

The *Itako* of Tōhoku: Between Tradition and Change

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INTRODUCTION

The region of Tōhoku offers a varied and interesting number of folk religious practices and traditions, one of the most popular being the *itako* イタコ, the blind *minkan fusha* 民間巫.¹ They are well attested in Tōhoku from at least the Edo period, as well as in Tochigi and Ibaraki prefectures, which border Fukushima, and are known in particular for their activity as mediums, with the ritual called *kuchiyose* 口寄せ, the calling of the dead through the possession of the practitioner's body.² Because of a combination of circumstances, such as the drop in new recruits and elderly practitioners abandoning the profession, the *itako* practices, as we know them, are inevitably destined to disappear. Various factors converge to explain this prediction; for example, blindness, the main distinctive characteristic of these professionals, is disappearing as a result of the improvement and diffusion of the health system: contemporary welfare is better equipped to manage sight disabilities,

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thereby offering a wider range of alternatives and employment possibilities to non-sighted women, with an adequate educational system and variegated methods of self-sufficiency.

References to the shamanic practices, and in particular to female religious specialists, are common in the mythology collected in the two main works of Kojiki and Nihonshoki. In addition to the classical mythology, there is a significant amount of material concerning *fusha* and possession in the local folklore and popular legends; the messages and meaning hidden within these tales can be interpreted in different ways through careful analysis, but they represent an important means of gaining a better grasp of the shamanic practice in Japan. The existence of a strong female shamanic power in Japan has been claimed by researchers in the field who analysed the ancient Chinese chronicles of the Wei dynasty, the Wei chih 魏志 (or *Gishi* in Japanese), a text compiled in the last part of the third century A.D. that comprises the descriptions of several people and countries living east of the empire; among these descriptions, a very popular excerpt is the Wajinden 倭人伝, or “An Account of the people of Wa”. The text is brief, about 2000 characters, but its descriptions are clear enough to offer a detailed image of Japanese islands and their inhabitants: in these chronicles, third-century Japan is represented as split into thirty provinces, under the guidance of the Yamatai clan 邪馬台, and ruled by Queen (or Empress) Himiko 卑彌呼; from this narration we acquire the image of a complex society, with marked status differences and central regulation concerning the distribution of goods. There are no indications about the ways and means by which Himiko reached her position, but we are given the characteristics of her role and functions as a religious monarch; she is a figure with specific magical-religious traits, and this interpretation is strengthened by a series of strict taboos revolving around her. Beside her, we find her brother, the only human who can actually come close to her and who performs the function of mediator between Himiko and the rest of the people; he is considered to have acquired a more practical and political role.

The broad diffusion of Chinese culture, with its strong tradition of male succession, is considered the main reason for the concentration of power in the figure of the emperor, but the image of Himiko seems to have its historic counterpart in the empress-shaman who assisted the emperor (often her brother or son) in government through oracles and kami invocation; the most renowned examples of such a figure are Yamato-totohi-momoso-hime, mother-in-law of Emperor Sūjin (97–30 B.C.), and Okinaga Tarashi

Hime, Emperor Chūai's wife, widely known by her posthumous name Empress Jingū (Jingū Kōgō); she is reported to have reigned in the third century in place of her infant son Homuda Wake, the late Emperor Ōjin. Nevertheless, the lack of reliable historical data on her role and figure forces historians to consider her a legendary figure.

While this connection with mythology and ancient history has been the object of extensive research and analysis, it is important here to introduce a shift in the connection between *itako* practices and their references to the past. Many traditions that claim to be ancient often have recent origins and have sometimes been totally invented in the modern, contemporary era. This is the premise with which Eric Hobsbawm introduced his concept of “invention of tradition” (Hobsbawm and Ranger 1983) gaining popularity within the social sciences, starting from historical studies. The main element that qualifies a tradition as invented lies in the reference to a long-gone past, “conveniently selected”, through which it establishes an alleged continuity which is, in fact, historically artificial or at least uncertain in the possibility of being documented and objectively demonstrated.³ The originality of Hobsbawm's theoretical proposal lies in the strength of the implicit oxymoron that sustains it; it connects the idea of a stability in the past with that of a creative transformation, resulting in the appearance of the “*déjà vu*” as a consequence of an action of innovation in the present.

Despite the fact that countless empirical researches have made use of the concept of invention of tradition, applying it in the most variegated fields, there has been no significant development on the theoretical level, the vast majority of cases conforming to Hobsbawm's suggested formulation. The overall impression is that of a concept being presented as non-problematic, the use of which does not arouse sufficient critical reflection (Sarot 2001).

My chosen field for a reconsideration of Hobsbawm's thesis is that of religious studies. Religion, as suggested by Lewis and Hammer (2007), is the field par excellence where legitimation derives from an appeal to the authority of ancient tradition. The transmission and conservation of sacred knowledge through generations of faithful—the “chain of memory” upon which this process rests (Hervieu-Léger 1993)—are the very fulcrum of a given religion's symbolism and ritualism. But at the same time, invention is a constant motif in all the history of religious thought. Building a spiritual tradition entails the combination of history, myth and documented factual

elements with fictional and idealizing elements embedded in the traditional heritage by means of their a posteriori revision (Lewis and Hammer 2007).

Palmisano and Pannofino's thesis in this volume, upon which my study is based, is that Hobsbawm's invented tradition, especially if repositioned in the field of religious phenomena, could be more correctly reinterpreted as examples of "inventive" traditions. An invented tradition presumes, from a logical point of view, that the act of invention intervenes retrospectively to create a fictive historic antecedent that gives a sense of continuity with the past. The presupposition upon which our concept of "inventive" tradition is based affirms, on the contrary, the constitutively fictional and imaginative nature of all traditions (Palmisano and Pannofino 2016). It is not the historical event per se which is the object of traditional transmission, but the value which the event possesses for those who are elaborating its memory. And it is precisely because of this value that memory within a tradition is perpetuated. But because of the very fact that the sacred is imbued with value, over time it inevitably becomes subject to an ideal representation which informs the historical event with symbolic significance. In its turn, this symbolization alters the factual historicity of the sacred event, inserting it into an interpretative framework which—at least partially—creatively (re)invents the past. It follows that inventiveness is not an ancillary trait of some tradition—such as the invented traditions of Hobsbawm and Ranger—but is the very condition of the existence of any tradition insofar as it is a process of delivering and receiving memories upon which further new values and meanings, considered fit and productive for the present, are conferred. Being a transmission process, tradition is not dismissal (archiving) of the past, but a gesture of delivery and reception through time; this movement of delivery–reception can occur only because the memory of the past is inscribed in subsequent generations in a new frame that bestows on that memory a culturally relevant meaning to the present. In other words, the new social group receive the tradition selectively, that is to say, it develops a socially shared representation that idealizes some traditional elements. Idealization is the exact opposite to the accurate philological reconstruction of history because it is the result of an act of (collective) imagination. Since imagination is the condition *sine qua non* for the transmission of memory, it is inevitably an integral part of tradition.

The concept of "inventive tradition" is distant from that of "invented tradition" because of a second crucial element. Hobsbawm's invention is past-oriented, since it is the creation of those historical antecedents that

can guarantee the continuity of a specific tradition. Inventive tradition, on the contrary, is the result of a future-oriented operation: instead of searching for what is fictional (invented, historically false) in a given tradition, it is more productive—in social sciences at least—to investigate what in the process of traditional transmission is generative of new symbolisms and new sociocultural imaginaries. The imagination that creates new tradition is employed where significant cultural elements are available, that can undergo original reinterpretation in the present, and that at the same time are believable and justifiable. From this point of view, tradition is a performative practice, a collective dramatization of a ritual kind through which the social group “meta-interprets”, that is reflects critically and innovates roles and values of their own culture while generating new ones (Turner 1987).

Moving on from the distinction between “invented” and “inventive” tradition, I shall discuss how a historically demonstrable (therefore not invented) tradition has been transformed according to new interpretations and in connection with new contemporary demands. In particular, I shall examine the way in which *itako* and their clients acknowledge the memory of the past and, inscribing it in a new interpretative frame, bestow a new meaning in the present. With this objective in mind, I shall focus on the essential elements of the tradition in order to examine what is still plausible today and what is the object of reinvention or criticism.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Authors such as Yanagita (1913) and Origuchi (1930), founders of *min-zokugaku* studies (Japanese folklore studies), have included *itako* practice in the female shamanic tradition as having its roots in myth. This reference has remained a central element in the analysis and perception of the profession of *itako*, becoming—depending upon one’s point of view—a source of legitimization for their practice or proof of the profession’s degeneration. After the Second World War, the most significant contributions were the works of Kawamura (1984, 2003) and Ikegami (1987, 2003), who extensively reported interviews with, and the life history of, some previous generations of *itako*.

From the standpoint of the traditional *itako* and *ogamisama* practice, as analysed and described by all the researchers, the reason for entering apprenticeship is very practical: she is blind. Be it blindness since birth or the consequence of disease or accident, it seems that until recently this

was the only element that led to the choice of the *itako* profession.⁴ In a society where being able to work is a basic requirement, especially in an agricultural community where everyone is expected to contribute to the family, being blind means not being able to carry out everyday activities or to take care of oneself, and thus being considered a burden on the family and on the community. Pushing the child to become an *itako* was an attempt to provide her with a new social role, thus avoiding the risk of being labelled as useless or indolent. Given the girl's young age, it was mostly the parents (or relatives) who took the decision; moreover, the parents needed to invest a significant amount of money to pay the blind *fusha* who would train the child, since she would take her to live with her.

When the young girl entered the apprenticeship, her filial bonds were suspended and replaced by new fictional family relationships with the master's family.⁵ During her apprenticeship, the girl lived with her teacher for the whole duration of the training (usually up to five years, until the celebration of the initiation ritual), and aside from her studies, she would help her out in the housework, and in the business management. From the beginning of the training she would follow a specific vegetarian diet, which would become more severe in time, followed by other ascetic practices, such as *mizugori* 水垢離, pouring over herself numerous buckets of cold water while chanting prayers and the *sūtra*.⁶

As Kawamura (1984, 2003) suggests, the focal point of the whole apprenticeship is clearly the ritual called *kamitsuke* カミツケ (or 神憑け), which represents the main goal for the young girl and her family. In connection with this important ritual, which revolves around the *kami* possession, is the age of the apprentice, and the distinction between childhood (*kodomo* 子供, *warashi* わらし) and womanhood (*onna* 女). Usually it was strongly suggested that the girl undertake the *kamitsuke* before her first menstruation; the physical maturation of the woman's body represented, especially in the past, the moment of social maturation and the ability to start a new family. It represented the transition from the condition of childhood to that of the adult woman, where independence (*ichin-inmae*—人前) is reached. Hence, the *kamitsuke* acquires meaning when it is considered as a further moment of symbolic passage between childhood and maturity/independence.⁷

We can roughly identify four main phases connected with the *kamitsuke* ritual; the first is the apprenticeship itself, because during this time the apprentice will learn all the prayers and *sūtras* that she will have to perform during the *kamitsuke*. The second is preparation for the

kamitsuke, a purification period which starts 100 days before the ritual, with seclusion (*komori* 籠り) and different purification practices such as a strict vegetarian diet, an increase in the *mizugori* practice, and the avoidance of direct sunlight. We then have the *kamitsuke* itself; the ritual takes place in an enclosed, dark space, often a room delimited carefully by sacred ropes and screens, thus marking the sacred space and preventing disturbance from evil spirits. Usually it is the teacher's house, and on the entrance gate a banner is hung with the name of the apprentice written on it, often associated with the name of the teacher's tutelary *kami*, ancestors or *ujigami*.⁸ The apprentice normally takes a first *mizugori*, and then is led into the room and asked to sit in the middle of the room or in front of the altar, with rice sacks surrounding her at the four cardinal points. The teacher takes her place in front of the apprentice, and starts chanting and reciting the *sūtra* and prayers, often while drums or bows are played. When finally the apprentice starts shaking, the teacher asks her apprentice who the *kami* is and the girl will pronounce the name of the god, or indicate it by choosing one of the *ofuda* 御札 previously placed in front of her, with various *kami* and *buddhas* names written on them. Shortly afterwards, the apprentice faints while the teacher holds her in her arms, and she is conducted into an adjacent room to rest for a while. When she again enters the room, she will receive her new name, through the ritual of *chie hirome* 知恵広め, "widening of knowledge", while she swears to carry out successful activity, and after that the *dōgu watashi* 道具渡 (delivery of the professional tools such as rosary, bow and *oshirasama*)⁹ will take place. At this point the new shaman will perform her first *kuchiyose* (calling her ancestors, or one of the masters). The *kamitsuke* is important not only within the *fusha*'s world, but also for the secular world and the entire community; the rebirth of the shaman is in fact a second birth into the social world, where the blind girl is no longer a burden, but an accomplished and independent adult woman. As the last step of this process, the day after the initiation, a great celebration is arranged, called *goshūgi* ご祝儀. This is a very different moment, where joy and cheerfulness prevail, and where everyone is invited to participate. This celebration closely resembles a wedding banquet as a means to underline the union between the new *ogamisama* and her tutelary *kami*.

Finally, the new shaman will have to undergo a period of free service to her teacher, called *reibōkō* 礼奉公, as a way of repaying her for all the teaching she has received and the money spent. This period can last for several years, depending on the initial economic conditions of the

apprentice, and on the agreement between her family and the teacher. Only after this passage will the shaman go on to the *miagari* (身上がり), a completely independent practice allowing her to go back home or start her own life.

Whereas in the past *itako* also performed healing and divination rituals, today the best-renowned and most-requested is the *kuchiyose* ホトケ降ろし; the reasons for this change may lay primarily in the fact that health-related issues are now more widely managed by doctors and hospitals, with a better and more general health system in these peripheral areas, while other practitioners such as the *kamisama* have now taken over divinations and prediction rituals. The *kuchiyose* on the contrary seems to remain a prerogative of *itako*: this is generally conceived as a possession of the *itako* by the spirit of the dead who, through the woman's voice, speaks to their relatives. Despite local variations, the pattern of the general *kuchiyose*, as I was able to see in the field, begins with the invocation of various *kami* or *buddhas*, who assume the role of guardians of the ritual; they are invoked through the chanting and repeating of different *sūtra* (such as the Jizō-kyō 地藏經). In some cases, other ancestors are invoked alongside the *kami*¹⁰; finally, the requested spirit is allowed to descend, and to communicate with its relatives.¹¹ There is in general a defined structure (*kata* 型) in the dialogue between the spirits of the dead and their families; usually the ancestor begins by thanking his relatives who wanted to meet him, shows gratitude and loving feelings for being remembered by the family, since only their prayers and affection can lead him properly to the land of the *hotoke* (ancestors, or *kami*). Later on in the dialogue, the spirits give some general advice to their relatives, such as "Take care of your health", "Don't work too much", "I would love to have grandchildren", "Please continue the family"; he then asks them to pray for him always, to visit his grave and to offer some memorial services, because only in this way he claims will he be granted peace. Finally, he again expresses his gratitude, returning to his world with a heart full of peace, and the *kuchiyose* ends with the final prayer to release the *kami*.¹²

One of the most popular ceremonies in which the *itako* has a significant role—not institutionally recognized, yet extremely important—is the Osorezan Taisai 恐山大祭 that takes place at Mt. Osore in Aomori prefecture, every year between July 21 and 24. This *matsuri* represents an undeniably powerful element which has contributed in recent years to the popularity of *itako* themselves. Mt. Osore is the most sacred place



Fig. 2.1 Irataka juzu (rosary) used by *itako* to perform the *kuchiyoze* ritual

in Tōhoku; it is celebrated as the Mountain of Hell and on its volcanic slopes are to be found the different afterworlds of the Buddhist tradition. During the Taisai, the souls of the dead who dwell on the premises are thought to seek contact with their relatives, who visit the mountain from all over Japan. The *itako* are now a solid element of this image, and they gather every year for the whole length of the Taisai, in the area in front of the Bodaiji 菩提寺, the Soto Zen temple of the Osorezan. Here they place their tents, and from early in the morning to late at night perform the *kuchiyoze* for the visitors (Fig. 2.1).

METHODOLOGY

My analysis of the *itako* experience is based on fieldwork that I carried out between July 2012 and August 2014, with a major 7-month period of residence in Japan between 2012 and 2013.¹³ It can roughly be divided between the Tōhoku stay, resulting in the most important interviews with three *itako*, three *kamisama*, several priests and monks (besides different informants and practitioners), and the period in Tokyo,

where textual materials were gathered, along with interviews with academics and field researchers.

The interviews and data collected in these years¹⁴ seem to draw a picture that diverges slightly from the traditional image of *itako* practitioners, first and foremost since not all of them are blind. In order to achieve a more complete comprehension of their activity and practices, it is important to take into consideration previous studies and research. This will allow us to see if the discrepancies observed designate a change, a shift in the traits, practices and overall experience of *itako* practitioners.

THE BLIND *FUSHA* AND THE RELIGIOUS LANDSCAPE OF JAPAN

As is often the case with oral and marginal traditions, it is difficult to trace a clear history of the *itako* practices before modern times. The practice of *fusha* speaking to the dead seems to have spread all over Japan since the Heian and Kamakura periods,¹⁵ but for those eras we mostly rely on literary works such as the *Man'yōshū* 万葉集, the *Genji Monogatari* 源氏物語 and the *Heike Monogatari* 平家物語, where the activity of communication with the spirit of the dead is well documented. In addition to the literature, we can trace *fusha*'s history through official notes, edicts and laws issued at different times by local or central governments, both concerning folk religious practitioners and blind guilds, and through the lives of some important religious associations that from time to time try to assume jurisdiction over blind men and women (religious practitioners and performers) and over folk religious practitioners. Popular attitudes toward blind *fusha* varied from case to case; while it is clear that they had their share of believers and followers, they were also objects of contempt in the past.¹⁶ *Fusha* and *miko*, like many other women who practised an art or skill outside any established institution, for a large number of paying customers, were often considered to have loose morals or even to prostitute themselves. Though there are few comprehensive works about the development of female blind *fusha* during the Middle Ages, there is broad interest in changes in blind *fusha* practices during the transition between the Edo-Tokugawa era 江戸—徳川時代 (1603–1868) and the Meiji era 明治時代 (1868–1912), given the great historical value that it contained, and the consequences of the profound political and cultural changes imposed on the country. It is

well known that the Meiji era represented the first significant opening of Japan towards the rest of the world, in particular the Western colonising countries. The huge process of reformation put in place by the Meiji administration was aimed at creating a powerful Japanese nation with the strength and the unity to resist foreigner pressures, and the capacity to gain an equal position among the other world powers. The strategy took a double form, well exemplified by the motto *wakon yōsai* 和魂洋才 (“Japanese spirit and Western technology”): on one hand, the new ruling class pushed for the creation of a distinctly Japanese cultural system, in an attempt to rediscover the pure essence of the nation and a solid national identity in order to face the cultural power of the Western countries. On the other hand, the government massively introduced Western knowledge and technology in various areas of the society, with the aim of aligning Japan’s technological and scientific levels with those of the Western colonizing powers. This purpose was introduced to the population with the slogan *fukoku kyōhei* 富国強兵 (“wealthy nation and strong army”, “enrich the nation, reinforce the army”), with which the government required the whole country to participate in the transformation of Japan into a modern state.

On a religious level, the Meiji Restoration entailed a significant change: focusing on the emperor, the *tennō* 天皇, as the source of political and religious authority, the Meiji oligarchy pressed for a revival of the original, pure soul of Japan, its original mythological beliefs which justified a renewed significance of the *tennō* as the issue of the *kami*. From this point of view, a whole set of practices considered as local, and pre-Buddhist, was re-arranged and reorganized under the name Shintō, and elevated to the state religion. In 1868 the government imposed the *shinbutsu bunriri* 神仏分離令, separation between *kami* and *buddhas*, in order to divide clearly the Buddhist elements from all the Shintō belief system now central to the state.¹⁷ Various rituals and bureaucratic responsibilities were moved from temples to shrines, as for example the obligation for the household to register at a Shintō shrine; moreover, from 1872, Shintō funerals were introduced as the principal means of dealing with death. For this purpose, a variety of cults were singled out, since they did not conform to state guidelines; they were the symbol of religious syncretism, and they were disparaged as savage, primitive belief thriving on the ignorance and underdevelopment of society. Like many other local religious specialists, the *itako* were discriminated

against and penalised, even legally, and were compared to beggars and dodgers. In particular, the Minister for Religious Education 教部省 emitted an official decree, severely forbidding these specialists to “upset the people” 人民の眩惑, or “obstruct medicine” 医業の差し止め. Later on, this notification evolved into a penal sentence, and all these practices began to be considered as social crimes 社会的な犯罪. This smear campaign ended around the first decade of the twentieth century, when the equation between shamans and superstitions had already widely penetrated society. From then on, especially in the 1930s, we can see a different trend, linked with a new interest in Spiritualism リチュアルイズム. After its emergence and diffusion in the United States and Europe, the Spiritist body of thought was enthusiastically received in Japan. The term was translated into Japanese in various ways, with varying nuances; *shin-reishugi* 心靈主義, *shinreiron* 心靈論 (Spiritist theory), *shinreijutsu* 心靈術 (technique) and *shinrei kagaku* 心靈科学 or *shinrei gaku* 心靈学 (scientific Spiritism). Paranormal phenomena and Spiritist views and investigations first became a topic of discussion in Japanese academic circles around the 1880s, while the decade separating the Sino-Japanese and the Russo-Japanese wars (1895–1905) attested to a significant increase in interest in religious topics.¹⁸ Many Japanese intellectuals and educators were involved with religion, and there was a widespread willingness to combine the most diverse religious and philosophical outlooks with new worldviews; it was a time of fewer established certainties and more uneasiness, a sense of being lost, doubts and anxiety, when ultimate questions remained unanswered, and Spiritism became more successful. As in the West, we see a boom of magazines and newspapers that introduced Spiritism and offered an important forum for discourses on new religiosity; examples are the newspaper *Torozu chōbō* 萬朝報 (Morning Variety News) by journalist and novelist Kuroiwa Shūroku 黒岩 周六, the journal *Seishinkai* 精神界 (Spiritual World) by Buddhist reformer Kiyozawa Manshi 清沢 満之, and debates in literary magazines such as *Waseda Bungaku* 早稲田文学, by the philosopher Tsunashima Ryōsen 綱島 梁川. Spiritism was also rendered attractive for the popular press by the photographs that came out of the experiments with mediums, and the mysterious occurrences observable in hypnosis. It is possible that fascination with the whole spiritualist trend fostered new interest in all those practices involving a communication with the spirits and the kami, representing a backward glance at tradition.

At the same time, new attention to these practices was reinforced with the birth of folklore studies *minzokugaku* 民族学, with the work of the renowned Yanagita Kunio and his studies on female shamanism in Japan and in texts such as “Nihon Miko shi” 日本巫女史, published in 1930 by Nakayama Taro 中山太郎, and some Yomiuri Shinbun 読売新聞 articles in the following years. After the war, in the 1950s, these practices gained new respect. The *itako* in particular started to appear in newspapers, books and magazines, in particular in connection with the rediscovery of Mount Osore 恐山 and connected beliefs. From the Showa 昭和 30 (around the mid-1950s), Mount Osore practices caught the attention of the mass media, and were recognized by, and assimilated into, society as part of its cultural heritage. The mass media affirmed the ancient and primitive origin of these practices, in particular as connected with the other world and the spirits of the dead; they also identified the *Bodai-ji* 菩提寺 (the great mountain temple) as the “*itako* temple”, thereby creating a close connection between the place and the activity of the shamans. It is indeed from this moment on that the word *itako* entered the collective popular imagination. In the post-war period, the word *itako* was widely used in the mass media and in travel magazines; periodicals 「旅」 devoted several articles to *itako* shamanism and its relation with Mount Osore. Relying on fascination with hidden places 秘境 and the ancient customs, magazines emphasized the element of mystery and spirituality, which had been overlooked in previous years; with the support of visual elements such as pictures of the places and the *itako* themselves (for example, the picture of a shaman performing the *kuchiyose* in front of a client), these shamans became an essential element of the mountain’s mysterious landscape.

The contrast with the modern era was emphasized in the 1960s, when the popularity of the *itako* reached a peak (we can speak of a real *itako* boom); in particular, we can see a shift of the focus from the sacred place (here Mount Osore) to the shaman herself, who became the undisputed protagonist in the print media. Opposition to the present was thus stressed and the *itako* began to symbolize resistance against modernity. There are, of course, different viewpoints contesting this revival, and interpreting it as the celebration of suspicious and weird personalities. This is particularly evident in articles written by psychologists and scholars of hypnosis, treating *itako* practices with extreme suspicion and scepticism, due to their inability to verify states of trance and possession.

They often end up reviving the typical Meiji-era equation between *itako* and beggars. After the oil shock of 1972, the Japanese National Railways campaign “Discover Japan” デイスカバージュパン was one of the most striking instances of a political attempt at rediscovery of traditional places, remote villages and ancient values which were threatened by the prevailing modernity and Westernization. Tōhoku became the land of tradition, and Mount Osore practices had an appeal for the urban population, while *itako* were elevated as a symbol of the resistance of authentic Japanese spirits and practices to modernity.

In order to underline the inventiveness of these practices, we can point out some differences in practices between the traditional image of the *itako* until the 1980s and the present situation. In particular, we witness a transformation in the main element of the practice itself: the importance of blindness. Whereas in traditional studies, blindness was considered as the *conditio sine qua non* to be identified as an *itako*, in the last ten years this condition has been considerably relaxed. Among present-day *itako*, as emerged from fieldwork, only the older ones are blind (the *itako* Nakamura, for example, is blind due to mistreated measles), while the younger tend to be sighted practitioners (the *itako* Matsuda, whom I met twice, is a young woman in her forties, without any eye problems). Moreover, while in the past access to the profession was a path chosen by parents and neighbours, and entailed a strict apprenticeship, some of the most recent experiences demonstrate a different—more flexible—path. Examples are available of vocation-type practice (where religious specialists freely chose this path), as in the case of the aforementioned Matsuda who entered the profession by free personal choice, and hereditary transmission practice (the *itako* Aoyama, for example, began to practise while following and helping out her mother). Notwithstanding these changes, practitioners define themselves, and are recognized as, *itako*.

In addition to the above changes, *itako* have witnessed increased popularisation through the media, reflected in an increased interest in the sacred places they are connected with; however, this popularity has led to a shift in understanding the *itako* role and in the reasons for requesting their services. The *itako* themselves report a significant change in the type of requests their clients make while contacting the deceased; whereas in the past (apart from the practice of healing), contact with the deceased was mainly aimed at understanding their needs and the necessity to perform memorial rituals for them, nowadays there

is a greater tendency to contact the family ancestors in order to solve everyday problems or to get advice about individuals' circumstances (employment, relationships, children's problems and so on). As the *itako* Matsuda reported, their work is being transformed into a sort of counselling which people avail themselves of in order to speak privately about personal problems.

To fully understand these changes, we must take into consideration another significant transformation that occurred in Japanese society after the end of the Second World War. In particular, one of the most important changes influencing *itako* practice has taken place within the family system, that is the passage from the extended to the nuclear family, which has had profound consequences for the concepts of death, the afterlife and the worship of ancestors. These transformations belong to the historical, legislative framework which has seen the passage from the i.e. 家 system¹⁹ to the post-war nuclear family which began to characterize Japanese society in the 1950s. Apart from the Meiji restoration, in fact, the post-bellum period was most probably for Japan the time of greatest cultural transformation with the advent of mass culture, a remarkable acceleration of technical innovation and an impressive economic boom leading to unprecedented levels of individual consumption (Ivy 1993). Many drastic changes were also seen in legislation and in customs: specifically, the new 1948 Civil Code, abolishing the i.e. system. In this context state policies had entrusted responsibility for the afterlife to the i.e., emphasizing the relationship of interdependence between ancestors and their descendants: the former depended on the living for their well-being after death while descendants obtained protection and guidance from their dead.

Even after it had been abolished in 1947, when both the family and the worship of ancestors had ceased to be political-propaganda tools, the ideology of death connected with i.e. maintained its strength, continuing to shape the habits of contemporary Japan (Rowe 2011). The importance of the role of i.e. is ever more striking when we consider that the contemporary Japanese family has become a drastically different entity from that codified in the Meiji era. Extended families have shrunk considerably, substituted by nuclear families which, in contemporary Japan, are giving way to families made up of couples or single people, while the birth-rate per woman had sunk to 1.33 in 2001 and divorces were constantly on the rise (Rowe 2011). All these changes undermine the idea of the family as a perpetual, immutable entity, resulting in an

increase of individuals without descendants who can look after them in their afterlife. New funeral and burial practices have appeared to address this problem: to cite two examples, the *eitai kuyōbo* 永代供養墓, “eternally worshipped graves”, and the *shizensō* 自然葬, the practice of scattering remains in the mountains or in the sea. The *eitai kuyōbo* is distinct from tradition in that it is not the family which maintains the graves and venerates the dead but people paid for that purpose, usually monks.²⁰ The growing popularity of these tombs shows that they are being transformed from a family symbol to a place of individual repose. *Shizensō* represents a more powerful passage towards greater individualism: the practice of scattering bones in the mountains or the sea eliminates the need for tombs and sacred practices, and to all effects abolishes the problem of taking care of one’s ancestors’ tombs. The research seems to show that these changes in the basic family structure and the consequent repercussions (practices, rituals, beliefs) upon the sphere of death have influenced not only the *itako* who have carried out their profession from the war onwards but also the relationship between *itako*, the world of the death and the ranks of believers. Indeed, as emerged from fieldwork, entrance paths to the profession and the most frequently practised ritual activities have been substantially modified since before the war. The connection with changes in family structure was clearly expressed by the *itako* themselves who amply underlined renewed interest in the practices of blind *fusha*, with a considerable number of people now seeking a meeting with them in order to carry out rituals.²¹ In addition, a striking difference emerges in the reasons for which, and the expectations with which, people now turn to her for help. Today, she says, people see the *itako* practice as a kind of counselling, which harks back to the original (religious and spiritual) sense of intermediation with *kami* and ancestors. Matsuda asserts that the reason people come to the *itako* is the need to talk to their ancestors about how to handle everyday problems even in a context where ancient family bonds have been lost.

The *itako* profession is going through a critical passage which is driving changes in tradition; on the one hand, we have a new generation of *fusha* which enter the profession following a personal “vocation” and an “individual choice”, thus pressing for an inevitable transformation of the profession from within. Field research has revealed that two of the youngest *itako* (both born in the 1970s) grew up in very different socio-cultural contexts from those of the “traditional” *itako* (who lived in rural areas) and are both sighted, and both interested in the profession not

only for economic reasons. The fact that today access to the profession is no longer the result of straitened economic circumstances or physical disability, but rather a personal choice, considered a vocation by the *itako* interviewed, takes into account changes in tradition and also—above all—a possible development for the future and an inventive element introduced by new generations of practitioners. On the other hand, post-war social and cultural transformations have led to the decline of the traditional family system and drastically changed relations with the dead and the afterlife. While these cultural changes have underlined the *itako* role as the only mediator with the world of the dead, they also have significantly shrunked the gamma of practices and activities for which these *fusha* were sought after and popular in the past. If until after the war *itako* were a source of cures for various illnesses, as well as a guarantee—by means of seasonal rituals—of human–divine equilibrium, today they have almost completely abandoned their healing practices, whereas divination rituals seem to have become the prerogative of *kamisama* (sighted *fusha*). Now the main interest in *itako* on the part of the general public seems to be their connection with the dead. The fulcrum of the relationship between believers and *itako* is the attempt to recreate that bond, best expressed by the *kuchiyose* (invocation of the dead) ritual, thus indicating a possible new itinerary for the future of the profession and a new dimension within which *itako* creativity may demonstrate its full strength.

CONCLUSION

As I have described above, *itako* practices have undergone a series of modifications and shifts in meaning throughout their history, particularly in the past century. This analysis helps to underline how today's *itako* show signs of significant modifications compared with past decades. We have also seen that these modifications are not only the result of external factors but they are also the consequence of individual practitioners' initiative and creativity.

Itako are now at a delicate point of their existence: their number is thinning out, with the decrease in apprenticeship and the retirement of old practitioners. New generations of possible *fusha* have introduced some modifications such as the notion of vocation and choice, causing an inevitable shift from tradition. At the same time, we see that public interest, while it has declined significantly since the 1980s, is nevertheless still

high, especially in connection with the new issues of death and afterlife. As we have shown, there has also been a significant modification of the practices and rituals for which *itako* are now renowned and requested. Today their main function is the practice of *kuchiyose* at Osorezan, at private houses, and in some cases in hotels for tourists. The link with the deceased (expressed through the fascination with the occult and mysterious places like the Osorezan) seems to be therefore the main concern of the general public. Experiencing a dramatic change in the composition of the family and in the collapse of values perceived as traditional (venerating one's ancestors), the attempt to recreate the same bond is now the fulcrum of the relationship between *itako* and believers, symbolized at best in the *kuchiyose* ritual, thus representing a new (possible) path for the future of the profession and a new dimension in which the creativity of *itako* may prove its power.

Therefore, the field-research findings and the foregoing analysis allow us to interpret the *itako* tradition as “inventive tradition”—considering inventiveness not as an ancillary trait of some tradition (such as the invented traditions of Hobsbawm and Ranger) but as the very condition for the existence of any tradition insofar as it is a process of delivering and receiving memories upon which further new values and meanings, perceived as fit and productive for the present, may be conferred.

Future investigation of *itako* practices could evaluate the ways in which modifications introduced in recent decades will influence the profession, the possibility of new means of diffusion in popular culture (new media, for example) and the practice's own survival when faced with these important changes.

NOTES

1. The term *fusha* (or *fujō* 巫女), usually translated as “shaman”, identifies a peculiar type of folk religious practitioner who enjoys a specific relationship with the gods and the spirit world, mainly through possession. Given the controversy surrounding the use of the word shaman, I have chosen here to maintain the original Japanese term, with its specific nuances.
2. They also perform a variety of other rituals (such as *kami-oroshi*, *oshi-rasama-asobase*, *uranai* etc.), and especially in the past were renowned as local healers.
3. One of the most cited examples is the Scottish tradition of the kilt, as analysed by Trevor-Roper (Hobsbawm and Ranger 1983). The male garment

emblematic of the Highlands, supposedly of Celtic origin, is in fact a late eighteenth-century invention that became established only during the Romantic era, in the blooming of national aspirations.

4. This is the element that led many scholars not to consider the *itako* experience as shamanic experience, because of the lack of a vocation or a hereditary transmission of powers.
5. In particular, the master herself is called mother (オッカサマ) and her husband and the other relatives become father, uncles and aunts. Other apprentices are called sisters.
6. Following the teacher, the apprentice starts repeating a various number of sutrā 経, norito 祝詞, songs and wasan 和讃, until she learns them by heart. Among the most important we can mention the Hannya Shingyō 般若心経, the Kannon Sutrā 観音経, the Jizō Sutrā 地藏経 and the Jizō wasan 地藏和讃.
7. There are exceptions in which the apprentice is older, or began menstruating during her apprenticeship; in these cases, more solemn purification rituals take place in order to reach the *kamitsuke* in the proper form (for example, longer fasting).
8. The meaning of this banner is not completely clear; it has the evident practical use of pointing out to the community the place and time of the ceremony; it may also be considered as an invitation for the kami around the country to gather and to possess the apprentice (as we shall see later on); it could also indicate the sacred space which has to be kept apart from the secular world.
9. In Tōhoku, there are mainly three shamanic tools: the catalpa bow *azus-ayumi* 梓弓 or a one-string lute *ichigenkin* 一絃琴, the rosary, called *ira-taka-juzu* イラタカ数珠 and the *oshirasama* dolls オシラ様.
10. Generally adopting the form “Hai, senzosama, o-tanomi mōshimasu... はい先祖様、お頼むもうみます”; at this point the invoked ancestor will give a speech about the importance of taking care of ancestors, *toba an ibai*, and the need to lead a decent life.
11. We also have cases in which several spirits are invoked in the same *kuchiyose*, and each of them will then speak with the living relatives.
12. The image that surfaces here is a mixture of sadness and regret on the part of the dead who can no longer stay with their families, and who still need them to pray for their sake, for example by offering some precious gifts or votive image; simultaneously, there is a very reassuring communication during which the relatives are reassured that their ancestor is helping them, while travelling towards their ancestors’ society.
13. It can be divided roughly between my Tōhoku stay, with the most important interviews being with *itako*, *kamisama*, priests and monks (as well

- as various informants), and my stay in Tokyo, where I was able to gather textual materials and interview academics and field researchers.
14. Specifically, they are the result of my PhD fieldwork.
 15. Heian Period 平安時代: from 794 to 1185 A.D. Kamakura period 鎌倉時代: 1185–1333 A.D.
 16. Already in the late thirteenth century, for example, *fusha* were prohibited from delivering oracles within the Ise Shrine grounds, since they “concealed the truth” from “stupid commoners who believe in falsehoods and become enraptured with deceptive spells”.
 17. The most violent version of this policy was the *haibutsu kishaku* 廃仏毀釈 (destruction of Buddhism, killing of shakamuni), which led to the destruction of tens of thousands of temples, the laicisation of priests and nuns and the loss of objects.
 18. As in the West, one may speak of spiritual longing, which marks the nineteenth century and the *fin de siècle* as a time of great unrest and uncertainty.
 19. The family structure, codified in 1898 in the Meiji era, was considered as the assembly of a principal family, *honke* 本家, and a series of secondary branches, *bunke* 分家, connected by patrilineal descent. It was the model for ritual and funeral practices and raised obligatory worship of ancestors to the level of guarantor of the system in that it was perpetual. Far from representing the most common family system, this patrilineal structure expects the first-born to provide for the continuity of the *honke* branch, while the younger brothers are expected to start secondary *bunke* branches. The i.e. ideal also represented the national basis of a family state with the emperor as the symbolic father; this family ideology, premised on a hierarchical Confucian model, was part of a broader attempt to create a unique Japanese culture that could stand up to the pressures of modernization and state formation.
 20. In some *eitai kuyôbo*, individuals are buried alone while in others bones are consolidated in one grave, not with family ancestors but with unrelated people.
 21. In particular, after the 2011 Tōhoku earthquake, Matsuda reported an increase in visitors during specific religious occurrences.

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