**Communication with the Dead in Postwar Japan：How the *Itako Kuchiyose* Ritual Has Changed under the Phenomenon of Delocalization**

Haruka OMICHI

Introduction

The *kuchiyose-miko* (口寄巫女), or the *kuchiyose* female shaman, epitomizes the traditional Japanese shaman. Her work generally belongs in the latter of the two categories: *ecstasy* (or *trance*) and *spirit possession*. *Kuchiyose* (口寄) describes the practice in which the female shaman, who is usually blind, summons a spirit of the deceased, allowing herself to be possessed by the spirit and communicating with clients on behalf of the deceased. In prewar Japan, there were many *kuchiyose-miko* in every region of the country. It is reported that there were still a considerable number of *kuchiyose-miko* even in urban areas such as Tokyo and Osaka during the Meiji Period.

However, due to government campaigns against superstitious activities, the number of *kuchiyose-miko* rapidly decreased in the prewar period. The formation of new social frameworks in postwar Japan further contributed to this decrease. In the 1960s, *kuchiyose-miko* remained in only a few regions, including the Tohoku region, where various kinds of *kuchiyose-miko* were still engaged in the *kuchiyose* practice. It was during this time that the *itako* (イタコ), a kind of *kuchiyose-miko*, attracted the attention of mass media.

The Tohoku region is known for the following kinds of female shamans: *itako* (イタコ) or *idakko* (イダッコ) in Aomori, north Iwate, and north Akita; *ejikko* (エジッコ) or *enjiko* (エンジコ) in south Akita; *ogamin* (オガミン) or *ogami-sama* (オガミサマ) in south Iwate and Miyagi; *onakama* (オナカマ) in the Mogami and Murayama districts of Yamagata; *waka* (ワカ) or *ｗaka-miko* (ワカミコ) in the Fukushima and Okitama districts of Yamagata; *miko* (ミコ) or *migo* (ミゴ) in the Syonai district of Yamagata; and *azusa* (アズサ) or *moriko* (モリコ) in the Hamadori district of Fukushima. Among these, *itako* have been a dominant subject of postwar Japanese shamanic studies.

It is unclear when *itako* first appeared in the history of the region, but the diary of Masumi Sugae (菅江真澄 1754-1829), a traveler in the later Edo Period, mentions witnessing an *itako* （盲巫女）while visiting Morioka in 1788. In those days, *itako* not only practiced *kuchiyose* rituals, but also uttered oracles, told fortunes, and performed magical rites in local communities.

Although *itako* had been a phenomenon found only in local communities, mass media exposed them to a broader audience of people from around the country who wanted to experience the *kuchiyose* ritual. As a result, the *kuchiyose* ritual became delocalized.

The mass media tends to create new meanings for and put new value on phenomena through editing and recontextualization. While this newly created image deviates from the original phenomenon, it should not be dismissed as a mere fabrication; people who share the newly created image perceive or rediscover the phenomenon based on that new image. The image has an effect on social attitudes and behaviors towards the phenomenon’s existence, and in turn bring about change in the phenomenon itself. This is what occurred in the case of *itako* during the postwar environment. I will explain below how the mass media has changed elements of the local folk culture, focusing on the *kuchiyose* ritual practiced on the sacred mountain of Osorezan.

1. Mass Media’s Attention on *Itako*

*Itako* first began to appear in the Japanese mass media in the 1950s with the rediscovering-Japan movement and the boom in travel to unexplored places.[[1]](#endnote-2) The sacred mountain of Osorezan attracted people as an undiscovered experience of old Japan. As a result, local religious activities, especially *kuchiyose*, attracted public attention.

Osorezan is located on the Shimokita Peninsula, Aomori, and is known in Japan as one of three great sacred mountains, along with Mount Hiei and Mount Koya. One of its features is a natural landscape made of volcanic rocks and a caldera lake, known as Jigoku-Gokuraku(地獄極楽), or “Heaven and Hell.” Throughout modern times, this sacred mountain has been overseen by Kisshozan Entsuji Temple (吉祥山円通寺) in Mutsu City. Osorezan Bodaiji Temple (恐山菩提寺), which is located on the sacred mountain, is recognized as an Okuno-in Branch (奥の院) of Entsuji Temple. As Osorezan Bodaiji Temple is regarded in folk religion as a site where the spirits of the dead gather, it is a place where one can observe *itako* performing the *kuchiyose* ritual.

While *itako* normally work alone in local communities, they gather at temples or shrines to perform the *kuchiyose* ritual on special occasions, such as seasonal festivals and Obon. Although Osorezan had already begun attracting pilgrims from neighboring provinces by the late 18th century,[[2]](#endnote-3) it has only been in relatively recent times that *itako* have gathered there. This gathering is called *itako-machi* (イタコマチ) or *miko-ichi* (ミコイチ).

In 1963, the *itako-machi* on Osorezan began to capture the public’s attention. It was said that “the *miko-ichi* comes under the media spotlight every Obon season.”[[3]](#endnote-4) Public interest in the *itako* continued throughout the 1960s in what could be called an *itako* boom. In the 1980s and 1990s, this increased interest in the occult firmly established the *itako* in Japanese popular culture. The popular perception of *itako* that was shaped during this time is still prominent today.

In this popular image, the strong relationship between *itako* and Osorezan is the aspect which deviates most from reality, as originally it was but a transient occurrence. The *itako-machi* is just one of a number of various religious phenomena that can be observed on Osorezan, and it can also be observed at other locations. As I mentioned, the *itako* usually live their lives in local communities and come to the mountain only on special occasions. However, by focusing on the *itako-machi* at Osorezan*,* the mass media has created an inextricable connection between the two. This relationship may have been strengthened by the image of the mysterious volcanic landscape of the surrounding area, which is frequently displayed on TV and in the print media.

The *Osorezan no Itako* (恐山のイタコ) or “*itako* at Osorezan,” was originally built from the image created by the mass media. In turn, this image has affected actual religious practices and the environment on Osorezan.

2. Trends on Osorezan Since 1960

As I have shown in my previous work,[[4]](#endnote-5) based on statistics issued by the local government, the number of visitors to Osorezan has increased rapidly since 1960. The trend continued with the designation of Shimokita Peninsula as a national park in 1968, and then the revival of the Osorezan Akimairi (恐山秋詣り), or the Autumn Festival of Osorezan, which was brought back in 1973 after a 30-year absence. The number of visitors correlates with media coverage, showing that most visitors have been influenced by the image of *Osorezan no Itako*.

According to a local newspaper, tourist activity in the area has led to two significant changes to how the *kuchiyose* was performed. The first was the emergence of an audience for these rituals, as excessive media exposure caused an increase in the number of tourists who were not participants, but who just came to observe the rituals. The second was an increase in the number of clients of *kuchiyose* rituals. The average wait for clients has increased since the 1960s. In 1965, it was 20 to 30 minutes. Following the *itako* boom, the average wait extended to three hours in 1972. As the number of *itako* declined, the average wait time sometimes reached four hours in the late 2000s. In some exceptional cases in 2014, waiting clients were turned away after waiting for half a day.

The *kuchiyose* ritual provided a livelihood for blind women in prewar Japan. With the improvement of public healthcare and welfare services, the number of *itako* has decreased since the 1980s due to a shortage of blind women willing to become apprentices. Changes in religious attitudes and superstitious beliefs in postwar Japan have also contributed to the decrease. Table 1, based on data presented in previous reports and studies and field data collected by me, shows the trend in the number of *itako* participating in the Osorezan Grand Festival and Autumn Festival. In 1978, the number reached 53, the highest number ever recorded. After that, it gradually decreased over the decades until only two *itako* took part in 2011. In 2014, one of the shamans taking part was not actually an *itako*. By 2019, the *itako* had finally disappeared from the festivals altogether, and those performing the *kuchiyose* ritual for tourists were other kinds of shaman. However, the image of *Osorezan no Itako* is still perpetuated by the mass media, and tourists will continue to visit Osorezan in search of *Osorezan no Itako* as long as the desire to communicate with the dead exists.

Desiring to communicate with the dead and searching for *Osorezan no Itako*, the client base, which initially was purely local, has expanded and delocalized. Moreover, the *kuchiyose*, which was just one element of more extensive funeral practices on Osorezan, has come to be regarded as the primary religious practice on the sacred mountain. Such changes have altered aspects of both the ritual itself and the local religious hierarchy at the same time.

3. Three Changes in the *Kuchiyose* Ritual

Before analyzing how the *kuchiyose* ritual has been changed by delocalization, I will explain the traditional procedure of the *kuchiyose* ritual. It consists of the following seven parts:[[5]](#endnote-6)

1　*Kami-yose*（カミ寄せ）: Invocation of gods

2　*Jigokusagashi*（地獄探し）: Searching for a *hotoke*, or the spirit of the deceased, in one of the hells

3　*Hotoke-yobi*（ホトケ呼び）: Possession of the *itako* by the *hotoke*

4　*Kudoki*（口説）: Communication with clients

5　*Hotoke-okuri*（ホトケ送り）: Release from the possession

6　*Kami-okuri*（カミ送り）: Sending off the gods

7　*Hotoke-okuri*（ホトケ送り）: Sending off the *hotoke*

Aside from *kudoki*, which is usually extemporized, most of the procedure is formulated. When there are many clients, such as in *itako-machi*, the first and the last steps are sometimes bypassed in each session. In this case, the *itako* summon gods before beginning the series of sessions and sends them off when all of the sessions are complete.

The *kudoki*, the central part of the session, has two significant features. First, the communication is carried out in the first person. During the *kudoki*, an *itako* – in an unconscious state while being possessed by a *hotoke* – communicates with clients on behalf of the deceased. Second, the *kudoki* is not a dialogue but a monologue: it is a one-way communication from the deceased to the living. *Hotoke* do not ask questions of clients, and clients cannot ask anything of the *hotoke*.

Samples presented here show variance from the traditional procedure among 48 cases gathered in previous studies[[6]](#endnote-7) and eight cases I gathered in my fieldwork with four *itako*. Those 56 cases are dated between 1967 and 2014, which means that they have all been influenced by delocalization.

Compared to the traditional *kuchiyose*, we can find the following three differences in the *kudoki* part: first, the *itako* or *hotoke* asks clients questions to clients; second, the *itako* provides advice to clients; and thirdly, the *itako* lets clients do *toikuchi* （問口）, or ask questions.

a. *Itako* or *Hotoke* Asks Questions to Clients

As previously mentioned, the traditional *kudoki* was a monologue told in the first person. During the *kudoki*, an *itako*, being in an unconscious state, cannot exercise influence on the *hotoke*’s monologue. Traditionally, only before and after the *kudoki* can she talk of her own volition. Clients can usually consult her before the *hotoke-yobi*, or in the case of *itako-machi* they can ask questions before the session or during the *hotoke-yobi*.

By contrast, in our samples we have found multiple cases in which the *itako* temporarily returned to consciousness and asked clients questions during the *kudoki*. The following is from the record of a *kuchiyose* ritual performed by the *itako* M.T. from Aomori City, at the Osorezan Taisai (恐山大祭), or Grand Festival of Osorezan, in 1989. The client, who came from Hyogo, asked for the *kuchiyose* of her deceased son, aged seventeen, who was killed in a traffic accident. In this *kuchiyose*, the *itako* suddenly returned to consciousness during the *kudoki*, and asked the client whether or not the deceased had siblings.

Case 1:

*Itako/Hotoke*: My mother, since I became *hotoke*, you have changed the water in a vase, you have made offerings, and also you have prepared my favorite dishes a lot. I want to share them with my best friends there, but I can’t. It can’t be helped. If I could live another five years, I (who used to be a spoiled boy) would be able to become a devoted son ... The 23rd, the day I passed away, was a Jizo (地蔵) festival day. Please accept the short duration of my life.

*Itako*: (*Changing her tone*) Does he have any sisters?

Client: No, he has only brothers.

*Itako*: He has three brothers, right?

Client: Yes.

*Itako*: Please make the eldest be careful on the 28th of September. And the youngest, he must have become a disrespectful son because the *hotoke* asked him to behave nicely.

森勇男(1991): 57-58

The following is from the record of a *kuchiyose* ritual performed by the *itako* H.A. from Ajigasawa Town, in western Aomori, at the Osorezan Autumn Festival in 2004. In this record, the *itako*, in the voice of the *hotoke*, repeatedly checked comprehension by asking the client, “Don’t you know?”

Case 2:

*Itako/Hotoke*: I’m poor in health, don’t you know? In every hospital, I never completely recovered, don’t you know? I was poor in health, so I was prone to illness.

*Itako:* How is the health of your parents?

Client: Hmm, they have problems like a hernia in their backs. Furthermore, they once had some problems like pleurisy.

*Itako/Hotoke*: Yes, my illness caused my wife a lot of trouble. That condition lasted so long, don’t you know?

Client: Yes.

*Itako/Hotoke*: Don’t you think my wife is poor in health these days?

Client: Yes, she seems to be getting weaker and weaker.

*Itako/Hotoke*: I see. She can still walk by herself, but she can’t move smoothly. I’m worried about her.

神徳昭甫(2006): 57

b. The *Itako* Provides Advice to Clients

As we saw in the first case, after she suddenly returned to consciousness and asked the client about the number of siblings of the deceased, the *itako* M.T. gave advice to the client based on communication with the spirit of the deceased.

In the following case, the same *itako* gave advice on how to treat the *hotoke*’s belongings when the same client visited her on another occasion and asked her to summon the spirit of her deceased son again, at the Osorezan Autumn Festival.

Case 3:

*Itako/Hotoke*: Please hang tough. You do the work of two people. Don’t be so kind. Please be stricter and tougher. Wear my clothes, and use my belongings, thinking as though you are me. Mom, did you notice my savings?

Client: I withdrew your money from your bank account. And here I brought much of the small change you had saved up. I will offer it to Osorezan.

*Itako/Hotoke*: By the way, you should not throw the change out willy-nilly. Put it in a bag and hand it to a monk, or put it in the offering box. Please be attentive to what the *hotoke* is feeling. Even though no monk or no one else notices, Jikaku Daishi (慈覚大師) will see that. So it is no problem if you put it in the offering box. It seems there is still some of his money in your house. Look in a bookshelf, or the pockets of his trousers or jackets.

Client: I found 300 yen when I checked the pocket of your trousers. I brought it today.

森勇男(1991): 61-62

c. The *Itako* Allows Clients do *Toikuchi,* or Ask Questions

*Toikuchi* allows clients to address or ask questions of a *hotoke* possessing an *itako*. When used with a verb, it is called *toikuchi wo kakeru* (問口をかける). We can often find this *toikuchi* within other Japanese shamanic practices. However, it is seldom seen in traditional *kuchiyose,* which is a monologue told in the first person. The following case is from the record of a *kuchiyose* ritual performed by the *itako* F.I. at the Osorezan Rest House in 1979. In this case, the *itako*, while being possessed by a *hotoke*, allowed the client to do *toikuchi*, or ask questions. The *itako* F.I. often performs *kuchiyose* rituals for clients who come from other prefectures at the request of tourist agents. In this case, the clients are brothers who want to hear from their deceased mother.

Case 4

*Itako/Hotoke*: I don’t want to make you worried about domestic affairs. I’m sincerely concerned for the well-being of every child and every grandchild. Standing in front of you or behind you, I’m always protecting you all. I wish to alleviate your misfortunes and to please you all. Please work free from anxiety. If you have something to talk about, something to regret, or something to ask me, please tell me.

Client (the older brother): Where is our deceased father, who followed your death in early May? Is he with you now?

*Itako/Hotoke*: Even though he is my husband, he can’t be with me now. I meet him once or twice a month. I sometimes talk to him. I sometimes just see him and say goodbye. It is still difficult to meet and speak with him at length.

高松敬吉(1993): 101-102

4. Function of These Changes Under the Phenomenon of Delocalization

As I mentioned, all of the cases we have seen were in the process of delocalization under the influence of the mass media. These three changes appeared when clients were outsiders to the community, where the reverence for the sacred mountain Osorezan and the relating religious culture, including *itako*, had been ingrained. Not all the changes that appeared in the *kuchiyose* ritual were caused by external influences. Internal factors, such as the *itako*’s health and mental condition, also played a part. Here, however, I will focus on the effect of the clients on the ritual in order to understand the influence of the mass media.

Among various changes in the *kuchiyose* practice caused by new clients, the most significant phenomenon came about due to miscommunication between the *itako* and the clients. Traditionally, the *itako* use special terms during the *kuchiyose* ritual. For example, *yumitori* (ユミトリ) or “one having a bow” meant *father*; and *heratori* (ヘラトリ) or “one having a rice paddle” meant *mother*. As a result, new clients could not understand the *kuchiyose* at all. Local newspapers began exposing this problem in the 1960s, leading to calls for translators of the *kuchiyose* in the 1970s.

Coupled with curiosity, a wide range of clients around the country, including the Kanto, Kansai, and even Kyushu regions, have asked for the *kuchiyose* ritual in recent years. However, it is difficult for even local people to understand the *kuchiyose* ritual, which uses a mixture of the Tsugaru dialect and mystical words. In the case of people who come from other regions, it must be as difficult as to understand as a foreign language. Therefore, some insist that it is necessary to arrange a kind of translator, who can summarize the content of the *kuchiyose* for them.

「苦情がいっぱい恐山大祭イタコ通訳論も飛び出す」『デーリー東北』5 August 1973.

Clients maintain that the purpose of the *kuchiyose* ritual is to replicate the image of the deceased. On the other hand, an *itako* may view the purpose of the ritual as meeting the clients’ desire to communicate with the deceased. Thus, a gap in both the linguistic understanding and social expectations between *itako* and their clients may result in catastrophic failure for the *kuchiyose* practice.

Though *itako* traditionally received only minimal information about the deceased, such as the date of death and the relationship with the clients, the *itako* were able to meet the clients’ demands because they already had a relationship with the clients and usually belonged to the same local community. By sharing the same views on life, customs, and religion, *itako* could easily understand the thoughts, feelings, and desires of clients or the deceased. With delocalization, the *itako* lack sources of information about client needs and expectations, which could cause a *kuchiyose* to fail.

In this context, it appears that the intention of these three changes to the *kuchiyose* ritual is to lessen the risk of miscommunication between the *itako* and new clients. That is, these changes help clients understand the *itako* and build a sense of intimacy with them. By requesting information from the clients and letting clients express their desires, the *itako* succeeded in letting the deceased and the living share topics (in Cases 1, 2, and 4). Whether the one taking the initiative in the conversation is the *itako*/*hotoke* (in Cases 1 and 2) or the clients (in Case 4), the form of asking and answering questions helped improve the clients’ understanding. Moreover, by advising clients based on their knowledge and experiences, the *itako* could indirectly transmit the intentions of the deceased in detail (in Case 3).When the *itako* talked to her clients while conscious, mutual interchange was available between the *itako* and her clients.

This mutual interchange not only helps clients but also benefits the *itako*. When clients provide information about the deceased (in Cases 1, 2, and 4), it helped the *itako* gain necessary information which was lacking as a result of delocalization. Especially when the *itako* let clients ask questions (in Case 4), it helps the *itako* replicate more precisely the image of the deceased.

The *miko* S. (who has participated in the Osorezan *itako-machi* since 2014, and who is the last shaman still currently performing at the *itako-machi*) is a different kind of shaman from the traditional *itako*. Her *kuchiyose* does not seem to follow the traditional procedure. She provides advice and lets clients ask questions during her *kuchiyose* ritual. She usually explains to clients that they can talk with the *hotoke* even during the ritual, and instructs them to speak to the *hotoke* after the *saimon* proclamation (祭文). She always interprets the deceased words and advises clients after each *kuchiyose* session. In my previous research, I found that most clients gave the *miko* high marks for letting them ask questions. Thus, we can see that the changes appearing in the traditional *kuchiyose* practice, or the new *kuchiyose* style practiced by the *miko* S., are a general consequence of the delocalization of the *kuchiyose*.

Conclusion

In this article, I have explained how the mass media has changed the local folk culture, focusing on the *kuchiyose* performed on the sacred mountain Osorezan. As the popular image of *Osorezan no Itako* created by the mass media spread and became established, the audience, who wanted to see *itako* perform a *kuchiyose* ritual, pilgrimaged there from around the country. The impact of this popularization was evident in the following three changes to the *kuchiyose* ritual: first, *itako* or *hotoke* began asking the clients questions; second, *itako* began providing advice to clients; third, *itako* let clients do *toikuchi*,or ask questions. The function of these changes is to lower the risk of miscommunication between *itako* and their clients that has arisen from the phenomenon of delocalization.

In previous studies, these changes have been regarded as a sign of decline of the local folk culture or the disappearance of traditional practices. We can interpret these changes, however, as creative answers to meet the clients’ expectations in an expanding world—not as a decline or disappearance, but rather as an effort to maintain the religious function of communicating with the dead under the new circumstances.

\* This article is a revised and updated version of my previous article,「恐山の脱地域化と口寄せの変容」in『蓮花寺佛教研究所紀要』9 (2016).

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1. Notes

   I analyzed how Japanese media treated the *itako* in 大道 (2017), Part I. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
2. 宮崎 (2002):361-362, 366-371. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
3. 掘一郎「この世とあの世」『読売新聞(朝刊)』28 July 1963. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
4. On the changes brought to the sacred mountain Osorezan by tourists, see大道 (2017), Chapter 8. [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
5. I formulated the procedure in seven parts based on文化庁文化財保護部(1986) and小島et al. (2013). [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
6. I used the following studies as sources: 小林 (1967); 岩崎 (1972); 小館 (1973); 楠 (1973); 岩崎 (1974); 森 (1975); 明治大大久間ゼミ(1980); 高松 (1993); 楠 (1984); 河北新報社編集局(1984); 文化庁文化財保護部(1986); 網野善彦et al. (1990); 森勇男 (1991); 宮本・高松 (1995); 加藤 (2003); 神徳 (2006); 小島et al (2013). [↑](#endnote-ref-7)