

## The Japanese Way of Silence and Seclusion: Memes of Imperial Women 日本式沈黙と隔絶 皇室女性のミーム

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This article examines how tropes of silence and seclusion were utilized both at the dawn of the Japanese imperial house and in its current iteration. Attempts to subjugate women and to subvert subjugation by women exist in the origin myths of Japan, and are repeated in the Heisei era.

*Keywords: Silence, seclusion, Amaterasu, Izanami, Masako, Michiko, Imperial Household Agency*

“In the beginning,” *Seitō (Bluestockings)* founding editor Hiratsuka Raicho pronounced in 1911, “woman was the sun.”<sup>1</sup> Drawing upon a recognizable spiritual trope, she sought to highlight the disparity between the earlier centrality of women in Japanese mytho-history and the perceived value of that same gender millennia later. In doing so, Hiratsuka hoped that tapping into a meme of female value within society would permit the necessary changes to ensure the return of her gender to its place in the sky.

Many of the memes of Japan’s imperial culture focus on women—their treatment and their responses to this treatment, not only as the sun, but also as a producer of a son. In Japan’s origin myth, arguably the most famous of these memes, one can see how, following an archetypal case, women at the highest level of society have both been suppressed and have suppressed themselves. Despite their existence as more cultural than historical, these patterns of suppression have been conscious developments, presented as performed through choices made by individuals. Women’s responses to suppression have also been

shaped by these memes. From them we get archetypal cases promoted by influential members of a society across time. An examination of some key cases can highlight fundamental aspects of society, affecting its central symbolic figures, the imperial family, in ways that are variously religious, political, national, and cultural. In looking at choices made in these archetypal cases, one can compare methods both of subjugation and of attempts to resist subjugation within a society in order to catch some of the complexities surrounding that society’s relationships with and valuations of women. Beyond merely being symbolic, though, the memes we will discuss here reverberate within the imperial house, with very real implications for imperial women—with implications for all Japanese women—even today.

In late 20<sup>th</sup> and early 21<sup>st</sup> century Japan, two of the most famous female figureheads of the nation, Crown Princess and later Empress Michiko, and her daughter-in-law, Crown Princess Masako, have, with varying degrees of success, employed diverse tactics to deal with the strictures of their offices and the expectations of their behavior and the attempts to limit agency placed upon them. In employing silence and seclusion, and by playing the public and private spheres against each other, these women have echoed behavioral memes from archetypes first put forth in Japan’s origin mythopoeia.

By looking at cases within two key, well-recognized narratives of women’s roles within Japanese society – the origin myths of the Japanese state and the story of the late 20<sup>th</sup>

century Imperial Household – this article will explore trends in the treatment of women, and the responses of women, at the highest level of Japanese society. The silencing and seclusion of Izanami and Amaterasu, as well as the interplay of private and public in the foundational myths, resonate in the contemporary stories of Princesses Michiko and Masako. In history, and in the behaviour of both of the imperial women and others we observe not only archetypal, but also mimetic elements.

### *The Goddess in the Cave*

With the sun metaphor, though she herself would disavow it, Hiratsuka recalled the origination myths of Japan, and the birth of the sun goddess Amaterasu, from whom Japan’s imperial household was purported to be descended. In Amaterasu’s origin, the relationship of men with women—both in the physical and spiritual sense—was shaped. The story of Amaterasu and her progenitors, Izanagi and Izanami, as an origin myth and a heuristic device, is far more complex than an obvious feminist manifesto. The tale of Amaterasu and Izanami, her “mother”, as conveyed by the *Kojiki*, Japan’s oldest extant chronicle, presents a legitimising meme of the subjugation of women, and of women’s attempts to circumvent subjugation; and this meme occurs not only within Japan’s origination myths, but also in far more modern iterations among Amaterasu’s current putative descendants.



Amaterasu

Neither Amaterasu nor Izanami emerge from their stories unscathed. At the beginning of the *Kojiki*, following a commentary by the compiler, we are confronted by the primal void, which appears in so many origin myths, and from that void emerge Japan’s progenitrix deities, Izanagi and Izanami, male and female, respectively. The pair is tasked with creation, which is first undertaken through a rather pragmatic and perfunctory attempt at intercourse. While the actual, physical coupling seems to be fairly by the book, the postcoital utterance by Izanami ruins the encounter, forcing a miscarriage of form. It is Izanagi’s privilege to speak first, but Izanami, whether out of ignorance or excitement, blurts out her satisfaction with the partnering. Women are often charged with ruining aspects of origination myths—Eve and the apple, Pandora and the box—and Izanami falls into this trap. Her brother-spouse orders her silence after their next attempt, allowing him the first words following their union, and she complies with his command. It is his right to pronounce the union satisfactory first, whereupon Izanami is allowed to echo his sentiment. After all, when she was the first to speak, the offspring produced are, essentially, aborted, abandoned to the void. Izanami’s initiating speech is a miscarriage, a breakdown; her echo, a success. She complies, and, by choosing to hold her tongue, Izanami has been silenced, both by her partner and, in her acquiescence, by herself.

With Izanami’s purely reactive acquiescence, the physical features and natural phenomena of Japan are created by their pairings, although, in the process, Izanami is consumed by the vagaries of childbearing (birthing fire is not without its difficulties), and dies. Distraught, Izanagi attempts to retrieve his spouse from the underworld, but is disgusted by the sight of her as a polluted corpse, and flees from her, entrapping her in the underworld, and forcing her seclusion in the land of the dead. In his attempt to purify himself following this interaction, Izanagi, in ablution, produces the

three noble children, Amaterasu, Tsukuyomi, and Susanoo. Izanami, then, is left as a tragic figure, silenced, sequestered, and subjugated, literally uninvolved in the birth of her own daughter. Faced with suppression, Izanami submits, albeit unhappily, remaining caged in the realm of the dead.

Meanwhile, Amaterasu takes the place of the sun, splitting the sky with her brother, Tsukuyomi, the moon. Yet Amaterasu, even as imperatrix, is not in control of her story at that point. She reacts, rather than forcing others to react to her. Instead, it is her second brother upon whom the tale turns. Having the sky split between his siblings, Susanoo grows envious and throws a tantrum that merits his expulsion from the sky he so desperately wanted to control. Before taking his leave, however, he confronts his angry sister, who questions his motives for the visit. He challenges her distrust, and the two place bets, settled by producing deities, to determine whether her distrust of her brother's motives was sound. By the criteria of their contest, it was not. Susanoo once again throws a tantrum, this time in celebration of his veracity. In anger, Amaterasu sequesters herself in a cave, casting the world in darkness.

While she is secluded, Amaterasu has regained control. Unlike her mother, Amaterasu *chooses* to hide herself. Both women were faced with the anger of men, but Amaterasu is able to control her seclusion. As her brother, in his envy, sought to subjugate her, utilizing her anger and her distrust to his advantage, Amaterasu had given up the power she had been granted. Only through sequestering herself, separating herself from the situation and from the subjugator, is she able to reaffirm a modicum of power. Only in her absence, then, is Amaterasu the sun once more. Unlike her mother, Amaterasu refuses to accept acquiescence, even after losing power. Instead she reestablishes her own power by appearing to forego it. Her power now derives from her

ability to refuse to interact with those who would attempt to control her. Only upon reemerging from the cave, does her supremacy become a matter of lineage—establishing her claim to the imperial line; at this point power is again displaced to the imperial line. For that period in the cave, Amaterasu is truly at her most powerful as an individual.

Power allows an individual the agency to dictate her own story—to act as an agent and to react to others. Power, and its creation, is at the heart of the origin story, both as a trope and as a technique. Despite its claim to detail a story nearly a thousand years earlier, the *Kojiki* itself was compiled in 712 CE at the behest of one of Japan's few empresses regnant, Genmei. The work was commissioned to substantiate the origin both of the land over which Genmei claimed to rule, and of Genmei's right to rule. Like so many similar texts, religious or otherwise, the *Kojiki* was concerned with power, and who deserved to hold and wield it. It was a justification of parentage, which, in turn, was a justification of suzerainty. History conveys legitimacy, and legitimacy bequeaths power.

To suggest that this work, which justified a woman's rule by invoking a supreme woman, would hold the keys to subjugation of women, might seem a bold, even counterintuitive, statement, but the audience for the work was as important as its sponsor. The *Kojiki* was intended for a proto-Japanese audience, over whom Genmei both purported and desired to rule, but it was also meant for a proto-international audience—the imperial household of China and its outliers. China, for this portion of the world, was the metropole, and it was the imperial court of China that smaller hegemonies or would-be hegemonies sought to emulate, and against which they measured themselves. Thus, the *Kojiki* was both an internal and external political text, one meant to justify rule over a "country" that did not yet exist as such in the eyes of its populace and its counterparts.<sup>2</sup>

Accordingly, the *Kojiki* had to use recognizable characters and customs, or risk failing to convey its intended message. The rectitude of rule and of the ruler's rights, then, had to be clear both in a world of local religio-philosophical constructs and in the parameters of the Chinese world order. At the same time, it had to present a comprehensible justification for rule that operated outside of the latter's Mandate of Heaven, permitting the usurpation of a leadership that no longer aligned with Heaven. So Amaterasu became the cornerstone on which to legitimate rule, and political action was taken to attribute the fabrication of the unbroken lineage to a matriarch. Though she had produced sons enough to merit herself the imperial progenitor, Amaterasu, as the sun herself, remained powerful only as a trope—lighting up a cave.

For centuries, long after the reign of Genmei, the origin myths became confused and lost to common cultural knowledge. In creating the modern myths of nationalism and nationhood at the end of the Edo Period, the Satsuma-Chōshū alliance to whom the Meiji Restoration is credited revived the saga, utilizing it once more to justify political ends. To ensure its satisfactory maintenance, too, they “restored” the imperial cult—underwritten by the Imperial House Law, the Imperial Household Ministry, and even the Imperial Palace in the new Imperial Capitol. The Meiji elite, then, made the imperial institution public.<sup>3</sup> These patterns would continue throughout the modern era, as the Imperial Household Agency works to keep the Imperial Household in the public eye, a touchstone of nationalism. But humans, imperial or otherwise, cannot be actors merely as touchstones, memes, tropes, or consumable packets. In the psychological struggle between the individual as agent and as respondent, she may use the private sphere to regain power and agency. She may choose silence and seclusion.

*The Trope of Seclusion and the Imperial House in Postwar Japan*

The notion of extreme seclusion, the flight to the private sphere, has, in itself, become something of a Japanese trope, both within and outside the nation. The phenomenon of the *hikikomori*, those socially withdrawn recluses whose identity is predicated solely on the drastic privatization of the self, is often presented as a culture-bound syndrome. Even if the individual's withdrawal is comorbid with other psychiatric diagnoses (depression, social anxiety disorder, etc.), ultimately, the diagnosis is often seen as sufficient unto itself, and is believed by many commentators to be one almost wholly unique to Japan, or at least to Japan originally. For the *hikikomori*, the public sphere narrows to the self. It is a condition of the extreme individual—a solipsistic exercise in which the individual separates himself or herself from the larger society.<sup>4</sup>

Individuality of any sort was often seen by the myopic as somehow antithetical to Japanese consciousness,<sup>5</sup> but it is quite ineluctable and certainly has been so in the relatively recent development of the Imperial Household. With defeat and the Occupation that followed, the Shōwa Emperor, Hirohito, descendant of Amaterasu, officially ceased to be divine. Instead, he was repackaged for national consumption as a mortal, the so-called “people's Emperor,” a public commodity. Of course, the emperor's mortality was never in doubt, a certainty confirmed when he died in 1989. Succeeding him was his eldest son, the Heisei Emperor, Akihito. Akihito was always a better fit as an individual to become “the people's Emperor,” not least because his marriage was a love match, and his bride, despite her privilege and wealth, was a commoner. Shōda Michiko had beguiled her prince on the tennis court in 1957, and was approved as a suitable match by the Imperial Household Agency, a supragovernmental agency meant to ensure the health and longevity of the very cornerstone of Japan's imperial polity, an institution over 2,000 years in the making.

Engaged to her prince the next year, and married the following year, Michiko marked the triumph of love in a new age—Japan’s economy was on the brink of rapid growth, consumerism was rampant, and Michiko herself became another object to be consumed by a delightfully hungry public. As Amaterasu herself was sold to Genmei’s public, so too was Michiko packaged to become a utilitarian product, both existentially and physically. Over a million television sets were sold leading up to the royal wedding to allow a nation to partake in the spectacle of Michiko’s marriage, to consume her as “bride,” and Michiko was made into a fashion plate. Yet as such, one consumed Michiko not merely as product, but also as false consumer—What did she wear? How did she do her hair? What sort of goods did she like? How did she act as a crown princess or a wife? And, as time went on, how did she establish herself as the female head of a nuclear family?

unbroken imperial lineage, she could now trace her progeny’s ancestry. She was a product and a re-producer, a woman replying and reacting to the Imperial Household Agency’s strictures upon her. When she chose to raise her children herself or dress in a way that evoked Jackie Kennedy, Michiko was choosing to react to the very institution that had approved of her as partner for the future emperor. In acquiescing to its wishes, at least publicly - while differentiating herself and fighting whatever battles she chose privately - she permitted the relationship to appear harmonious, and gave the IHA the power to be perceived as equal partner in her volition. In other words, she projected the image of a reactor, not an agent. Her public silence, therefore, even in the face of clear action, negated her own power. Thus, publicly, Michiko could remain a product—branded as the ideal female model, both in terms of fashion and comportment—all the better to feed the so-called “Micchii boom” that she produced in her reproduction.<sup>6</sup>



**Naruhito and Masako**

Michiko’s production, of course, was not solely limited to her parturition or to her consumerism. Yet much of it was as reactive as the behaviour of Izanami and Amaterasu: the women to whom, having married into the

Yet Michiko chafed under the control of being made into a product, even as she seemed to acquiesce in the process. A product, after all, ultimately lacks control of itself, lacks the agency of an actor. So, as the IHA strove to create the perfect image of the rising empress, the weekly magazines that had once admired her turned on her, decrying her as domineering, demanding, imperious—often charges levied against a woman insisting on exercising agency. She had faced backlash before, criticism from within the IHA and, rumors circulated by her mother-in-law, but soon after her husband’s coronation, stories of Michiko’s demands that servants “peel her apples” and “prepare instant ramen” for midnight snacks made the rounds in the weeklies. Whether or not such stories were true, the idea that this woman should make her desires known was so widely criticized that it became a feature of autumnal reportage in 1993.<sup>7</sup> Faced with such vitriol, Michiko, whether aware of following precedent or not,

became unable to speak. The empress had literally fallen silent, struck down, it was said, by a nervous disorder. Though she appeared on the balcony at her husband's side as he greeted the throngs assembled on his birthday, two days before Christmas, she could only wave, mutely.

Between the booms and the bashing to which she was subjected, Michiko found herself volleyed between forces which were set on objectifying her. The Imperial Household Agency which claimed to support her also claimed power over her public presence. The IHA proclaimed that its history could be traced back to a time before the promulgation of the *Kojiki*, granting itself another good half century of lineage, to the Taiho Code of 701 CE. These sixty-odd years were a claim of ownership over the imperial lineage, despite the fact that the laws authorising the role of the IHA were not enacted until 1908. In maintaining the public image of a private family, particularly after the alterations to the imperial seat in the wake of defeat in war, the IHA insisted on keeping these spheres—the public and the private—distinct.<sup>8</sup>

The delineation of public and private spheres and the necessity for imperial women's silence in the public sphere, evident in Michiko's life, has ancient echoes. Amaterasu had desired that her brother properly follow demarcations beyond those of the rice paddies he destroyed. Yet Susanoo knew no such bounds. What was private could be made public, collateral damage be damned. In responding to his public tantrums, Amaterasu reacted by retreating into the most private of spheres—solitude. In her reaction, Amaterasu was not a sun notable solely for its absence. Like a nuclear reactor, she became a power turned in on itself, marked by internal fusion. Michiko, of course, never fully turned in completely on herself, as her forebearer had. But Michiko's daughter-in-law did.

### *The Goddess in the Cave Returns*

Like an origination myth, fairy tales centre on archetypes. The girl who captures the heart of a prince, raised up from relative obscurity to the heights of grandeur and opulence, who undergoes the transformative process from duck to swan—this story is one whose tropes transcend cultures and societies. But these stories conceal deeper relationships and more complex understandings. As Hiratsuka noted, Amaterasu is not just the sun: likewise, the story of Princess Masako is not just a fairy tale.

As in the fairy tales, Owada Masako did not begin her story as a princess. But she did begin it with many other notable and important identifiers—an internationally-educated savant, a polyglot, and a diplomat, to say nothing of her identity as a daughter, sister, friend, and, perhaps, girlfriend. Meeting her prince was neither the beginning nor the end of her story, although it certainly altered the tenor of her existence. She was a unique princess—supposedly a little too smart, too old, too independent, and too tall for the prince whose heart she had won, and whom he attempted to pursue over a period of over half a decade. She was also a princess who, when she finally yielded to the prince's proposals, was faced with the apparently undesirable position of becoming the Crown Princess of Japan—a station which some 75% of Japanese women interviewed for one study simply would not accept.<sup>9</sup>

But why not? Immediately following her betrothal, Masako was whisked away to be made over, as all true fairy tale princesses are, into the best approximation of a princess, given limitations mentioned above. Not quite the fairy godmother that she was perhaps hoping for, the Imperial Household Agency transformed Masako into the same sort of princess bride that had been such a novel product some decades earlier, during economic boom times, not the bust that the Heisei era of Akihito's

reign oversaw.

But Masako soon discovered that she was not merely an anachronistic product of the Imperial Household Agency, she was also a product of a powerful media presence. At their public interactions and interviews as a couple, Masako and her prince, Naruhito, were analyzed as offerings to the nation, both domestically and internationally. And while Naruhito came across as somewhat awkward, Masako became an ambivalent commodity. The mass media found her a starry-eyed lover, while some feminists decried her as an exemplar of the female willingness to lose agency. Western journalists saw her as a “sacrificial lamb” to an outmoded institution, while conservatives feared her as a feminist iconoclast.<sup>10</sup> Beyond her production by the IHA, Masako was produced by many more forces than Michiko had been. Her own agency was displaced, not necessarily through her choice to marry into this unbroken line, but rather through a public need to produce and consume her.

And as a product, she has been cowed into choosing to remain silent publicly. When her first interview with her fiancé proved disastrous due to her desire to answer questions directly and openly, she was reprimanded and reminded what it was to be a product. Masako was always a quick learner, it seems. Her determination had certainly served her in the past, and her résumé showed no evidence of prior failure.



Yet, unlike her mother-in-law, and the long line of women presumed to precede her, Masako the product could not produce an heir. The woman who had succeeded at so many other tasks and jobs could not produce the only thing that, as a princess, she was required to do. A miscarriage in 1999, six years into the marriage, led to continued speculation of Masako’s fertility and suitability. After all, Masako had fallen pregnant, only to provide an inhospitable environment for Japan’s 127<sup>th</sup> emperor-to-be.<sup>11</sup>

Public speculation about the faulty product seemed to catalyze Masako’s shame, and she became increasingly silent, both vocally and existentially. She began to recede further into herself, even as she carried to term a viable imperial progeny in 2001. But the only child of the future emperor and his bride was a girl. Masako, nearly 38, had failed. She had lost this contest, and like Amaterasu, she retreated.

In a country made famous for its *hikikomori*, the Crown Princess became their analogue, like them reacting to the world by seeking physical solitude and attempting to regain control by limiting the scope of their interactions. *Hikikomori* become their own suns, around which a world, microcosmic though it may be, revolves.

Masako’s absence had not cast the world into blackness, even if her own life seems dark. The attempts to coax her from her seclusion have been unsuccessful over decades, and the birth of a male heir by Naruhito’s younger brother and his wife has postponed the necessary reevaluation of the suitability of imperial rule by an empress, the same gendered rule that commissioned the myth of origin to legitimize imperial rule. Still, nothing has truly convinced Masako that the wider world is worth returning to.

Silence has long been believed to be a sign of subjugation. Izanagi demanded Izanami’s reticence and compliance. The IHA insisted on Masako’s politesse. But so too can silence convey a form of public strength. Michiko bit her tongue in public, a product of the IHA and the news weeklies. Yet her strength was that of Izanami, not Amaterasu, who maintained control over a microcosm. Sequestration can be imposed on the powerless by the powerful, becoming a way to maintain control over another by limiting her environment. But it can also convey an attempt to regain the power that has been wrenched from the one who reacts. Amaterasu restricted the world in which she shone by retreating to a cave, like Masako hoping to reaffirm control over a far smaller sphere.



In the beginning, woman was the sun, and now,

some millennia later, woman was expected to produce the son. A sun, like Amaterasu, is a singular being, existing as a sole power. The production of sons, however, requires another individual, a preeminent individual who may force the other into a position of silent submission. Will a future generation of Japanese imperial women be able to overcome the enduring trope of silence and seclusion, imposed or chosen, as a response to the demands of male power? And beyond that, what message does Masako’s fairy tale send to her subjects, both female and male?

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**Notes**

<sup>1</sup> Hiratsuka Raicho. 1992. *Genshi, josei ha taiyō deatta: Hiratsuka Raichō jiden 1881-1*. Tokyo: Ōtsuki Shoten.

<sup>2</sup> Delmer Brown. “[Kojiki Commentary](#).” Japanese Historical Text Archive. Berkeley.

<sup>3</sup> Takashi Fujitani. 1996. *Splendid Monarchy: Power and Pageantry in Modern Japan*.

<sup>4</sup> A. R. Teo. 2010. “A New Form of Social Withdrawal in Japan: A Review of *Hikikomori*.” *International Journal of Social Psychiatry*.

<sup>5</sup> Ruth Benedict. 1946. *The Chrysanthemum and the Sword*.

<sup>6</sup> “[\(Shōwashi Saihō\) Micchi- bu-mu](#).” *Asahi*



*Shimbun*. January 5, 2014.

<sup>7</sup> “Kōgōsama hanron.” *Mainichi Shimbun*. October 10, 1993.

<sup>8</sup> “[Kunaichō ni tsuite no naka no enkaku.](#)”

<sup>9</sup> Louise Lague. April 1, 1991. “He’s Educated, Presentable and Comes from a Good Family—So Why Can’t Japan’s Prince Naruhito

Find a Bride?” *People*.

<sup>10</sup> David Sanger. June 7, 1993. “The Molding of Masako-san, Japan’s Perfect Bride.” *The New York Times*.

<sup>11</sup> David McNeill and Herbert P. Bix. 2004. “Trouble at the Top: Japan’s Imperial Family in Crisis.” *The Asia-Pacific Journal: Japan Focus*.