted and put into practice
cWomen’s political agency was slowly usurped by the men at court, and would eventually lead to
the exclusion of women from political power.

The Empress Kōgyoku (594-661) ascended the throne for a second time in 655, after the
Taika reforms. Her first rule had shamanic undertones, as exemplified by the great drought in
642. According to the Nihongi, during this drought Buddhist, Taoist, and traditional prayers had
not been successful in producing rain. However, when Empress Kōgyoku made a pilgrimage to
the Minabuchi River and prayed, it began to rain immediately.\textsuperscript{24} During her second reign as
empress, after the enactment of the Taika reforms, she did not act as a shamanic figure.

At the end of the eighth century the situation began to change when the political power of
the empresses declined, and after the reign of Empress Shōtoku which ended in 770, no women
were allowed to accede to the throne. This is due to nature of the rule of this empress, and the
fact that she kept as her closest councilor, the Buddhist monk Dōkyō, who was not well liked at
court. The other councilors and officials saw that the monk had a great deal of control over the
empress. What finally caused a law to be made that precluded women from becoming
sovereigns was the fact the monk Dōkyō wanted to become emperor himself, and that the
empress was willing to allow this to happen. The attempt of the supposedly holy man to grab
power did not sit well with the nobility, and the empress was believed to be weak for trusting this
monk. The perceived weakness of Empress Shōtoku was then projected onto all women and
laws were passed which prevented women from coming to power as the head of state. The
responsibilities of female government officials also declined after this incident. The

\textsuperscript{24} Hori Ichirō. \textit{Folk Religion in Japan: Continuity and Change}. eds. Joseph M. Kitagawa and Alan L. Miller (Tokyo:
University of Tokyo Press, 1968), 198.
accumulated strength of the Confucian tradition imported from China several centuries before may have also had an effect on the establishment of the law barring women from the throne. Emperor Saga’s imperial consort “instituted a number of Chinese-inspired reforms with an emphasis on virtue, and there was a renewed emphasis on the spouse of the emperor in accordance with Chinese notions of how each gender had its respective roles.”

During the early Heian period women’s status further declined and ceremonies in which they had once stood side by side with men were segregated and importance was placed on the men’s ceremony. For example, in the New Year’s salutations ceremony the empress would have stood next to the emperor and received greetings with him on the first day of the new year in earlier times. However, after the time of Empress Kachiko the empress received New Year’s greetings on the second day of the new year, and only from certain people, which followed the Chinese tradition more closely. In the ceremony all of the female attendants at court paid respects to the empress, which was intended to symbolize that she was the most powerful of the women at court. Another example of the declining power of women at court was the promotion ceremony, which had originally been held with both men and women seated together in rows, but in the early ninth century this also changed. The men had their promotion ceremony on the original day designated for it, but the women’s ceremony was the day after. The women’s ceremony also became an empty observance because after 810 C.E. female officials who held state administrative responsibilities were replaced by male secretaries, and female officials only served the emperor in minor affairs. As Fukitō argues, “the responsibilities at court, which had

26 Ibid., 22.
formerly been executed by both men and women, were now divided: the political authority rested with men, while the private, including the sexual, rested with women.”

Despite this division of power, women did not disappear completely from the political realm after Empress Shōshi’s death. They continued to exert influence over the state by other means, especially by being kokumo (the mother of the emperor). In the second half of the ninth century the imperial consort regained some power. In 842 the crown prince was deposed by Fujiwara pressure, but the imperial decree adds that this decision was in agreement with the imperial dowager Tachibana no Kachiko, who was the crown prince’s grandmother. Her involvement indicates that she gained actual control over the imperial house after the death of Emperor Saga. “the emperor’s mother assumed a new status as mother of the nation and came to take power behind the throne, a position that became even more powerful in the case of child emperors.” Therefore, even though women could not ascend the throne, imperial consorts could still exercise influence over the affairs of the emperor from the position of kokumo, who was the mother or grandmother of the emperor.

The kokumo had the power to influence the selection of imperial consorts, which were instrumental in determining the future prestige and power of aristocratic families. The families that were able to install their daughters as imperial consorts could claim power by virtue of relation to the imperial family. The practice of matrilocality in marriage during the Heian period also meant that the family of the consort had direct control over the upbringing of any future

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28 Ibid., 23.
29 Ibid., 26.
emperor born to the consort.\textsuperscript{30} Using this method of marriage politics the Fujiwara family gained
great power and the patriarchs of the family were able to effectively rule the nation by becoming
the regents of child emperors and then \textit{kampaku}, or permanent regents, so that the role of the
emperor was largely relegated to ceremony. In one instance in the mid tenth century, however,
all of the crown princes and retired emperors died, leaving only the \textit{kokumo} to act as head of the
imperial household and care for the child emperor Suzaku until he reached adulthood.\textsuperscript{31} The
\textit{kokumo} also had influence over who was appointed to the court and who would be successor to
the throne.

Only a small group of women who became influential imperial consorts or \textit{kokumo}
represent the height of women’s power in the political sphere during the Heian period. Even the
women directly beneath them in rank did not have any significant individual influence over
politics. Despite the great reduction in political power, women in the Heian period did still have
many rights under the law which would be denied them in later centuries. Ivan Morris even goes
so far as to argue that “it is only since the Second World War that the position of Japanese
women has become better than that of their ancestors [in the Heian period].” Women in the
Heian period were allowed to own and inherit property, and many upper class women were in
charge of running their own household and estate. Inheritances allowed women to gain some
economic independence, and a few high ranking and important women of the aristocracy even
had their own administrative councils to look after their property and personal affairs for them.\textsuperscript{32}

\textsuperscript{30} Fukitō Sanae and Takeshi Watanabe, “From Female Sovereign to Mother of the Nation: Women and the
Government in the Heian Period.” In \textit{Heian Japan, Centers and Peripheries}, ed.Mikael Adolphson, Edward
Kamens, and Stacie Matsumoto (Honolulu: University of Hawai‘i Press, 2007), 22.
\textsuperscript{31} Ibid., 27.
\textsuperscript{32} Ivan Morris, \textit{The World of the Shining Prince: Court Life in Ancient Japan} (London, Great Britain: Oxford
Wives also stayed in their parents’ home for at least the early part of their marriage, so they did not have to worry about being treated poorly by their in-laws as would happen in later times.

Moreover, as early as 701, the Taiho code specifically made wife beating illegal and a husband was forbidden to kill his wife unless he caught her in the act of adultery.\cite{33} Morris suggests that one reason for this comparatively favorable position of women was the importance of marriage politics which I mentioned earlier, whereby a family could gain power by marrying daughters into distinguished families and then raising the children themselves. The desire to have daughters who could marry upwards far more easily led to greater prestige for women compared to later medieval times.\cite{34} Morris also argues that the position of women during the Heian period was not as unfortunate as feminist scholars have attempted to make it appear. He writes that women were not expected to humbly see their husbands off, and that they were educated enough in to hold their own against men in the areas of calligraphy, poetry and music, which were the main categories required for a woman to succeed in the life she was expected to lead.\cite{35}

In the *Pillow Book* Sei Shonagon discusses the differences between women at the imperial court and those who stay at home. She writes that the women at court walked about and saw people of all ranks face to face, without hiding behind screens as women who lived at home were obliged to do. She also notes that because of this, some men thought that women at court were “frivolous and wicked.”\cite{36} She also dislikes women who stay only in their houses, “faithfully serving their husbands,” and even though “they have not a single exciting prospect” in

\begin{itemize}
\item[34] Ibid., 207.
\item[35] Ibid., 209.
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their lives, believe themselves to be happy.\textsuperscript{37} From this description women at court seem to have more freedom if not more power than women who lived only in their homes.

Despite the comparative power of the highest ranking court ladies, the majority of aristocratic women were not at court, but lived in mansions and were sequestered and surrounded by heavy curtains and screens so that they would not be seen. Although the Heian nobility led a generally sedentary lifestyle, women in particular were closed off and rarely ventured outside. When visitors arrived women would sit behind screens of state which hid them from view. The atmosphere in which Heian noble women was both physically and emotionally stifling, because great emphasis was placed on behaving in a way that was aesthetically pleasing to others. Even poetry exchanged between lovers was not generally a true heartfelt expression of love, but was carefully constructed to conform to the proper rituals of poetic exchange.\textsuperscript{38} Heian noble women also likely suffered from the monotony of their sedentary and sequestered lifestyle, except for court ladies their time was spent on small distractions and waiting for visitors or messages.\textsuperscript{39} Due to the practice of polygamy women who were not primary wives lived in a somewhat unstable state. Jealousy was one of the worst emotions a woman could show in the Heian period, and it was discouraged strongly. However, under the inequitable double standard of polygamy, in which men could have multiple partners while women were expected to remain faithful to one husband, women developed these feelings of jealousy against each other.

In the society of the Heian period the position of women was undoubtedly lower than that of men. According to Confucian values, women were to be under the three obediences of father,

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\item \textsuperscript{37} Sei Shōnagon, \textit{The Pillow Book}, Translated by Ivan Morris (Kingsport: Kingsport Press, 1967), 39.
\item \textsuperscript{38} Doris G. Bargen, \textit{A Woman’s Weapon: Spirit Possession in The Tale of Genji} (Honolulu: University of Hawai‘i Press, 1997), 5.
\item \textsuperscript{39} Ivan Morris, \textit{The World of the Shining Prince: Court Life in Ancient Japan} (London, Great Britain: Oxford University Press, 1964), 211.
\end{itemize}
husband, and eldest son. So, within the family hierarchy, women were certainly in an inferior position. In Buddhist doctrine the idea of women’s inferiority was reinforced through the teaching of the “five disadvantages” of women.\textsuperscript{40} Morris writes, “however worthy her conduct in the present life might be, she had no chance of being reborn into any of the higher categories without having first passed through an incarnation as a man.”\textsuperscript{41} Therefore, no matter what a woman did in this life it was thought to be impossible for her to attain enlightenment. The best she could hope for was to be reborn as a man in her next life, preferably in Amida’s paradise. This meant that women had more negative karma than men by nature, and were therefore naturally inferior to men. When combined the teachings of Buddhism and Confucianism gave the Japanese people the mindset that women were socially and spiritually inferior to men. Under these assumptions of inferiority, women lost much of their direct means of asserting power, such as through politics or shamanic powers. Instead they had to develop other ways of asserting themselves and letting their needs and desires be known. One of the methods by which women attempted to assert themselves was through spirit possession.

**Spirit Possession**

There were several types of spirit possession commonly believed in during the Heian period, including foxes and other animals believed to have magical powers, spirits that were non-human, and the spirits of people who could be either dead or living. It is this last type which I will focus on in because we can see social conflict most clearly through the interaction of those involved in the possession of one person by another’s spirit. These vengeful spirits of people


\textsuperscript{41} Ibid., 205.
were called *onryō* or *goryō*, and are featured as main causes of catastrophe in many works of Heian literature, in addition to causing problems for individual people.

Spirit possession did not appear in the way of angry or vengeful ghosts until the eighth century. Perhaps, even though the ideas of Confucianism and Buddhism introduced from the mainland took certain aspects of power away from women, especially in the political sphere, they opened up a new way for women to voice their protests or complaints against the system. Most women could not directly affect the social order, but because of the rise in popularity of spirit possession during the Heian a new route for attempting to change their situation opened up.

This method was not entirely successful, however, and in general after the exorcist had the spirit identify itself and its complaint there was little else done about it. Though perhaps this simple airing of grievances allowed for some psychological healing, and even if the man who caused the problems did nothing else about it, others would at least know what had happened. The idea that the restless and wronged spirits of the dead could come back to harass the person who wronged them, their family, and even the entire nation if they were powerful enough, is well documented in sources from this period. When a major disaster such as fire, earthquake, or epidemic occurred, the immediate course of action for the court was to order the religious authorities, especially the *onmyōji* diviners of the Yin-Yang Bureau, and also powerful Buddhist priests to discover the cause of the disaster. The cause was often found to be the vengeful spirit of a person who was powerful in their lifetime, but died after having been wronged or otherwise poorly treated. The priests would then perform rituals to placate the spirit of the dead person.
These spirits appear to have their origin in the native religious beliefs according to which the spirits of the dead became part of the *kami*, and were to be revered and worshiped by the community. If these spirits were not properly treated by purification rituals they could become angry and turn into vengeful spirits rather than benevolent deities. In order to appease the vengeful *kami* proper purification and pacification rituals had to be performed.42 When Buddhism became incorporated into this Japanese idea by fusing with it the ideas of karma and the Buddhist belief that if a person was excessively troubled or angry when they died their karma and therefore their afterlife would be strongly affected by that emotional state. This influenced the belief that a person who was wronged or passionately angry and died may have accumulated strong attachments and negative karma which could cause the person to return as a vengeful spirit to cause harm to individuals, groups, or even the entire nation.

The belief that a person’s soul could detach from his or her body while that person is still alive, and possess or molest another person, which was common in the Heian period, has its roots mainly in the native Japanese beliefs about souls. According to Masaharu Anesaki,

“the soul was believed to be composed of two parts, one mild, refined, and happy, the other rough, brutal, and raging…The former cares for its possessor’s health and prosperity, while the other performs adventurous tasks or even malicious deeds. Either of them can leave the body and appear to the astonishment of its possessor himself.”43

Though it was not necessarily believed that every human being possessed this dual soul, powerful and distinguished people were certainly believed to have them.

Thus, during the Heian period it was believed that the adventurous and violent part of the soul of those people who had strong negative emotional feelings toward another was believed to leave the body it belonged to in order to harm the object of their anger or jealousy. Since the spirit was not believed to be under the control of the person it belonged to, but rather to act of its own accord, the person believed to be the origin of the spirit was not held responsible for the harm caused to the victim.\textsuperscript{44} The idea that a person’s soul could actually possess another person, however, does not appear until the ninth and tenth centuries. Bargen interprets this development to be the result of Heian aristocrats’, particularly women aristocrats’, “intense interest in private matters of the psyche that supplemented when it did not replace political and religious concerns.”\textsuperscript{45}

**Exorcism Background**

In the Heian court the most common method of exorcism of a possessing spirit was \textit{yorigitō}. The defining feature of \textit{yorigitō} is the use of both a medium and an ascetic to make contact with spirits, either deities or molesting spirits. In this ritual of exorcism a child, either boy or girl, or a young woman was used as a medium into which a Buddhist priest forced the possessing spirit. The spirit would then communicate to the priest through the medium, and the priest would begin to subdue the spirit using his knowledge of esoteric Buddhism and magic spells. Once the spirit was brought into submission it would be dismissed by the priest and, hopefully, bother the person no more.

**Ancient Female Shaman**

\textsuperscript{44} Doris G. Bargen, \textit{A Woman’s Weapon: Spirit Possession in The Tale of Genji} (Honolulu: University of Hawai‘i Press, 1997), 10.
\textsuperscript{45} Ibid., 19.
There exists a long tradition of belief in the power or ability of women to be possessed by spirits in Japan. Though, it should be noted that the victims of spirit possession not exclusively female, and during the Heian period there were believed to be vengeful spirits of both men and women. Among the oldest traditions in Japan is the female shaman who calls on a kami to possess her and communicate to the people through her. Archeological evidence dating back to the Yayoi period has been found in the form of haniwa that depict female figures carrying implements, including magatama beads and a mirror with bells attached to it, and wearing a distinctive head-dress. Another depiction of the female shaman may appear in chapter 14 of the Kojiki. According to Saigō Nobutsuna the passage describing Amaterasu is not about the goddess herself, but rather a medium possessed by her. This figure carried quivers full of arrows as well as a bow. Many of the accoutrements of the female shaman are all incorporated into the religion of Shinto, when it began to take a recognizable shape in light of more organized and formal religious traditions from the continent. Another female shaman of note in early Japan was Queen Himiko, who ruled over more than 30 states from 180 A.D. to about 248 A.D. According to Hori she was put in power by the people while only about 15 years old, during a time of civil war, so that fighting would cease. She appears in Chinese records of Japan from those times and was recognized as the ruler of Japan. According to these accounts she from a cloistered palace with only one male attendant to transmit her words to the people.

In addition to these, there are many other records of female shamans acting as the mouthpiece of a local kami and thereby prophesying and transmitting other information to the people of the locality during ritual spirit possession. It is not clear how the medium was able to

47 Ibid., 105.
achieve the spirit possessed trance, whether she could do so by her own power or required an outside stimulus provided by another. Nakayama Tarō has come to the conclusion that these ancient mediums threw themselves into a possessed state by means of “violent magical dancing” and the singing of invocations.⁴⁹ According to Blacker there are surviving seasonal rights in which the medium relies completely on a member of an ascetic order to induce the trance. This remnant may, however, have been a result of the rise in the belief in the power of Buddhist esoteric practices that occurred during the Nara period, so I am inclined to believe Nakayama’s point of view.

In these ancient rituals there was also an interrogator who oversaw the ritual, questioned the deity possessing the shaman, and dealt with any unforeseen dangers resulting from contact with the spirits. The deity possessing the medium would address the questions of the interrogator, which usually revolved around information necessary for agricultural production. These rites were not performed only by the common people, however. In both the Kojiki and the Nihon Shoki there are accounts of the Emperor’s consort acting as a medium in a ritual that was conducted by the chief minister and in which the Emperor himself participated as a musician. The question put to the kami was not related to the harvest, but to the advisability of the launch of an attack on an aboriginal people.⁵⁰

Shamanesses also often communicated with the dead. According to Bargen their most important appearances were at rituals for a dead sovereign’s temporary interment, “where they

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⁵⁰ Ibid., 110.
presided over spirit-summoning rituals (*tamafuri*) in which they exercised their power to transfer the imperial spirit to his successor.\(^5^1\)

In these ancient shamanic women there appears to be the beginnings of the belief in the power or susceptibility of women to be possessed by spirits, and their ability to act as mediums who can give voice to those spirits. These shamanesses are also directly related to the mediums employed by the Buddhist ascetics during most exorcisms in the Heian period, who were not truly shamanesses, but children both male and female, young girls and sometimes ladies of the court; all of whom had no special training.

The influence of the strongly patriarchal Chinese social system, Confucianism, was detrimental to the influence of the female shamans. After the Taika reforms the *miko* were stigmatized and their power decreased, and eventually split into two kinds. The *miko* who still performed trances and prophesied were usually of the lower class and were often looked down on by the nobility. The *miko* who hailed from the upper class became close to merely entertainers and performers at Shrines, who danced and played music during rituals. According to Bargen, “At the time of *Genji*, the female role in Shinto rituals still retained some of its shamanistic importance, but Buddhism allotted men the greater authority in the drama of religious life.”\(^5^2\)

*Buddhism*

The strengthening of the influences of mainland culture caused the weakening of the influence of shamanesses, and increased the power of the practitioners of esoteric Buddhism,


\(^{5^2}\) Ibid., 11.
especially the Tendai and Shingon sects in the Heian period, as well as *yamabushi* (mountain ascetics), who were often practitioners of a mix of esoteric Buddhism and indigenous religion. These ascetics lived alone in the mountains to practice austerities and were considered to have great spiritual power because of this. In the *yorigito* ritual, these priests and ascetics were the men who would perform the actual exorcism with the assistance of the medium.

According to Taikō Yamasaki, esoteric Buddhist practices were present very early in introduction of Buddhism to Japan. They arrived as miscellaneous practices and were easily assimilated into the native traditions because of the immediate benefits they were claimed to have for those who could use them.53 Yamasaki writes, “the powerful aristocratic clans of Japan were concerned with Buddhism primarily as a new and potent magic paralleling shamanistic beliefs and practices already used to achieve prosperity and perpetuate their rule.”54 Therefore, from very early on in the incorporation of Buddhism into Japan, esoteric practices mixed with the native tradition.

In the Nara period six Buddhist sects acquired great power over politics of the court, and were corrupt and oppressive to the ruling aristocrats. This helped to precipitate the move of the capital from Nara to Heian-kyō (present day Kyoto) which marked the beginning of the Heian period, in order to free the capital from the dominating force of the Buddhist sects based there. During the Heian period two sects come to prominence: Tendai and Shingon. Both of these were founded in the Nara period by Buddhist monks who had traveled to China by imperial sanction in search of the true Buddhism, and each brought back the teachings of a different Chinese sect. According to Byron Earhart these men were also committed to establishing a distinctly Japanese

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54 Ibid., 23.
form of Buddhism, and propagate it in a form that would provide Buddhist teachings to all the
Japanese people.  

The Shingon sect was founded by Kūkai (774-835), who was known posthumously as
Kobo Daishi. Kūkai brought back the teachings of the Chen-yen sect of China, which was the
transplant of Tantric Buddhism from India. The meaning of Chen-yen, and also its Japanese
pronunciation: Shingon, is “true word,” meaning that the sect employs esoteric practices which
use mystic words and sounds. Esoteric practices are defined as highly symbolic and even secret
formulas and practices which arose from the Tantric Buddhist tradition of India. Upon his
return to Japan Kukai established his monastery far from the other Buddhist sects in Nara and
from the new capital of Heian-Kyo, on the secluded Mt. Koya. Despite the rather remote
location the people of Japan soon began to seek it out in order to learn the esoteric practices that
instill power in those who could use them. There was soon a great demand at court for the
esoteric rituals of Shingon especially for healing and childbirth. These rites spread and came to
be practiced by all Buddhist priests because of the high demand not only at court, but also among
the common people.

In the Tendai sect, founded by Saicho (762-822), also posthumously known as Dengyo
Daishi, was not as concerned with esoteric practices, though it considered esoteric Buddhism to
be an important tradition. The Tendai sect gained more power than Shingon over politics in the
capital, especially since Saicho established its center on Mt. Hiei, which is Northeast of the
capital of Heian-Kyo. It also produced many of the later Buddhist developments in Japan. The
main teaching of Tendai emphasized the importance of the Lotus Sutra, and the idea that all

56 Ibid., 79.
57 Ibid., 82.
forms of life are capable of attaining Buddahood. This teaching became widely known among the Japanese, and even expanded during the medieval period to encompass the natural world, which shows the incorporation of Japanese nature worship.\textsuperscript{58} Over time Tendai also acquired the influence of Shingon esoteric practices, which were popular among the people.

Both of these sects were interested making Buddhism Japanese, and worked within the existing system of beliefs to accomplish this. For example, both locations for the central temples were chosen only after consulting with and obtaining the permission of the local \textit{kami}. Another shared characteristic of the schools was the focus on gaining immediate benefits from Buddhism, which caused the popularity of the esoteric spells of Shingon. “All through the Nara and Heian periods, almost all the sects of Buddhism aimed at tangible rewards in this world and they mainly depended upon incantation and magic”\textsuperscript{59} In the process of incorporating Buddhism they influenced the social system and modes of thinking to some extent.

Another way of viewing the assimilation is through the idea, popular at during the early days of Buddhism in Japan, that the kami were unenlightened beings, and needed to be saved rather than gods who should be revered. In \textit{A History of Japanese Religion}, Sekiyo Shimode discusses the view that the native kami are in need of salvation and that this idea argued “the absolute superiority of buddhas over the deities.”\textsuperscript{60} This form of assimilation has the effect of putting Buddhist doctrines to the forefront, though the native beliefs are still there underneath the surface. The overall structure of religion among the nobility became Buddhist, though there were elements of all the religious traditions. Since the Buddhist doctrines from the mainland taught that women’s karma was inferior to men’s karma, and that it was impossible for a person

\textsuperscript{58} Byron Earhart, \textit{Japanese Religion: Unity and Diversity} 3\textsuperscript{rd} ed. (Belmont: Wadsworth Publishing Co.),85.
\textsuperscript{59} Ibid., 86.
to attain enlightenment if incarnated as a woman, the position of women both religiously and socially. By the Heian period phenomenon of honji-suijaku, which is the belief that the native kami are actually trace manifestations of Buddhist deities, came to be the norm and native deities were read sutras as an act of reverence. “earlier attempts to divest the Shinto kami of their dignity by fiat had not been effective.”61 and there is some debate over whether Buddhism eclipsed the native beliefs in terms of religious power and importance or was changed by the native traditions in the Nara period and later.

Buddhism did not just bring with it religious ideas, but also Chinese Confucian ideas about how to run the state, which began to influence the nobility during the Nara period. The structure of the new capital of Heian-kyo was based on principles and ideas borrowed from the China. “Buddhism (and Confucianism, as well) not only was a personal faith or moral guide but also, as a bearer of a richly developed culture, brought with it a supreme political concept and practical policies.”62

Syncretism in Exorcism

Cases of exorcism during the Heian period took the traditions of shamanic and Shinto belief and combined them with the esoteric practices of Buddhism imported from the mainland. Japanese incorporated parts of China’s system of controlling harmful spirits through “exorcistic weapons,” “magical binding,” and “oaths and spells.” Japanese customs also contributed, and the

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62 Ibid., 51.
Buddhist clergy adopted native pacification and purification rituals to add to their esoteric repertoire of efficacious incantations and spells.\(^6^3\)

The passive nature of the female mediums who also came to be used in place of children in these rituals is rather different from the powerful shamanesses of ancient Japan. The reason for the passive nature of the mediums in these exorcisms is likely found in the esoteric Buddhist practices introduced to Japan. According to Carmen Blacker the use of mediums as “passive vehicles” who merely give voice to the spirits can be traced to the 9\(^{th}\) century when the doctrines and spells of esoteric Buddhism were brought from China and introduced to Japan.\(^6^4\) Some of the rituals brought to Japan describe how a child can be used to divine the future by being possessed.

One practice from this time is called *Abisha*. In this rite the ascetic uses small children, either boys or girls, as passive mediums into which he calls a deity and then is able to question that deity, which answers through the children. This ritual was brought back from China by the monks Kūkai and Ennin in the early ninth century, and was practiced by both Tendai and Shingon sects.\(^6^5\) The use of women instead of children as mediums during the Heian period was likely the result of the assimilation of the esoteric Buddhist practices with the native religious practice of female shamanism.

This ritual of *yorigitō* exorcism, in which a Buddhist priest or ascetic employs a medium to draw the spirit out of the victim and allow it to identify itself and its reason for molesting the person, can be compared with the ancient ritual of female shamanic possession by deities. Both

\(^6^5\) Ibid., 252.
require a medium and an individual to ask questions of the possessing spirit. However, the spiritual agency of the medium in this ritual is taken by the Buddhist priest who is the only one who can summon the spirit into the medium, because she cannot cause herself to be possessed. Through this exorcism ritual the reduction of power of the native female shamanic tradition due to the rise in the influence of mainland religious practices such as Buddhism can be seen.

**Spirit possession and women’s power in the Literature of The Mid-Heian**

One of the favorite pastimes of noblewomen in the mid-Heian period was the writing and sharing of *monogatari* (fictional stories). In these works spirit possession was central to many of the most moving scenes depicted. The monogatari form of literature was almost exclusively for women, and in it they used spirit possession to express themselves in ways that men could not do. The forms of writing used in government, however, were the realm of men, and women very rarely wrote using the Chinese characters that were reserved for documents and men’s writings.

Women in the Heian period were discouraged from learning Chinese characters, which were associated with higher learning and were therefore gendered masculine. During the Heian period it would have been defeminizing for a woman to write using Chinese Characters. Instead, the phonetic system of hiragana was used by women to write. This system lent itself to more artfully refined forms of communication as it was better representative of the actual spoken language of Japan. Despite the fact that women were almost exclusively restricted to hiragana, this was not necessarily a setback because it was a way of expression that was not open to men except in letters and poems. For this reason we have a wide range of quality literature written by women of the mid-Heian period, including Murasaki Shikibu’s *Tale of Genji* and personal diaries of noble women. In these works women were able to depict psychologically complex aspects of
life among the aristocracy, and scholars, such as Bargen, have argued that some of these women’s works are actually social commentary and are subtle protests against the oppressive patriarchal system of the Heian period.

Women, however, were not the only ones restricted to certain accepted modes of expression in writing; Men were expected to use Chinese characters even when writing their own diaries, and that writing system did not lend itself well to literary expression. It is very interesting to note that if a man did choose to write a journal in hiragana, he would make it appear as though a woman were the author, and preface it so as to obscure the actual authorship. We also know that Murasaki Shikibu knew Chinese characters as well, but that it was not a talent that she flaunted. Just as it was discouraged for women to use Chinese characters it was also unseemly for men to use hiragana except in discourse with women. This was because it was disagreeable for a woman to be more versed in matters of the world than men. Women were to be artful rather than intelligent in practical ways, and it was distasteful for a wife to discuss the political matters of his job at court or to advise him on what he should do in his job. Women were excluded from having political power, and since Chinese was the language of the state, it was considered improper for women to know.

The literature of the Heian period is replete with examples of and references to religious beliefs and practices, including exorcism and spirit possession. In this section I will be mostly concerned with Murasaki Shikibu’s *Tale of Genji*. This work focuses on women, rather than men, as victims of spirit possession. It should not, however, be assumed because of the focus on women in the possessions of these works, that women were the only ones who were involved in spirit possession. In fact, the *Tale of Flowering Fortunes* includes possession of a man by another man. Although spirit possession was not exclusively practiced by women, it was mainly
women who were possessed by the spirit of a person who was still living. Powerful male spirits, especially those of the dead were more often cited as causes of major disasters as opposed to causes of individual possession, though men may haunt those in power in addition to causing major catastrophes. According to Bargen “unlike women’s fictional narratives, which focused on gender relations by expressing mainly female grievances, historical reports of spirit possession revealed a political purpose and featured members of both sexes possessed by either male or female spirits.”

In the *Tale of Flowering Fortunes*, the son of Fujiwara Michinaga (966-1027), Yorimichi (992-1074), was possessed by Prince Tomohira, the father of his principle wife, as a manifestation of his concern that his daughter would be replaced by the daughter of Emperor Sanjō. According to Bargen, this spirit possession by another individual, like many in Heian literature, revolves on the complex interactions of polygamous marriage. In this case she interprets the possession to be Yorimichi’s protest against the Emperor’s desire for him to marry his daughter and the constraints of arranged marriage because Yorimichi would not be able to directly refuse the marriage. He, therefore, turned to a display of spirit possession to obliquely express his protest against the arranged marriage.

Despite these instances of male spirit possession, Bargen argues that in the patriarchal and polygamous society of the Heian period women more than men were pressured to “disguise their grievances, to suppress their angry impulses, and to repress the very thought of open rebellion.” She writes that, “appearing suddenly in a culture normally characterized by gentleness and indirection, the disturbingly violent phenomenon of spirit possession can best be

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67 Ibid., 13.
68 Ibid., 3.
understood as a disguised form of female protest triggered by the psychological hardships of Heian polygyny.\textsuperscript{69} The fact the polygamous marriage system among the aristocracy fostered feelings of jealousy among women was likely one of the main reasons for the social codes to strongly proscribe it. Girls were trained from an early age to be patient and comply with the proper codes of behavior; not complain or become jealous. This prepared them for their futures as one of several wives between which a husband split his time, sometimes unequally.

Jealousy over how a husband split his time between wives was not the only cause of strong competitive feelings among women. Being recognized in society as a wife and having a secure relationship as well as the husband’s support of the social status of the children he has with any of his wives was very important to a woman in Heian Society. If a man were to neglect any of these over long periods of time the woman’s frustration over pent up emotions had to be expressed in some way. Direct expressions of jealousy would be in extremely poor taste and might jeopardize a woman’s marriage, because jealousy was one of the reasons for which a man could divorce his wife during the Heian period. According to Bargen, in this environment, women who felt unbearably oppressed turned to “the mysterious esoteric language of spirit possession”\textsuperscript{70} to vent their frustrations. She also argues that “individual temperament, aggravated by somatic crises such as illness or a difficult pregnancy, made spirit possession a ritual resort to the rehabilitation of a wounded psyche. In this sense, the woman who fell ‘victim’ to spirit possession was actually resisting the constraints and injustices of a male-dominated culture.”\textsuperscript{71}

\textsuperscript{70} Ibid., 7.
\textsuperscript{71} Ibid., 7.
There are three ways of interpreting spirit possession in Heian period literature. 1.) As real spirit possession. Within the text and within the Heian period spirit possessions and exorcisms were considered very real occurrences, and the people reading the stories of possession in *monogatari* would have believed that these things could actually happen. In fact, accounts of spirit possession of and by both men and women occur in historical accounts of the Heian period as well. 2.) As an act in which the ‘victim’ deliberately pretends to be possessed but knows that she is actually not, and 3.) As a mental state in which the victim believes themselves to be possessed by the spirit of another and to display the emotions and thoughts the victim believes the spirit of the person possessing them has.

The first two possibilities are easily understandable, but several factors come into play when examining the third possibility and how such a state in which a person could believe that they are being possessed by another could be induced. It is debatable whether or not female spirit possession was an intentional act or psychologically induced state which was meant to disrupt the patriarchal power structure and allow a woman to vent her frustrations or get men to address the wrongs committed against the woman. When discussing spirit possession in the *monogatari* of the mid-Heian period many scholars, including both Fields and Bargen, tend to treat the possessions from the third point of view that they are psychological phenomenon rather than realities or mere acts. According to Bargen, the female “protagonists [were] brooding, speculating on each other’s thoughts, willing illness and even death upon themselves,”72 which is consistent with the third view of spirit possession.

According to the interpretation, in which the ‘victim’ is the main subconscious architect of the possession, this is how spirit possession by women may have worked in the Heian period: First a woman begins to think that another of her husband’s wives is angry with or jealous of her because of her social position, or how she is being given attention while the other is neglected, or any of a number of circumstances which might cause the woman to feel humiliated. Soon the woman who is not neglected begins to believe that the other has bad intentions for her, or that she is at least unconsciously sending her spirit to molest her. The victim may then begin to experience inexplicable feelings of discomfort and become ill. Those familiar with the situation between the two women would then attribute the illness to the spirit they believe to be molesting her, and exorcists would be called to drive out the spirit. During the exorcism the priest would call the spirit into a medium who would voice the grievances of the woman who was thought to be possessing the ‘victim’. Once the ‘spirit’s’ protests had been heard, the priest would attempt to subdue the spirit and negotiate with her to convince her to leave the victim.

After the woman expresses discontent by the display of spirit possession, the second element in the stories of spirit possession is the exorcism. The exorcists were always men, and they used Buddhist practices, which mixed with the native religion, and diminished the power of women in the native religion, in their rituals of exorcism. This exorcism is also an attempt to exorcise the spirit of discontent from women, and keep them compliant with the social norms. According to Bargen, the spirit possession and exorcism “process culminates in the attempt of exorcists to pacify female frustration and prevent social restructuring.”

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Bargen also argues that spirit possessions were used in fictional works written by women to express the thoughts and feelings that went against the Heian codes of conduct, especially jealousy which was perhaps considered the worst of all emotions. She claims that “The mono no ke [(possessing spirits)] are tropes to express emotions that the authors, like their female characters, dare not articulate even in indirect discourse. In other words, it is through mono no ke that the female author and her possessed female characters can articulate their “double consciousness.” She tends to treat the spirit possessions as psychological disturbances rather than potentially real supernatural events, as they would have been interpreted in the Heian period.\footnote{Doris G. Bargen, \textit{A Woman’s Weapon: Spirit Possession in The Tale of Genji} (Honolulu: University of Hawai‘i Press, 1997), 21.}

I think that both types of interpretations are important to consider when discussing how spirit possession was able to empower women. The interpretation of possession as reality allows us to understand the reactions of the people, who would have viewed the possession as real, and in the literature, to ascribe power to the possessing women. The second two interpretations add a layer of complexity in which there is the idea that women who were supposedly rivals or jealous of each other might work together to exact revenge on the man who causes them so much anguish. They would accomplish this by working together, either consciously or sub-consciously, to present a case of apparent spirit possession, which would expose the man’s neglect and force him to deal with the issue.

If the man did not take action or change his ways to appease the women, word of his neglect or injustice could quickly travel through the upper levels of society. This was especially true at court, and he could acquire an unpleasant reputation which could have social consequences. Genji’s father, the former emperor, is distressed when he hears that Genji has
neglected Lady Rokujō and that she was planning to leave the capital and go to live at the Ise shrine with her daughter, who was the newly appointed priestess at the shrine. This was an unprecedented act, and the story of Genji’s neglect, which was the cause of her desire to retreat to a religious life, spread rapidly. The former emperor admonishes him to take care of Lady Rokujō and her daughter saying, “If you do not learn to keep better control over your frivolous inclinations, you will soon find yourself becoming extremely unpopular.” He also warns Genji of the power of women, and that he should take care to make sure Lady Rokujō has no lingering reason to resent him, saying, “Affairs of this kind… must be managed so that the woman, no matter who she is, need not feel that she has been brought into a humiliating position or treated in a cynical and offhand way. Forget this rule, and she will soon make you feel the unpleasant consequences of her resentment.” In this passage the former emperor makes it clear that women have the ability to cause problems for men if they feel neglected or humiliated. The former emperor is ambiguous about what the consequences might be, but it is likely that this is a foreshadowing of the possession of Lady Aoi by Lady Rokujō, which I will discuss later in this section.

Fields makes the argument that in the Tale of Genji the women who are possessed are all “in physically and psychologically weakened states when they are [possessed]. The common cause of their condition may be crudely put as suffering induced by men,” and that the time when their neglect is most unbearable is marked by the appearance of Lady Rokujō’s spirit. At

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76 Ibid., 155.
these times, Fields writes, “in perverse fashion, [Lady Rokujo] may be said to be speaking for them.”

Spirit possession not the only way, Fujitsubo comes to Genji in a dream after she is dead and expresses her displeasure over his discussion of their affair with Murasaki after Fujitsubo had told him to keep it a secret, very directly to him. Rather than taking possession of another woman, her spirit directly addresses Genji in his own dream. From the viewpoint of spirit possession as a psychological phenomenon, the reason for not employing spirit possession in this case is most likely that Murasaki would not have known of Genji’s vow to keep the affair secret, or may not have felt that the incident was enough to cause Fujitsubo’s spirit to become angry. She therefore would not have become upset enough to induce the symptoms of spirit possession. However, the breaking of his vow may have weighed heavily on Genji, causing him to dream that Fujitsubo was displeased with him.

In the *Tale of Genji*, Yūgao, who has nothing but her innocent sweetness to commend her captures the attention of Genji and he steals her away to a nearly deserted mansion. Such a place would have been understood by the people of Heian times as a very likely place for foxes, demons or other spirit creatures to take up residence. Indeed, the couple discusses the possibility of encountering a fox in the place during the night. Later that night Yūgao dies suddenly, and Genji attributes her death to the apparition of a beautiful woman that only he was able to see.

It is debatable whether this was actually the spirit of lady Rokujō, but the spirit speaks to Genji and says “Though I have admired you, you have neglected to visit me and keep this creature at your side to fuss over when there is nothing distinguished about her.” This is

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78 Ibid., 62.
consistent with the story of the Rokujō Lady who was the highly refined and accomplished widow of a crown prince, and was wooed by and succumbed to the advances of Genji, after which his interest in her cools and he begins to neglect her. Genji’s interest in Yugao, which the Rokujō Lady feels is unwarranted is “precisely the kind of offending stimulus that impels a spirit to leave its body.”

In the “Heartvine” chapter Lady Rokujō lets herself be known for the first time as the possessing spirit. The incident begins with the lustration ceremony for the new priestess at Kamo Shrine in which Genji featured prominently. Since it was one of the biggest ceremonies of the year, and the famous Genji would be there, nearly everyone turned out to see it. Even though Lady Rokujō is upset with Genji’s neglect she cannot resist going to see him in all his splendor. She goes quietly to see the procession, but her carriages are unceremoniously pushed to the back by Aoi’s men, and she is forced to watch the procession from an obscure position. To add to her humiliation, Genji and others from the procession pay their respects to Lady Aoi, but do not even glance at Lady Rokujō’s carriages. This event was publicly humiliating for Lady Rokujō, and caused her dislike of Genji’s neglect to become intense jealousy and anger towards the, then pregnant, Lady Aoi.

This tension between Lady Rokujō and Lady Aoi begins to manifest slowly as Lady Rokujō experiences severe mental and emotional distress over the incident and cannot bring herself to accept any of Genji’s attempts to reconcile with her. At the same time Lady Aoi has a great deal to worry about because she is pregnant; a state which was thought to weaken a woman and make her more susceptible to psychic influences. Indeed, Aoi begins to show physical

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81 Ibid., 48.
symptoms of emotional disturbance by loud weeping, nausea, and shortness of breath. These are attributed to spirit possession and exorcists are employed accordingly to rid Aoi of the harmful spirits. These male exorcists work to transfer the tormenting spirits to a medium, and succeed in exorcising all but one spirit. The strength of the spirit leads those in attendance to conclude that it must be a jealous spirit, and the list of Genji’s women is examined for those who might be jealous, and Lady Rokujiō is identified by process of elimination.82

The inability of the male exorcists to subdue the spirit of Lady Rokujo may be seen as a strong assertion of power over the patriarchal social norms which hold jealousy to be among the worst emotions, and to which only women are susceptible. It may also be seen in a non-spiritual way, as the attempt of Lady Aoi to gain the attention of Genji. In this interpretation, which Bargen uses, Aoi would not cease to exhibit signs of spirit possession until the underlying problem was uncovered and dealt with in some way.

After Lady Rokujo is identified as the cause of the spirit possessions, Genji goes to see her, but she acts coldly toward him. After that visit Genji avoids meeting with her because her temperament made him uncomfortable. Lady Rokujiō’s anger toward Genji drives him away when he wanted to make amends. This partly puts blame back on Lady Rokujiō for not accepting Genji’s conciliatory gesture, which would normally be desired by the possessing spirit. She was so distraught that she could not accept his attempt to reconcile with her. Though, it may also be said that Genji did not make a great effort to console her, and only spent one night at her house because he was uncomfortable there.

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Lady Rokujō’s spirit was not appeased by Genji, and continued to wander after Genji’s brief visit. Aoi dies from complications during childbirth, likely caused by the spirit of Lady Rokujō. In the Heian period, occasionally women died from what was believed to be spirit possession, either due to an excessively weak mental and physical state or the loss of her will to live. This death could be seen as extreme retribution on the man for neglecting his duties as husband. It is unfortunate that some women were driven to act self-destructively, because of the necessity of using oblique expressions of anger toward men, in order to gain the social agency to protest their treatment by the men.

Another episode of possession by Lady Rokujo occurs after she has died. After Genji marries the third princess, Murasaki can’t feel secure and her condition deteriorates. The happiness of the women seems to truly depend on what the man does. The Rokujō Lady’s grievance in life cannot be shaken in death and was angered again by how Genji spoke disparagingly of her to Murasaki. That this is a similar offence to the one that caused Fujitsubō to appear to Genji in a dream. In this possession, Lady Rokujō is not entirely vindictive, however, and she also cherishes the ability to see Genji again and further express her anguish.83 Murasaki was able to make a recovery after Lady Rokujō had spoken, and the spirit leaves her. Then the final time we see that she left Murasaki only to go to the Third Princess. The Rokujō Lady’s spirit then proclaims it is leaving and departs with raucous laughter. We later learn that she remains unsatisfied and wanders the skies, unable to find salvation.

Buddhist ideas are visible throughout the text of the Genji, and Lady Rokujō’s fate of becoming a spirit attached to the world by strong karmic ties of anger and jealousy is influenced by a Buddhist world view. In her conversation with Genji, through Murasaki, Lady Rokujō

thought that he might have forgiven her in death, and asks that he pray to lighten her karmic burden of sins. She also laments that her daughter accumulated sins as the Ise virgin, and that she cannot hear the holy words of the monks. In death her rage has turned her into a vengeful spirit unable to attain salvation because she cannot hear the teachings of the dharma. Lady Rokujo represents talent and potential wasted, and frustration at the inability to better one’s social position. She could have been the empress and kokumo if her first husband, the crown prince had not died prematurely. She was unable to relinquish the desires she had for herself to gain power and prestige, which were thwarted by the death of her husband and main tie to power in the patriarchal Heian society.

Conclusion

In this paper I have argued that although the incorporation of religion and ideas from China and Korea reduced the political and social power of women, spirit possession and exorcism practices allowed women to assert their power over men in the highly patriarchal social system of the mid-Heian period. Through spirit possession women gained the social agency to voice complaints that would be unacceptable under normal circumstances. Those who performed the exorcisms were mainly Buddhist priests, who used a mix of Buddhism and native religion to attempt to exorcise the spirit of discontent from women.

I began by describing how the decline of the political power of women from the Nara period and into the Heian period was caused by the incorporation of Confucian ideas from the mainland into the Japanese system of government. During the Nara period there were many female emperors who could exercise the full power of their position, in the same way that a male emperor could do. After the incorporation of Confucian ideas into the government system the
power of women in politics began to decline, especially after the Taika reforms in 645. The women officials at court gradually lost power to the men until they were almost entirely pushed out of the realm of politics. After female emperors were banned due to the scandal involving Empress Shōtoku in 770, the only position for women that still held significant political power for women was that of kokumo, the mother of the emperor. This shows that women of the Heian period relied the status of their husband but also on their children to make important connections and improve their social status. For example if a woman bore a son who was able to become a high ranking member of the court, she, being his mother, would be able to influence his decisions in some ways. Kokumo were able to sway decisions about who the heir to the throne would be, and also could choose imperial consorts, which ultimately determined which aristocratic families gained or maintained power.

Despite the power of the kokumo, most of the women in Heian society were not influential in politics, but were sequestered in their homes. These noble women lived in an emotionally repressive atmosphere in which social behavior was highly regulated, and the expression of emotions such as anger and jealousy were strongly discouraged. In the polygamous marriage system of the Heian period women were held to a double standard in which they were expected to be faithful to a husband who was not expected to reciprocate. This system produced jealousy among women, not only for the attention of the husband, but also for the production of heirs which would enhance their status. However, they could not outwardly express it because jealousy was one of the reasons for which a man could divorce his wife. Under the emotional restrictions of the Heian period an indirect means to protest against unfair treatment began to gain popularity: spirit possession.
Although women’s political power declined during the Nara period and through the Heian period, spirit possession emerged as a method of voicing complaints and asserting power in the highly restrictive and patriarchal social system. Both men and women could use spirit possession, but men tended to use it in a different way than women. Women often possessed others while still alive, but men mostly reappeared as vengeful spirits after death to show that they had been treated wrongfully and to seek retribution. In the *Tale of Genji* we are able to see the instances of spirit possession through which noblewomen of the mid-Heian period were able to assert themselves and make demands or protest against their treatment by men.

I argue that the idea of spirit possession that women often used, which allowed the possessor to be a living person, was rooted in native beliefs about the soul. This shows that women were still deriving power from the ancient shamanic traditions, even though it was diluted by the influence of mainland religions. I then continue to discuss the history of female shamans in Japan, and the decline in their power. I conclude from Carmen Blacker’s work that the female mediums often used in Heian period exorcism rituals represent remnants of the ancient and powerful tradition of the female shaman. The medium’s agency has been taken away, however, and the Buddhist priest performs the ritual. The medium is a passive tool through which the Buddhist priest is able to identify and subdue the possessing spirit.

This straightforward way of viewing spirit possession and exorcism is not the only method. There are three basic ways of interpreting spirit possession: First, that it is a true supernatural phenomenon in which a person becomes possessed by the spirit of another person. The Second is to see it as an act put on by women to intentionally gain social or political agency. The final way to understand spirit possession is as the result of a psychological state in which the
‘victim’ believes that they are possessed by the spirit of another person, and behaves accordingly, even though there is no supernatural even occurring.

If the medium in the yorigitō ritual of exorcism is understood according to the third interpretation of spirit possession, however, her role eclipses that of the exorcist, and she becomes the focus of the ritual as the voice of the ‘victim.’ Through the medium, noble women could express their protests and desires while distancing themselves from the negative social stigmas associated with them, which could damage their relationships and reputation. According to Bargen this reduces the exorcist to a mere director of ceremony, and reveals that he is not the key player in exorcism. In this interpretation, the loss of power of women due to the incorporation of mainland ideas and religions is reversed by the woman’s use of the Buddhist ritual of exorcism to voice her protest of the male-dominated social order that is supported by Buddhist and Confucian ideologies.

85 Ibid., 15.
Bibliography


