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

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Introduction

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

However, the number of once the common *kuchiyose-miko*s had rapidly decreased by the governmental campaign against superstitious activities in the prewar period, and also through the formation of new social frameworks of postwar Japan. In the 1960s, *kuchiyose-miko*s remained in only a few regions, including Tohoku, where various kinds of *kuchiyose-miko*s were still engaged in the *kuchiyose* practice. Under the situation, the *itako* (イタコ), a kind of *kuchiyose-miko*s, happened to attract the attention of mass media.

In Tohoku region, the following kinds of female shamans had existed; *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 Mogami and Murayama district, Yamagata; *waka* (ワカ) or *ｗaka-miko* (ワカミコ) in Fukushima and Okitama district, Yamagata; *miko* (ミコ) or *migo* (ミゴ) in Syonai district, Yamagata; *azusa* (アズサ) or *moriko* (モリコ) in Hamadori district, Fukushima. Among those, the *itako* has played the role of a dominant subject of postwar Japanese shamanic studies.

It is ambiguous when *itako*s appeared in the history of the region, but we can see in his diary Masumi Sugae (菅江真澄1754-1829), a traveller in the later Edo Period, mentioned that he witnessed an *itako*（盲巫女）when he visited Morioka in 1788. *Itako*s used not only to practice *kuchiyose* rituals by spirit possession, but also to utter oracles by divine possession, tell fortunes, perform magical rites, and others in local communities.

Although thus *itako*s had functioned in each local community, once they came to attention nationwide through mass media, a broad audience, who wanted to ask them to practice a *kuchiyose* ritual, reached there from around the country. In other words, the *kuchiyose* was exposed to the phenomenon of delocalization.

The media always create new meanings and put new values on an actual object through editing the coverage and replacing the object into new contexts. These newly created images deviate from actual objects, but we should not dismiss them as mere fabrication. While people, who share the newly created images, perceive (or rediscover) the objects based on those images, the image that has an effect on social attitudes and behaviors towards the actual existence, in turn, causes to change the actual existence itself. It was something that happened to the postwar environment surrounding *itako*s. I will explain below how the mass media have changed the local folk culture, focusing on the *kuchiyose* practice on the sacred mountain Osorezan.

1. Mass Media's Attention to *Itako*s

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

Mount Osorezan located in Shimokita Peninsula, Aomori, is known for one of three great sacred mountains together with Mount Hiei, and Mount Koya. It is featured by the landscape known as Jigoku-Gokuraku (地獄極楽) or Heaven and Hell, which is a natural masterpiece made of volcanic rocks and a caldera lake. This sacred mountain has been superintended by Kisshozan Entsuji temple (吉祥山円通寺) in Mutsu city throughout modern times. Osorezan Bodaiji temple (恐山菩提寺) located on the sacred mountain is recognized as an Okuno-in branch (奥の院) of the Entsuji temple. On the sacred mountain, where the premises of the orthodox Buddhist temple is located, and which is regarded in the folk religion as the site the spirits of the dead gather, various kinds of religious activities including the *kuchiyose* have been seen.

*Itako*s, who usually lived their lives with practicing the *kuchiyose* and other rituals in each local society, gathered in the premises of a temple or a shrine to perform *kuchiyose* rituals together, on special occasions such as seasonal festivals and Obon. Although the mountain had already attracted pilgrims from neighboring provinces since the late 18th-century[[2]](#endnote-2), this *itakos'* gathering, which is called *itako-machi* (イタコマチ) or *miko-ichi*(ミコイチ), has been seen only relatively recent times in terms of the history of the sacred mountain.

In 1963, *itako-machi* on the sacred mountain already captured the audience as it was said 'the *miko-ichi* comes under the spotlight every Obon season in the media'[[3]](#endnote-3). *Itako*s became widely known to the public at that time, and the viewers had maintained their interest in *itako*s during the 1960s. It is correct to call the situation the *itako* boom. After that, during the 1980s and 1990s, the occult boom made the *itako* an established Japanese popular culture. The images of *itako*s thus established have been reproduced until today.

Among those images, the strong relationship with the sacred mountain Osoresan deviates most from an actual *itako*. Their relationship was initially transient. *Itako-machi* is one of the various religious phenomena that we can observe on the sacred mountain, and it could also be seen in other locations. As I mentioned, *itako*s usually lived their lives in each community and came to the mountain only on special occasions. However, the mass media created a strong image of *itako*s that has an inextricable connection with Mount Osorezan by focusing on *itako-machi* set up on the mountain. This relationship might have been strengthened by images of mysterious volcanic landscapes displayed repeatedly on the screen or in pictures.

"Osorezan no Itako (恐山のイタコ)" or *itako*s at Mount Osorezan, that was originally a virtual image created by mass media, in turn, changed the actual religious practice and its environment on the sacred mountain in the process of sharing the new image.

2. Trends of Mount Osorezan since 1960

As I showed in my previous work[[4]](#endnote-4) based on the statistics issued by the local government, the number of visitors to Osorezan district had rapidly increased since 1960. The trend continued until 1974, along with the designation of Shimokita Peninsula as a national park in 1968. The Osorezan Akimairi (恐山秋詣り) or the autumn festival of Mount Osorezan, was revived after an absence of 30 years in 1973. The trend of the number of visitors, which is correlated with media coverage, shows that most visitors at that time were influenced by the image of "Osorezan no Itako".

As a local newspaper reported, the viewers' behavior or consumer activity in the district led to two significant changes in the setting of the *kuchiyose*. The first is the emergence of audiences of *kuchiyose* rituals. As previous studies pointed out, the excessive media exposure caused to increase in the number of tourists, who were not participators of *kuchiyose* rituals but just irreligious observers.

However, those tourists were not always irreligious observers. It is reported that the average queuing time of clients has become longer and longer since the 1960s. It was the second change in the *kuchiyose* practice that the number of clients of *kuchiyose* rituals increased. The average queuing time was 20 to 30 minutes in 1965. By the advent of the Itako boom, the longest queuing time extended to three hours in 1972. The time tended to become further longer as the number of *itako*s has declined, and it sometimes reached 4 hours in the late 2000s. There was the case it exceeded the time limit after waiting for half a day in 2014.

The *kuchiyose* practice involved functioning as a livelihood for blind women in prewar Japan. With the improvement of public healthcare and welfare services, the number of *itako*s has decreased due to a shortage of successors since the 1980s. The changes in religious attitudes and superstitious beliefs in postwar Japan also contributed to the trend. Table 1（based on the data presented in previous reports and studies, and also the data I collected in my field work）shows the trends in the number of *itako*s who participated in the Osorezan grand festival and autumn festival. In 1978, the number reached 53, the highest number ever recorded. After that, it had been gradually decreased to two over the decades until 2011. In 2014, it added one who is not a traditional *itako* but another kind of shaman. In 2019, *itako*s finally disappeared, and only newly joined shaman remained. However, the image of "Osorezan no Itako" has been reproduced by mass media until today. Tourists will continue to visit there in a quest for "Osorezan no Itako" as long as the desire to communicate with the dead exists.

With the desire to communicate with the dead, in cooperation with the quest for the image of "Osorezan no Itako", clients, who were initially limited to the local, have been expanded and delocalized. Moreover, the *kuchiyose*, which was just an element in a more extensive whole funeral practice or custom on Mount Osorezan, became an established practice or performance and also came to be regarded as the primary religious practice on the sacred mountain. I call the change as the delocalization of the *kuchiyose*. It has altered the aspects of the practice itself, and the religious hierarchy in the local at the same time.

3. Three Changes of the *Kuchiyose* Practice

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

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

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

3　*Hotoke-yobi*（ホトケ呼び）: Possession 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 the *kudoki* part, which is usually extemporized, most parts of the procedure are formulated. Only under the condition that many clients are there like in *itako-machi*, the first and the last steps are sometimes bypassed in each session. In this case, *itako*s summon gods in advance of sessions and send off them when all sessions are completed.

The *kudoki*, the central part of the session, has two significant features. Firstly, it is told in the first person. During the *kudoki*, an *itako,* being possessed by a *hotoke* in an unconscious state, communicates with clients on behalf of the deceased. Secondly, it is a one-way communication from the deceased to the livings. *Hotoke*s do not ask clients, and clients cannot ask anything to the *hotoke*s. The *kudoki* is not a dialogue but a monologue.

I picked up some samples that show differences from the traditional procedure among 48 cases gathered in previous studies[[6]](#endnote-6) and also eight cases gathered in my fieldwork with four *itako*s. Those 56 cases have dated between 1967 and 2014, which means the delocalization influenced all cases.

Compared to the traditional *kuchiyose*, we can find the following three differences in the *kudoki* part. Firstly, *itako*s or *hotoke*s ask questions to clients; secondly, *itako*s provide advice to clients; thirdly, *itako*s let clients do *toikuchi*（問口）or ask questions.

a. *Itako*s or *Hotoke*s Ask Questions to Clients.

As I mentioned, the traditional *kudoki* was a monologue told in the first person. During the *kudoki*, an *itako*, being in an unconscious state, cannot exercise an effect on the *hotoke's* monologue. Only before and after the *kudoki*, she can talk with her intention. Clients can usually consult her before the *hotoke-yobi*, or in the case of *itako-machi*, they can ask before the session or during the *hotoke-yobi*.

In contrast, we find multiple cases, in which *itako*s temporarily returned of consciousness and asked a client questions during the *kudoki*. The following is a part of the record of the *kuchiyose* ritual practiced by the *itako* M.T., who lived in Aomori city, at the Osorezan Taisai (恐山大祭) or the grand festival of Mount 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 record, the *itako* suddenly returned of consciousness during the *kudoki*, and she asked the client whether the deceased had siblings or not.

\* In the following citations, I changed the speaker's name into Itako, Itako (Hotoke), or Client.

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. (snip) On the 23rd, the day I passed away, was a festival day of Jizo (地蔵). Please accept my duration of life.

(Changing her tone) Does he have sisters?

Client: No, he has only brothers.

Itako: Does he have three brothers, right?

Client: Yes.

Itako: Please let the eldest be careful on the 28th of September, and the youngest, he must become an unfilial son. The *hotoke* asked him to behave nicely.

森勇男(1991): 57-58

The following is a part of the record of the *kuchiyose* ritual practiced by the *itako* H.A., who lived in Ajigasawa town, west Aomori, at the Osorezan autumn festival 2004. In this record, the *itako*, staying in the state of *hotoke*, checked comprehension with asking a client repeatedly, "do you know?".

Case 2.

Itako (Hotoke): I'm poor in health, do you know? In every hospital, I never completely recovered, do you know? I'm poor in health, so I was prone to illness.

How about the health condition of your parents?

Client: Hmm, they have something problems like a hernia on their back. Furthermore, they have once had something problems like pleurisy.

Itako (Hotoke): Yes, my illness caused my wife a lot of trouble. That condition lasted so long, do you know?

Client: Yes.

Itako (Hotoke): Don't you think my wife is poor in health these days?

Client: Yes, she seems to become 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. *Itako*s Provide Advice to Clients.

As we see in the first case, after she suddenly returned consciousness and asked the clients about the family structure of the deceased, the *itako* M.T. advised the client, based on communication with the spirit of the deceased.

In the following case, the same *itako* advised how to treat the *hotoke's* belongings when the same client visited her and asked to summon the spirit of her deceased son again on the other occasion, the Osorezan autumn festival.

Case 3.

Itako (Hotoke): Please hang tougher than I expected, with the efforts of two persons. Don't be too kind. Please be stricter and tougher. Wear my clothes, and use my belongings, with thinking as if you are myself. Mom, do you notice my savings?

Client: I withdrew your money from your bank account. And here I bring a lot of small coins you had saved today. I will offer them to the Osorezan.

Itako (Hotoke): By the way, you should not throw them in somewhere. Let them in a bag and hand it to a monk or put it in the offertory box. Please be attentive to what the *hotoke* is feeling. Even though no monk notices that, or even no one notices that, Jikaku Daishi (慈覚大師) must see that. So it is no problem if you put it in the offertory box. It seems there is still his money in your house. Look into a bookshelf, or pockets of his trousers or jackets.

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

森勇男(1991): 61-62

c. *Itako*s Let Clients do *Toikuchi* or Ask Questions.

*Toikuchi* means the verbal behavior that clients address or ask questions to a *hotoke* that possesses an *itako*. The verb form is *toikuchi wo kakeru* (問口をかける). Among Japanese shamanic practices, we can often find this *toikuchi*, but it was seldom seen in the traditional *kuchiyose,* which was a monologue told in the first person. The following case is a part of the record of a *kuchiyose* practiced by the *itako* F.I. at the Osorezan Rest House in 1979. In this case, the *itako*, under the condition being possessed by a *hotoke*, let the client do *toikuchi*, or ask questions. It is reported that the *itako* F.I. often practiced *kuchiyose* rituals for clients who came from other prefectures at tourist agents' requests.

Case 4.

\*The Brothers who lost their mother, asked for a *kuchiyose* ritual of their deceased mother.

Itako (Hotoke): I don't want to make you worry about domestic affairs. I sincerely concern for the well-being of every child and every grandchild. Standing in front of you or back of you, I always protect 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, you tell me first.

Client (the Elder): 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 soon say goodbye. It is still difficult to meet and speak with him for a long.

高松敬吉(1993): 101-102

4. A Function of These Changes under the Phenomenon of Delocalization

As I mentioned, all cases we have seen above were observed in the process of delocalization under the influence of mass media. These three changes appeared when clients were outsiders of the community, where the reverence for the sacred mountain Osorezan and the relating religious culture, including *itako*s, had been ingrained. Although we should take into account that all changes that appeared in the *kuchiyose* practice were not caused by only external influences, but also by internal factors including each *itako's* health and mental conditions, I focus on the causes on the client-side to understand the relationship with mass media.

Among various changes in the *kuchiyose* practice caused by new clients, the most significant phenomenon is the miscommunication between *itako*s and *client*s. *Itako*s use their dialects during a session, and there are old special terms used in the *kuchiyose*. Example: *yumitori* (ユミトリ) or one having a bow means father; *heratori* (ヘラトリ) or one having rice paddle means Mother. As a result, it caused a situation where those new clients cannot understand the narrated *kuchiyose* at all. We can see the problem rendered articles in the local newspapers in the 1960s. Voices were calling for translators of the *kuchiyose* in the 1970s.

Coupled with curiosity, the wide range of clients around the country, including Kanto, Kansai, and even Kyushu regions, asked for a *kuchiyose* ritual in recent years. However, it is difficult for even local people to understand the narrated *kuchiyose*, which is a mixture of the Tsugaru dialect and mystic words. In the case of people who came from other regions, it must be as difficult as it would be to understand foreign languages. Therefore, some insisted 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.

When we interpret *kuchiyose* as the skill of replicating the image of the deceased, which each client has maintained, or as the skill of meeting clients' desire to communicate with the deceased, a linguistic and social gap between *itako*s and clients may result in catastrophic failure to the *kuchiyose* practice.

Even though they usually got only minimum information about the deceased, like the death date and the relationship with the clients, *itako*s could meet clients' demand because their *kuchiyose* practice was based on the relationship between *itako*s and clients who usually belonged to the same local community. By sharing a view on local life, custom, and religion, *itako*s could easily understand the thoughts, feelings, and wants of clients or the deceased. If they lack the source of information under the phenomenon of delocalization, *itako*s may fail the *kuchiyose*.

In this context, those three changes seem to function to avert a risk of miscommunication between *itako*s and new clients. That is, those changes helped clients' understanding through mutual communication by improving a sense of intimacy to an *itako*. By deriving information from clients and letting clients express their desire, the *itako*s succeeded to let the deceased and the livings share topics (in case 1, 2, and 4). Whether the questioner that can take the initiative in a conversation is *itako*s or *hotoke*s (in case 1, 2) or clients (in case 4), the narrated *kudoki* in the form of answering a question helped to improve clients' understanding. Moreover, by advising clients based on their knowledge and experiences, the *itako*s could indirectly transmit the deceased intentions in detail (in case 3). When *itako*s talked to her clients with the state of being conscious, mutual communication is available between *itako*s and her clients.

The mutual communication does help not only clients but also benefit *itako*s. When clients provided information about the deceased (in case 1, 2, and 4), it helped *itakos'* lack of information resulting from the delocalization. Especially when *itako*s let clients ask questions (in case 4), it helped *itako*s replicate more precisely the image of the deceased, which clients have maintained.

The *miko* S., who has participated in Osorezan Itako-machi since 2014, and who is the last shaman in Itako-machi now, is a different kind of shaman from the traditional *itako*. Her *kuchiyose* seems to be free from 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 could find most clients gave the *miko* high marks for letting them ask questions. Thus, we can see that the changes appeared in the traditional *kuchiyose* practice, or the new *kuchiyose* style practiced by the *miko* S. is a general consequence of the delocalization of the *kuchiyose*.

Conclusion

In this article, I explained how the mass media had changed the local folk culture, focusing on the *kuchiyose* practice on the sacred mountain Osorezan. As the image of "Osorezan no Itako" created by mass media spread and became established, the audience, who wanted to ask *itako*s to practice a *kuchiyose* ritual, reached there from around the country. Under the situation, the following three changes were observed in the *kuchiyose* practice: Firstly, *itako*s or *hotoke*s ask questions to clients; secondly, *itako*s provide advice to clients; thirdly, *itako*s let clients do *toikuchi* or ask questions. Those changes functioned to avert a risk of miscommunication between *itako*s and *client*s under the phenomenon of delocalization.

In previous studies, those changes have been regarded as the decline of the local folk culture or disappearance of the tradition as it should be. However, we can interpret them as creative ingenuity to meet the client's expectations. It is not a decline or disappearance, but rather struggling efforts to maintain the religious function to communicate with the dead under the new circumstances.

\* This article is based on my previous article, titled「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). I revised it and added new evidence here.

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1. Notes

   I analyzed how Japanese media treated *itako*s in 大道 (2017), Part I. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. 宮崎 (2002):361-362, 366-371. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. 掘一郎「この世とあの世」『読売新聞(朝刊)』28 July 1963. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. On the changes brought to the sacred mountain Osorezan by viewers, see大道 (2017), Chapter 8. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. I formulated the procedure in seven parts based on the formulation of文化庁文化財保護部(1986) and小島et al (2013). [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
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-6)