Hashisako Mizuho 橋迫瑞穂. *Ninshin, shussan o meguru supirichuaritī* 妊娠・出産をめぐるスピリチュアリティ [The Spirituality of Pregnancy and Childbirth]. 2021. Tokyo: Shūeisha. 224 pp. ISBN 978-4-08-721180-1.

Hashisako Mizuho's *Ninshin, shussan o meguru supirichuaritī* is a brief monograph setting out a compelling interpretation of twenty-first century women's spirituality in Japan. In Japan, the term "spirituality" is similar in usage to how "New Age" is used in the West, but broader in scope. "Spirituality" is said to avoid the suspicions associated with invoking specific religions and maintain a comfortable level of ambiguity and secularism (Gaitanidis 2012: 274). The readership of spirituality content, and participation in the "spiritual marketplace" of goods and services, are both overwhelmingly dominated by women, and Hashisako sheds light on how some trends within the spiritual marketplace are changing women's perceptions of their own bodies.

The author begins by framing her book in terms of a global transformation in ritual practice and the emergence of a new type of spiritual rhetoric. Premodern associations between women's bodies and bodily pollution, exemplified by taboos and restrictions of women's behaviors surrounding menstruation and childbirth, have gradually declined around the world, including in Japan. The American occupation in the late 1940s encouraged women to come to hospitals for childbirth and problematized traditional midwifery techniques, while in the 1960s, commercial menstrual pads proliferated, giving female consumers added convenience and time. Hashisako argues that the female body was transformed from an object of collective sacrosanctity and taboo into something treated on individual, consumerist, secular, and medical levels, and that in searching for a source of empowerment within their secularized bodies, some Japanese women have developed a wholly new spiritual language surrounding pregnancy and childbirth.

The next four chapters of the book cover specific subtopics within this language of spirituality. Chapter 2 looks at the rise of Japanese language publications in the 2010s with unusual titles such as *Womb Power*, *Womb Sun Magic*, *Womb Chairwoman Haru's Womb Association*, and, most startlingly, *All Your Prayers Will Be Answered By the Uterus!* Hashisako posits that these books are attempting to separate the meaning of the female body from its biological function, and produce an idealized relationship between a woman and her body, grounded in ideas such as "return to nature," "self-love," and "change from within."

Hashisako divides these books into those relating the imagined womb to either mental and physical stamina, and those which relate it to good luck. Stamina advice invokes a vague mythology of "traditional" wisdom in order to connect the uterus to various types of spiritual health practices. In these books, intermixed with scientific medical advice, a gynecologist recommends "womb yoga" to improve blood circulation, while a fortune teller suggests feng shui practices in the home in order to harmonize one's surroundings with the feng shui of the womb. Other publications both evoke and address anxiety surrounding egg counts; here, the focus is not on any medical implications, but on the emotional and psychic consequences of feeling that one's womb is aging after age 35, which is a common source of anxiety in Japan linked closely to societal pressure to produce children (Fassbender 2022: 118–165).

The language of luck is centered around a popular blogger styling herself "Womb Chairwoman Haruko," who conveys messages from her womb. Haruko's womb is mostly non-contingent with the physiological and medical body; rather, it is a spiritual concept which interfaces with a woman through communication and feeling. She warns that women must avoid a "sense of guilt" and live happily, because the womb processes "seeds of karma" from one's emotions. Haruko's message has attracted interest from Japanese celebrities, and Hashisako suggests that women will continue to be attracted to Haruko's disconnection of the womb from the biological process of pregnancy and her focus on the luck one can produce via emotional change. Both Haruko and the other "womb" writers foreground the needs and experiences of women and relegate men to the background.

Chapter 3 deals with the subject of fetal memory. In pediatric medicine, fetal or prenatal memory refers to the development of memory and sense organs in the fetus. In 2014, the film *A Promise Made with God* (*Kamisama to no yakusoku*) was released in Japan; the film links expert interviews on this medical subject to the experiences of mothers who said they had been able to communicate with their unborn children while they were still in the womb. Watching this film in a Tokyo theater, Hashisako observed that the audience was full of women, many of whom were moved to tears by the experience. She links this emotional power to the historical East Asian pregnancy custom of *taikyō*, providing education for the fetus. Recent articulations of *taikyō* link it to medical advice such as avoiding tobacco and alcohol, but frame it as a sort of communication with an unborn child who is already attributed with personhood and consciousness.

Shichida Makoto, an influential mid-century advocate of *taikyō* and early childhood education, described fetal memory in a purely negative sense as trauma inflicted by the "violence" of childbirth. Shichida considered a pregnant mother to have a responsibility to encourage her developing fetus to grow in intelligence and spirit and prevent it from developing psychosocial disorders later in life. Hashisako characterizes Shichida's *taikyō* as patriarchal and eugenic, making the mother responsible for the traumas and developmental disorders inflicted on the unborn child and placing the child's needs before the mother.

In contrast, Ikegawa Akira, a contemporary therapist who collects young children's recollections of life in the womb for his books and clinics, sees *taikyō* as part of a nine-month period in which mother and child share a body and its sensory experiences. Ikegawa is convinced that the soul of the child chooses its mother before conception begins, so that the child's personality and development are determined from the start and the mother's role is to enjoy sharing in the process. For Ikegawa, in fact, the womb is so attractive to the unborn soul that it is possible for a woman to conceive and give birth solely through a soul manifesting in her womb, without any male participation. Hashisako concludes that although Ikegawa espouses conservative virtues of motherhood, he prioritizes the agency of the pregnant mother to the extent of completely excluding the father, thus overcoming patriarchal conceptions of pregnancy and validating single mothers.

Chapter 4 handles the trend for natural birth which has arisen in Japan since the 2000s. After demonstrating the influence of American Ina May Gaskin's woman-centric birth techniques on Japanese publications, Hashisako highlights how Japan has put its own unique spin on Gaskin's techniques. Instead of natural birth representing one part of a self-help regime aimed at improving diet, becoming aware of the body's needs, and resolving problems with insecurity and self-image, Japanese childbirth books center on two concepts: the mystique of the developing child and of the state of motherhood. Thus, childbirth is cast as a way to reassert one's femininity and even improve one's looks. Instead of the Anglo-American self-help models of hypnotherapy and other techniques to minimize pain, for Japanese writers, foregoing pain medication during natural birth demonstrates a feminine ability to overcome pain. Despite her skeptical outlook towards this value system, Hashisako writes that the emergence of a natural birth movement shows that women in Japan, as in the United States, are dissatisfied with the style of treatment that modern hospitals provide to pregnant mothers.

In Chapter 5, Hashisako discusses the relationship of pregnancy to "nature" in the writing of two Japanese social critics. As early as 1982, ecofeminist Aoki Yayoi was critiquing Simone de Beauvoir and second-wave feminism as being in denial of "nature," here meaning the reproductive function of the female body. Aoki developed a familiar analogy equating men to violent and polluting civilization, and women to unspoiled nature, essential for life and vulnerable to exploitation. In contrast, the younger writer Misato Chizuru has blamed feminism for allowing women to believe they can go through life without contributing reproductive energy to society, claiming that such an ideology turns mature women into "hags" (*onibaba*); to avoid this fate, she says, women must reconnect with the "natural" functions of their bodies.

Both writers emphasize the centrality of embodiment to female experience, but where Aoki endorses the actual act of childbirth only as part of a vaguely defined creation of a better world and warns against a patriarchal society that sees women only as "baby-making machines," Misato considers pregnancy and child-rearing to be the central meanings of life as a woman. She promotes the use of cloth menstrual pads, claiming that constant consciousness of the sexual organs and application of the pads will allow women to take control of their menstrual cycles and achieve higher levels of femininity. Hashisako observes that the generational shift from Aoki to Misato has shifted the affirmation of women's embodiment away from part of a larger social critique and towards the fetishization and commercialization of women's bodily consciousness found in Japan's "spiritual marketplace."

In the final chapter, the author analyzes the shared assumptions of these spirituality writers, observing that they all lack consciousness of how modern medicine and feminism have completely transformed the embodied experience of women. Instead, they conjure up an idealized "ancient woman," who they claim "was able to go through pregnancy and childbirth smoothly thanks to having disciplined her body," (p. 184) although scientific data contradicts this theory. Unlike in America, where feminist approaches to pregnancy acknowledge the transformative power of modern medicine but desire a more holistic approach to spiritual well-being, in Japan "it's speculated that sluggishness in lifting restrictions on birth control is due to a reluctance to transfer the initiative of pregnancy and childbirth" (p. 194–195). The pain of childbirth is rationalized as part of the sacrifice that women must go through to increase Japan's rapidly declining population.

Hashisako affirms the value of the "spiritual marketplace," a concept popularized by the American religious scholar Wade Clark Roof, as beneficial for understanding the subjects of this

book. Japanese reviews of this book focus on its failure to discuss the lack of institutional acknowledgement of and assistance for women's labor such as childcare. However, the author speaks more generally, referring to the weakening of organic social bonds between women, extended families and communities, which are now supplemented by products and services aiming to directly serve the needs of female bodies. Hashisako recognizes that the emergence of a spiritual marketplace is not about profit-seeking or medical ignorance, but primarily about answering the complex needs of "spiritually homeless" women seeking out new forms of meaning. Accordingly, this book is not an attack on spirituality, but mainly serves to document a phenomenon Hashisako is witnessing in the spiritual marketplace. Rather than simply objecting to pseudoscientific or mythological elements among spirituality writers, she attempts to integrate her critiques into a responsible and sympathetic portrait of their worldview.

Hashisako's analysis of these texts is thoughtful and thorough, but it would have been beneficial to survey women who use the spiritual marketplace to learn life advice and ask them what they agree and disagree with. We can assume most women buy these books because they find the ideas intriguing rather than ludicrous, but without collecting data, we cannot claim to know how Japanese spiritual consumers interpret and implement these ideas. Additionally, although the object of investigation is described several times in the title, introduction, and conclusion as the "spirituality of pregnancy and childbirth," the book also covers spiritual practices dealing with menstruation, so that the overall topic could be more precisely described as the spirituality of female embodiment. Regardless, Hashisako's work interfaces with existing research in several different ways and raises some fascinating and deep questions for future scholarship.

Although some of the ideas treated in this book may appear unusual at first glance, Hashisako's analysis offers insight into many relevant subjects. For instance, research on Western spirituality has some overlap with the topics treated in this book. Gwyneth Paltrow's website Goop has offered" jade eggs" meant to be inserted inside the vagina, which gynecologists criticize as a source of infection. The esoterica scholar Susannah Crockford (2021) recently analyzed jade eggs as a sort of antisocial conspiracy theory, but completely neglected the gender angle. Hashisako emphasizes that in the Japanese case, such spiritual merchandise is part of a larger social production of a new sacred femininity, distancing female embodiment from the taboo-laden religious identities of past centuries by tying it to new ideas of wisdom.

In her conclusion, Hashisako references the deep historical link between ideals of motherhood and nationalism; indeed, abortion in Japan was partially legalized only in order to serve the economic imperatives of the state, not the individual needs of women (Kato 2009: 47–48). The spiritualization of fetal memory seems to center around the emotions of individual women and children, but does this simply tie Japanese women's bodies to an American-style politics of emotion? The emotional reactions to the film *Kamisama to no yakusoku* seems to evoke parallels with emotional narratives of unborn children used in America's abortion debate.

Finally, where the translated American self-help book that Hashisako introduces focuses on relieving the stress and pain of birth, some Japanese pregnancy manuals seem to encourage directly confronting and undergoing pain. This is remarkable, given Hashisako's excellent point that relief from the pain and danger of childbirth has been a constant struggle for women in both religious and scientific healing paradigms. The old value system behind these new spirituality texts can be seen in a statement by women's health educator Nakanishi Toyoko: "The tradition in Japan is that women accept the discomforts or even extreme pain that may relate to their female bodily functions" (Buckley 1997: 192).

The Japanese approach suggests a certain socialization of pain, a subject which Western writers seem reluctant to address. Prominent philosophers such as Hannah Arendt have even claimed that it is impossible to communicate pain. Yet many of the spirituality texts surveyed in this book speak of womanhood as an ideal to be achieved through endurance, awareness, and communication with one's body during the hardships of menstruation, pregnancy and childbirth. The recent changes Hashisako documents do not reject this view, but rather supplement it with moments of emotion and enjoyment. Are there social circles in which pain creates or validates gender identity? Does a body which cannot undergo menstruation and childbirth lack some qualifications to be female? To what extent is pain still seen as a marker of women's bodies and gender identities in Japan, and how and why does this differ from other countries?

On this last point, Hashisako's book demonstrates how the messages being offered by these Japanese spiritual writers reflect larger changes within discourses of femininity. One common thread running through this book is the unconventional and novel ideas of its subjects. The use of cloth menstrual pads to encourage mindful contemplation of femininity, or the belief in children selecting their own mothers to the extent of allowing virgin birth, seems unprecedented and startling in Japan. *Ninshin, shussan o meguru supirichuaritī* shows us that these novel ideas reflect

both traditional values and changing social contexts. By offering a highly plausible explanation for such phenomena, Hashisako has demonstrated the ongoing value of the field of sociology of religion for interpreting Japanese gender identity in the twenty-first century.

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