



Women in Japanese Religions (Women in Religions)

By Barbara R. Ambros

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Scholars have widely acknowledged the persistent ambivalence with which the Japanese religious traditions treat women. Much existing scholarship depicts Japan's religious traditions as mere means of oppression. But this view raises a question: How have ambivalent and even misogynistic religious discourses on gender still come to inspire devotion and emulation among women?

In *Women in Japanese Religions*, Barbara R. Ambros examines the roles that women have played in the religions of Japan. An important corrective to more common male-centered narratives of Japanese religious history, this text presents a synthetic long view of Japanese religions from a distinct angle that has typically been discounted in standard survey accounts of Japanese religions.

Drawing on a diverse collection of writings by and about women, Ambros argues that ambivalent religious discourses in Japan have not simply subordinated women but also given them religious resources to pursue their own interests and agendas. Comprising nine chapters organized chronologically, the book begins with the archeological evidence of fertility cults and the early shamanic ruler Himiko in prehistoric Japan and ends with an examination of the influence of feminism and demographic changes on religious practices during the "lost decades" of the post-1990 era. By viewing Japanese religious history through the eyes of women, *Women in Japanese Religions* presents a new narrative that offers strikingly different vistas of Japan's pluralistic traditions than the received accounts that foreground male religious figures and male-dominated institutions.

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Editorial Review

Review

"This concise volume provides a nuanced account of Japanese women's religious activities from ancient times to the present. Attentive to social context, historical change, and Japan's religious diversity, Barbara Ambros explores the complex ways in which religious ideas and practices have both constrained women and also offered them opportunities to advance their own goals and interests. This book challenges entrenched stereotypes and makes significant strides in redressing the androcentric biases of earlier scholarship. It will benefit both students and specialists and encourage rethinking of Japanese religions from a gendered perspective."-Jacqueline Stone, Princeton University

"There is no doubt *Women in Japanese Religions* by Barbara R. Ambros is a welcome resource for students at the introductory level who want to understand Japanese religion and women. Questions for discussion are included at the end of the book, which will be of use to instructors as well."-*Reading Religions*

"*The book's contents are well balanced, covering a variety of important primary sources with well-known, historicized, and recent acclaimed scholarship in the study of Japanese religions and women's history. In doing so, the book offers not only a thought-provoking and nuanced narrative but also draws attention to the striking historical facts and long-term trends that no doubt will invite further consideration and fruitful discussions in class. Succinctly written and well edited, this book will suit both upper undergraduate and graduate courses in Japanese and East Asian studies, as well as courses in world history and religious studies.*"-*Journal of Religion in Japan*

"Fills several lacunae in the landscape of Japanese religiosity in one volume. Careful research informs Ambros's thoughtful interpretations of the contributions and significance of women throughout Japanese history. Scholars and students of Japan, whether of religion, history, anthropology, sociology, or gender studies, will find that this volume enables them to make more informed analyses in their respective fields. Ambros's fluid writing style makes this information-rich volume highly accessible and satisfying to read."- Paula Arai, author of *Bringing Zen Home: The Healing Heart Of Japanese Women's Rituals*

"Ambros challenges entrenched stereotypes while providing evidence of fertility cults in prehistoric Japan and ends her discussion with an examination of the influence of feminism during the post-1990 era. The goal of the book is to provide a comprehensive perspective that entails the overarching scope of centuries; in this Ambros succeeds." -*Choice*

"[...] [S]he...assert[s] in the final sentence of her conclusion that the study of a subject as complex as religion and gender required a perspective of the long duree and must emphasize 'change and diversity in a specific, culturally bounded context,' which is a project that anthropologists can endorse and perform."-*Anthropology Review Database*

About the Author

Barbara R. Ambros is Associate Professor of Religious Studies at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. She is the author of *Bones of Contention: Animals and Religion in Contemporary Japan* and *Emplacing a Pilgrimage: The Oyama Cult and Regional Religion in Early Modern Japan*.

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