

MIZUKO KUYŌ ONLINE: RELIGIOUS RITUAL AND INTERNET SPACE IN
CONTEMPORARY JAPAN

by

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THESIS ABSTRACT

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This thesis looks at three different Japanese websites to examine how each spreads information about mizuko kuyō and how each provides online spaces for users in which they can share their own experiences with the ceremony. The goal is to show how perceptions of mizuko kuyō have changed with the advent of the Internet and the rise of Japanese Internet culture. Additionally this study shows how individuals now actively participate in dialogues about mizuko kuyō online and how this affects mizuko kuyō as a cultural practice. Emphasis is placed on the shift from mizuko kuyō being a temple dominated religious practice to a more secular and practitioner-focused ritual.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Mizuko kuyō is a Japanese memorial ceremony that developed in the 1970s as a reaction to abortion becoming the primary form of birth control after World War II. During the 1990s, Western scholars focused their attention on *mizuko kuyō* as an academic study, examining the cultural and religious significance of the ceremony. William LaFleur and Helen Hardacre devoted entire books to examining and dissecting the ceremony, its meanings and purposes, and how and why it developed. Academics such as Elizabeth G. Harrison and R.J. Zwi Werblowsky wrote significant articles contributing to the discussion of *mizuko kuyō* as a religious ritual of mourning for women and the cultural and historical influences that contributed to its spread throughout Japan.

However, little research has been done on the development of *mizuko kuyō* since the late 1990s and early 2000s and in what ways *mizuko kuyō* has been affected by the technological revolution of the new digital age. With over 80% of Japanese citizens connected to the Internet, new ways of information dissemination have developed incorporating nearly every facet of Japanese culture and lifestyle. *Mizuko kuyō*, too, has found a new life in online spaces, where forums, temple websites, blog posts, link sharing sites and question pages provide a plethora of information for anyone seeking to know more about the practice. This thesis will focus on three different Japanese *mizuko kuyō* websites and how they actively contribute to an open discussion of *mizuko kuyō* in an online public forum. By examining these three websites, I will show how women, and

now men as well, are using Internet spaces to talk about mizuko kuyō on their own terms and taking the discussion and interpretation of their practice into their own hands rather than be told what the practice should mean to them.

My research methodology consists of translating three Japanese mizuko kuyō websites and compiling data based on user generated comments and blog entries, website structure and functionality, and specific user-friendly features of each website. I do this in order to arrive at a more complete understanding of how mizuko kuyō websites have created online spaces for the discussion of the ceremony and what kind of modes of agency and expression each website advocates. I address some of the following questions in my research: 1) What is each website's agenda (its reason for existing or purpose) and how does this agenda affect how it uses online space as a means of promoting user-generated comments and open expression? 2) What types of digital media (here defined as the actual "end product" of digital development, such as digital videos, art, images) or technological features (online digital user interfaces such as blogs, message boards, comment sections, rankings) does each website incorporate in order to provide an online community for its users? 3) How do these websites portray mizuko kuyō as a practice and how is this significant in terms of historical portrayal or promotion of mizuko kuyō? 4) How do these websites represent the current state of mizuko kuyō in contemporary Japanese culture, especially in comparison to previous representations?

I translated, interpreted and analyzed three different mizuko kuyō websites: Honju-in, a temple website, mizukokuyou.com, an independent mizuko kuyō temple rating site, and Let's Perform Mizuko Kuyō, an archived blog site about mizuko kuyō.

Each website discusses mizuko kuyō in a manner consistent with its own stated or implied goals. Each provides users of the website with unique features that work to enhance the online experience for the user while utilizing specific types of digital technology to reach a broad audience. Each website contributes to a revolutionized age of information dissemination in which no opinions are taboo and even the smallest voice is audible. Finally, each website constructs an online space that allows for individuals to freely express themselves in an open forum and share their experiences with mizuko kuyō on a massive scale.

In order to understand the significance of mizuko kuyō taking on a new life in Internet spaces, it is first necessary to discuss mizuko kuyō in both a historical and cultural context. This will allow the reader to understand the complex history of the practice and how women have, in many respects, been silenced when discussing their own reproductive rights. Additionally, the development of these types of websites is a direct result of how Japan has embraced the Internet and developed both mobile and home-based computer technologies to become a culture of constant connectivity. Knowing how Japan has developed in terms of Internet technology as well as how people are using the Internet sheds light onto how each website utilizes specific online features to appeal to a broad audience. Chapter II focuses on understanding the how and why of mizuko kuyō and the emergence of Japanese Internet culture.

Chapter III focuses on the mizuko kuyō website of a Buddhist temple located in Tokyo called Honju-in 本寿院. Temples play a critical role in mizuko kuyō, and the relationship between temples, women, and mizuko kuyō is extremely deep and

complicated. I begin by discussing my reasons for choosing this temple website when there are hundreds of other temple mizuko kuyō websites available for analysis. I then examine the Honju-in website through its content and features in order to understand the purpose of the website and what it hopes to accomplish by maintaining a mizuko kuyō website. I first discuss the obvious Buddhist agenda of the website and how it uses digital media and the bodhisattva Jizō as catalysts to spread the Buddhist teachings and principles surrounding mizuko kuyō as a religious practice. I also look at the business aspects of Honju-in and how the temple uses its website as a means of advertising its own services and the effect this has on mizuko kuyō practice in real life as opposed to the digital realm. I end by analyzing two different message boards available on the Honju-in mizuko kuyō website and how they function to create an online space for individual users to express themselves and their experiences at the temple and with mizuko kuyō.

Chapter IV combines two different independently run mizuko kuyō websites, mizukokuyou.com and Let's Perform Mizuko Kuyō. Mizukokuyou.com 水子供養ドットコム¹ is an independently and anonymously run temple rating website that provides information about mizuko kuyō in a more secular manner without strong religious or cultural biases. Unlike Honju-in, which is a self-serving website, mizukokuyou.com functions as a conglomeration of different temple websites with no actual religious or temple affiliation nor any means of profiting from hosting different temple links and postings. I first discuss how mizukokuyou.com utilizes anonymity as a means of creating an online community that encourages user feedback and comments. The idea of

¹ The website uses this combination of kanji and katakana to display its name.

“lurking,” an Internet phenomenon where website users do not actively participate in an online community yet still use the community as a source of information, plays a significant role in both websites but has a greater influence on mizukokuyou.com thanks to its anonymous user rating system. I examine the importance of the user rating system on the website and why the loss of this feature due to recent website updates lessens the website’s impact in the online mizuko kuyō community.

Let’s Perform Mizuko Kuyō (LPMK) 水子供養をしましょう offers a unique look into what women really think about mizuko kuyō. An archived mizuko kuyō blog from 2008, LPMK provides nine unique blog entries written by different women who have performed mizuko kuyō. A completely anonymous site, I first try to understand how this website functioned when it was active: how did so many different women contribute to one blog? I then use examples from each entry to discuss different entrant’s perceptions of the spirit of their lost child: were women in 2008 still attached to the idea of a vengeful baby spirit haunting them or were they more secular in their mizuko kuyō practice? Furthermore, I examine how the blog itself is inherently biased towards mizuko kuyō yet still provides differing opinions on reasons for performing the ceremony. LPMK is a contemporary look into the minds of women who perform mizuko kuyō.

As a note before discussing in more detail each website, studying digital media and online culture and content presents a special challenge for researchers. In the blink of an eye, a website, an online video, or a blog can disappear and the focus of one’s research can be lost without warning. Internet culture is constantly changing, constantly updating, and constantly moving on to the next big thing. They say once something is on the

Internet, it stays on the Internet, but this is only true of some content and does necessarily apply to all websites. I began my research on the Honju-in page and mizukokuyou.com in Fall 2011 and continued to write about them into Spring of 2012. Upon reexamining both websites in Fall 2012, both had undergone updates and significant reconstruction in a variety of areas. Some features were added, others modified, and some parts of each site were completely removed. At first this seemed like a severe setback. All my translations and all my analysis seemed to no longer apply. However, after recollecting data, I realized what a boon these updates were. I now had a base of comparison for each website against itself. I could see what Honju-in updated or abandoned and see if this had any real impact on the website. For mizukokuyou.com, the loss of its rating system, which I had previously raved about as the backbone of the site, completely altered how the website functions in terms of its presence as an independent user based website. How can it be a rating website if the rating system is taken away? With this ability to compare the old websites with their new counterparts, understanding how each site contributes to the online mizuko kuyō community as a whole became more complex and more fascinating as a subject matter. For these two sites, I have made notes as to whether or not I am discussing a current feature or a past feature for the sake of clarity.

CHAPTER II

DEVELOPING NEW CUSTOMS: THE ADVENT OF MIZUKO KUYŌ AND THE RISE OF INTERNET CULTURE IN JAPAN

Mizuko kuyō as a funerary ceremony and religious ritual in Japan has a relatively short history, dating back only to the 1970s when a few temples first began offering the service to its female practitioners. By the late 1980s and 1990s, mizuko kuyō had become such a phenomenon in Japan as a subcultural practice, researchers could no longer ignore this new and quite popular ceremony for women who had had an abortion. In many ways mizuko kuyō has established itself in contemporary Japan as a cultural practice, having lost its controversy and settled into a life of business as usual at the local temple.

Online culture, too, is a newer development in Japan, though looking at the amount of online content originating from Japan, from cat pictures to cat videos to cat blogs, one would think the Internet has existed there since the days of the *bakufu*. Online communities, through message boards, forums, blogs, ask and answer sites, and posting sites, allow Internet users throughout Japan to connect with each other and share thoughts, ideas, and information, create support groups to discuss important or controversial topics, and exchange digital media such as photos and video. Internet studies are quickly becoming a prominent field as part of Japanese cultural studies and represent an important means of understanding how people are communicating with each other in this digital age.

This chapter combines two subjects that are more or less unrelated in open comparison. How does understanding a funerary ceremony for dead children relate to

knowing the development of Internet technology and studies of online communities in Japan? My research is the result of what happens when older culture merges with newer culture to create a brand new and separate area of study. One must first know about the loaded history of mizuko kuyō and women's reproductive rights within the context of abortion and birth control in order to understand why online spaces created for mizuko kuyō are so important in a dialogue about women's agency, free expression, and a social shift in perceptions of what mizuko kuyō is. Additionally, contemporary studies of online communities in Japan and how individuals utilize Internet spaces and interact with each other contributes to this dialogue of free public expression and allows the reader to understand how these spaces developed. The big question remains, though: what *is* mizuko kuyō?

What Is Mizuko Kuyō?

What is mizuko kuyō? While a seemingly easy question to answer, the reality is mizuko kuyō is a highly complex social custom laden with different meanings and interpretations and shaped by a variety of influential factors over the past seventy years. Examining mizuko kuyō simply as what it "is" ignores the social, cultural, religious, and governmental influences that acted to create a ceremony heavy with meaning and subject to both praise and scrutiny. Understanding how mizuko kuyō came to be and how it came to be studied and interpreted by academics allows for a more complete understanding of why mizuko kuyō in online spaces carries such significance in contemporary Japan.

Mizuko kuyō is a Japanese Buddhist memorial ceremony that developed surrounding abortion during the 1970s at numerous Buddhist temples and continues in contemporary Japan as a type of subcultural spiritual practice. Though specifically directed at women who have had abortions, the ceremony also includes women who have had miscarriages or stillborn births and can include the deaths of small children. Men, usually husbands or boyfriends, can also participate in the ceremony despite its predominately female associations. Where exactly mizuko kuyō began is unknown, but the practice has extended to all parts of Japan and is not limited to one specific sect of Buddhism. Some Shinto shrines offer mizuko kuyō but such services are less common at shrines than at temples. Mizuko kuyō is directly linked to the Japanese bodhisattva Jizō, a figure of infinite compassion and a renowned protector of women, children and travelers.

The term *mizuko* consists of two Japanese kanji, the first being *mizu* 水, the character for water, and the second *ko* 子, the character for child. Together they mean ‘water child’ and specifically denote a baby that has died before birth. In some Japanese beliefs, a baby exists in a liminal state before it is born, a liquid state in which it is not yet part of the human world yet no longer a part of the world of the gods, where babies are said to originate.² A *mizuko*, then, exists in a kind of pre-life limbo in which it is neither fully formed nor non-existent, a living being yet not human. In contemporary Japan, *mizuko* are specifically associated with aborted fetuses, but the term existed prior to widespread abortion practices and can still be used for miscarriages and stillbirths.

² Matsudaira, Narimitsu. “The Concept of Tamashii in Japan,” in *Studies in Japanese Folklore*, ed. Richard M. Dorson, Toichi Mabuki and Tokihiko Oto.(Bloomington, Indiana: Indian University Press 1963), 186.

Kuyō 供養 is the Japanese term for memorial ceremony or ritual. *Kuyō* exist as a practice in both Shinto worship and Buddhism and can be performed at either a shrine or a temple. Though memorial ceremonies are most commonly held for people, Japanese society, a culture of highly ritualized practices for every day things, has a long history of creating *kuyō* for objects and animals as well. Some temples in Japan offer *kuyō* to its practitioners in order to honor the loss of a well-used tool. *Hari-kuyō* 針供養, for example, allows people to take their broken needles to a temple and have them blessed as a means of showing thanks to the needle for aiding the user in his or her tasks. In contemporary practice, *petto kuyō* ペット供養, or pet memorial services, have become quite popular in a society of enthusiastic and passionate pet owners.³ Thus *mizuko kuyō* could be thought of as an almost natural development in Japanese society due to a rich history of memorializing lost items. The idea of the liminal state of the child in the womb combined with the a Japanese penchant for memorial ceremonies raises an interesting question about *mizuko kuyō*. Some women who perform the ceremony do so as an actual funerary ceremony because they think of the lost child as a human. But do other women perform the ceremony more like a *hari-kuyō*, where the practitioners thinks of a *mizuko* more as an object than a once living thing? Or does the idea of a *mizuko* as an object allow some women to feel no need to perform the ceremony? These questions will be examined again in Chapter IV, but the fact that already three different mentalities have

³ Eiki Hoshino and Doushou Takeda, “Indebtedness and comfort: The undercurrents of *mizuko kuyō* in contemporary Japan,” *Japanese Journal of Religious Studies* 14.4 (305-310): 1987, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/30233996>

Fabio Rambelli, *Buddhist Materiality: A Cultural History of Objects in Japanese Buddhism* (Stanford: Stanford University Press), 212.

arisen surrounding reasons to practice or not practice mizuko kuyō speaks to the complexity of understanding the ceremony.

Mizuko kuyō as a practice varies from temple to temple and region to region with few standards for practice. The most common element of mizuko kuyō is the purchase of a small statue of Jizō which the woman places in a cemetery, a home shrine, or by a roadside shrine. Usually these statues are relatively inexpensive, but some women choose to purchase statues that cost several hundred or even thousands of dollars. The mother can ritually wash the statue in order to cleanse it or she can pay a priest to perform this service. The statues are often decorated; parents place red bibs around the statue's neck and lay toys as well as candy or other small trinkets a child might like at the feet of the statue. If, after the purchase of the Jizō statue, women desire to, they can choose to continue with a more in-depth ritual. This requires them to pay a priest to perform certain rites on the Jizō statues. Most often priests say prayers, light incense and ritually bathe the statue. Practitioners may also select a posthumous name or *kaimyō* 戒名 and have it written on a wooden funeral tablet known as an *ihai* 位牌. Often women are encouraged to repeat the ceremony yearly. Alternatively, practitioners can pay a one time fee to have the priests perform mizuko kuyō for the child forever in a ceremony called *eitai-kuyō* 永代供養, but practitioners are left to their own discretion when deciding which services to partake in.⁴ This short description of mizuko kuyō provides the necessary information for

⁴ Jan Chozen Bays, *Jizō Bodhisattva: Modern Healing & Traditional Buddhist Practice* (Boston: Tuttle Publishing, 2006), 47-50.

William R. LaFleur, *Liquid Life: Abortion and Buddhism in Japan* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992), 148-149.

understanding what the practice is, but to truly understand why it developed, one must look back to Japan before and after World War II to see how women, pregnancy, and abortions were treated by the Japanese government and how women's reproductive rights were manipulated, changed, and controlled.

The Eugenics Protection Law of 1948 allowed women to have open access to abortions, something not seen in Japan for nearly one hundred years. Prior to the Meiji period (1868-1912), abortion and infanticide were practiced throughout Japan, usually assisted by midwives or matriarchs of the family. Even though the Tokugawa *bakufu* attempted to put limitations on abortion and made infanticide illegal in 1842, these laws did little to hinder the practices of midwives. In 1868 the Meiji emperor prohibited midwives from performing abortions while further legislation in 1880 turned abortion into a punishable crime. In 1907 harsher punishments, specifically long jail sentences, were enacted on both those who performed abortions and had abortions.⁵ The Meiji government believed that a strong and healthy population devoted to the promotion of the nationstate would be the key to success in the war effort and colonization process and thus held a strong anti-abortion sentiment. If people were killing the future of Japan before it was born, there would be no one left to fight for the country.⁶ Thus abortion remained illegal all throughout wartime Japan, limiting women's reproductive rights and jailing those who disobeyed. However, after the Pacific War, Japan was left in total devastation, socially and economically. Food and resources were scarce, cities were

⁵ Tiana Norgren, *Abortion before Birth Control: The Politics of Reproduction in Postwar Japan* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001), 44-46.

⁶ Norgren, *Abortion before Birth Control*, 23-24.

completely demolished, and economic conditions were exceptionally poor. In a complete turn around from the previous legislation forbidding abortion, the government drafted the Eugenics Protection Law of 1948. While this law returned women's reproductive rights by allowing for abortion under a wide variety of health circumstances, it also included various articles that limited female rights in terms of birth control and abortion procedures.

In Chapter II, Article 3 the law lists appropriate and acceptable reasons for women to have abortions: mental deficiencies or genetic diseases within the mother or the father's families, the contraction of leprosy by either parent, or various issues resulting in the decline in health of the mother or her eventual death.⁷ It was not until 1949 that a revision was added that allowed for women to have abortions for thinly defined economic reasons as well health concerns.⁸ Article 4 of Chapter II reinforces the traditional idea of the good of the community outweighing an individual child; any abortions "necessary for the public interests" are allowed. Pregnant women did not always have a choice about keeping their child; sometimes the eldest family member or the father demanded an abortion or infanticide without the consent of the woman. Despite giving women more freedom to terminate a pregnancy, the wording of the law remained misogynist and showed how it was not written with the woman in mind but rather as a necessary law drawn up for the benefit of men as well. Chapter III Article 15 declares that women may only receive contraceptives from physicians, thus effectively limiting how women could

⁷ Norgren, *Abortion before Birth Control*, 146.

R.J. Zwi Werblowsky, "Mizuko Kuyō: Notulae on the Most Important "New Religion" of Japan," *Japanese Journal of Religious Studies* 18.4 (1991), 337-338.

⁸ Norgren, *Abortion before Birth Control*, 44-46.

learn about birth control, practice safe sex and prevent pregnancy. Chapter IV Article 26 states women must inform any future partner of past abortions then contradicts itself in Article 27 stating anyone other than the woman must keep the abortion and all events surrounding it a secret.⁹ The Eugenics Law was abolished in 1996, but by that time the mindset about reproduction had already been well established thanks to the law. Norgren attributes the law to the development of the social idea of “abortion before birth control” in which terminating a pregnancy was more common than preventing a pregnancy and became the standard form of birth control practiced by couples.

In contemporary Japan, even though condoms are prevalent they are still male birth control and do not allow for women to take control of their own bodies and reproduction. The birth control pill did not even become available in Japan until the late 1990s due to the belief that the pill negatively affected women’s bodies, and alternative forms of birth control such as the patch, the implanon, or an IUD are still considered taboo. A survey conducted by a group of doctors in 2004 shows how unwilling some family physicians are to discuss sexual reproduction and birth control with their patients. Of 265 medical practitioners surveyed, 25% replied that they had no desire to discuss contraceptives with their patients. Three in four practitioners did not even offer contraceptive care at their office. 95% said they would never recommend a vasectomy to a male patient as a means of preventing pregnancy, and only 2.6% said that they actively recommend oral contraceptives for female patients. Most practitioners cited lack of knowledge or training as the biggest obstacle for them in providing patients with birth

⁹ Norgren, *Abortion before Birth Control*, 146-147, 150, 152.

Werblowsky, “Mizuko Kuyō,” 338, 340.

control information. Researchers also cited a lack in a positive attitude towards providing information, with many doctors feeling it is not their responsibility to discuss sexual issues with patients.¹⁰ The combination of easily available and legalized abortions and the general unwillingness of family physicians to discuss reproduction and contraception with their patients has led to a society in which abortions have become the norm and contraceptive practices are still limited and centered on men. Women have little to no power in terms of controlling the reproductive functions of their bodies and thus are often forced to abort pregnancies that they do not want or that could have been prevented. Statistics are difficult to come by as many women pay under the table for abortions and doctors are not required to report them, but most academic works seem to suggest Japanese women have an average of two abortions in their lifetime. With the societal penchant for creating rituals and the lack of sufficient birth control options resulting in a culture of abortion, it is little wonder that a ceremony developed for women surrounding abortion. This brief look at abortion and birth control in Japan since the beginning of the 20th century shows how in many ways women have been oppressed in terms of reproductive rights.

Research on Mizuko Kuyō

Though a simple and extremely personal practice, mizuko kuyō has generated a certain degree of controversy. This controversy is not, however, directly related to the fact that Japanese society is openly accepting of abortions and developed a religious ritual

¹⁰ Kazuya Kitamura, Michael D. Fetters, and Nobutaro Ban. "Contraceptive Care by Family Physicians and General Practitioners in Japan: Attitudes and Practices." *International Family Medicine Education* 36.4 (2004): 279-282.

specifically addressing the issue. Rather, the controversy lies in how mizuko kuyō developed and its relationship with the women who practice it. Additionally, the question of why women practice mizuko kuyō has produced a broad range of opinions.

William LaFleur details in his book *Liquid Life: Abortion and Buddhism in Japan* the general practices of mizuko kuyō in Japan and discusses the known history of the ritual. He concludes that mizuko kuyō is a pragmatic result of female agency and empowers women in the male dominated and misogynist world of Japanese Buddhism. Women who desired an outlet for mourning or grieving the loss of a child created mizuko kuyō as a means of coping with a situation in which female sexuality and reproductive rights were often left to the decisions of men and abortion had become the standard form of birth control. LaFleur's argument focuses on mizuko kuyō being created as a positive outlet for women and used as a type of female agency in a male-dominated religious society. Women use mizuko kuyō to grieve and mourn their loss or to alleviate feelings of guilt associated with terminating a pregnancy.

In contrast to LaFleur, Helen Hardacre discusses how mizuko kuyō is used against women to oppress and exploit them. In *Marketing the Menacing Fetus in Japan*, Hardacre focuses on mizuko kuyō as not being an agency for women to express themselves and their loss over a child but as a misogynist scam aimed to oppress and coerce women. Originally the media used scare tactics and sensationalized stories of women being haunted by the spirit of their aborted fetuses as a means of guilt-tripping women into practicing mizuko kuyō. Women who were mentally weak or vulnerable were specifically targeted for financial exploitation. Women did not practice mizuko kuyō as a

form of grieving; rather, they feared the spirit of their unborn child and the negative effects of a ‘menacing fetus’ or *tatari* 胎 疔 疔 . Additionally, Hardacre discusses how women have lost reproductive rights and emphasizes the diminishing role of the midwife as an example of how women have gradually lost power over their own reproduction with the advent of hospital births.¹¹ Hardacre, then, represents the negative view of *mizuko kuyō* as a method of female oppression in the misogynist realm of Buddhism and Japanese society.

Elizabeth G. Harrison reaches a middle ground between Hardacre and LaFleur in her article “I can only move my feet towards *mizuko kuyō*- Memorial Services for Dead Children in Japan.” She acknowledges the massive advertising campaigns that promoted *mizuko kuyō* and the negativity and coercive nature of these ads and the effect such misogynist viewpoints had on some women. No doubt, some women really *were* frightened into performing *mizuko kuyō* based on the concept of a *tatari* and negative karmic retribution. However, other women used the creation of *mizuko kuyō* and the ads used to promote them to make their own informed decisions on whether or not they needed to perform the ritual for their own personal benefit.¹²

Jan Chozen Bays, a practicing Buddhist Zen master, offers a unique Western Buddhist perspective in her book *Jizō Bodhisattva: Modern Healing & Traditional Buddhist Practice*. Bays acknowledges the business aspects of the temple and funeral

¹¹ Helen Hardacre, *Marketing the Menacing Fetus in Japan*, (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1997), 23-25; 79-84.

¹² Elizabeth G. Harrison, “I can only move my feet towards *mizuko kuyō*- Memorial Services for Dead Children in Japan,” in *Buddhism and Abortion*, ed. Damien Keown. (Honolulu: University of Hawai’i Press: 1999), 93-120.

industry in Japan and how mizuko kuyō has managed to keep some temples alive and even thriving as religious practice declines in Japanese society. However, like LaFleur she also accepts that mizuko kuyō acts as a means for individuals to mourn the loss of a potential human life and creates a ceremony that offers consolation. Bays looks specifically at how conceptions of death and life in Buddhism differ from those in American or Western cultures. In Buddhism, “death is not the end of life but one step in a dynamic of change that has no beginning or end.”¹³ This contrasts sharply to traditional American values of birth and death as specific and concrete events in a finite timeline. This dynamic nature of life and death within Buddhism offers a solution to how a religion whose first precept is not to take life can allow for a ritual based on taking the life of an unborn child.¹⁴

Mizuko kuyō more than likely developed in a joint effort between women and Buddhist temples and priests. Abortion can be viewed as a necessary, run of the mill type life event for some women, a regrettable loss of life for others, and every type of feeling or reaction in-between. No doubt some women in Japan will have an abortion and have no feelings of loss, guilt, or regret or have any desire to mourn. Other women, however, will feel the psychological effects of having an abortion and experience a sense of loss, the need to mourn, or overwhelming feelings of guilt that their child was not able to be born. These women sought out a means to relieve their psychological problems through Buddhist temples, a natural outlet as Buddhism provides funerary services and is most commonly associated with death. Possibly somewhere out in the mountains of Japan right

¹³ Bays, *Jizō Bodhisattva*, 55.

¹⁴ Bays, *Jizō Bodhisattva*, 43-47, 52-58.

now there is a very clever priest who heard the needs of his or her practitioners, who heard these women asking if there was something they could do for the loss of their child, and created mizuko kuyō. The inclusion of Jizō into the ritual is extremely logical given Jizō's traditional role as the protector of children and pregnant women as well as his role as the comforter of children in Buddhist limbo. By creating a new ritual to meet the growing needs of its female parishioners, Buddhist temples and priests were better able to serve their community through spiritual healing and serve themselves by receiving income from the ceremony.

As mizuko kuyō spread to various temples across Japan, rather than being advertised as a purely Buddhist ritual to help women cope with a traumatic event in their life, the meaning of mizuko kuyō became skewed. *Tatari*, the malevolent spirits of unborn babies, became associated with mizuko kuyō, and scary stories of women being haunted by their *tatari* became commonplace in women's magazines. The only way to stop the *tatari* from causing misfortune to fall onto the woman and her family was to perform mizuko kuyō and relieve the baby's soul.

How *tatari* became so entwined with mizuko kuyō in its early stages on development in the 1980s and 1990s is unclear. Perhaps the temples created this culture, using traditional tales of children suffering in limbo to make money from this new funerary ceremony. Rather than promote mizuko kuyō in a positive manner focused on female agency, they chose to manipulate women and scare them into believing their abortions were bringing suffering to a child in the afterlife and misfortunes to the woman in her current life. Perhaps, unlike Hardacre's view of temples being part of the source of

negativity, temples simply provided the services, and it was the male-dominated media that used the pre-existing concept of children's limbo and *tatari* to bring in revenue for their magazines or newspapers. Either way, no one can deny that temples are the financial beneficiaries of mizuko kuyō, as Bays writes, but whether a woman practices mizuko kuyō for her own reasons or because of outside influences, she is still making the choice to practice it. No one is forcing her, no matter how fear-inducing or coercive any advertisements might be.

With this understanding of the history of mizuko kuyō and academic research and opinions on it, one can begin to understand why online space for mizuko kuyō has such significance for both the ceremony itself and for the women who have or want to practice it. Up until the technological advances that brought Japan into the digital Internet age, women had little to no voice in the discussion of mizuko kuyō. Women's magazines provided a small outlet for some women to express their experiences with abortion of mizuko kuyō, but magazines only reach a limited number of people and have a shorter life span. Now with new Internet spaces, women's voices have loudly and proudly joined in the discussion of mizuko kuyō. Whether through a temple website or an independent mizuko kuyō website, women now have the opportunity to be the voice of mizuko kuyō, to share what it means to them rather than be told what their experience should be.

Internet Usage in Japan

Internet usage in Japan continues to grow and has become a ubiquitous part of every day life for most people. Whether at home on a PC through high speed broadband

or while sitting on an hour long train ride to work, Japanese people are constantly connected to the Internet. As previously mentioned, Hardacre and LaFleur both researched *mizuko kuyō* prior to widespread Internet usage in Japan and even in the United States. No doubt when academics like LaFleur and Werblowsky were writing in the late 1980s and early 1990s, the number of Internet users would be negligible if they existed at all. In 2000, a year after Hardacre published *Marketing the Menacing Fetus in Japan* and the same year Harrison released her article, the number of Internet users worldwide was only 361 million people with Japan at only 47.1 million people, or less than 40% of the population.¹⁵ By 2006, Nakano and Watanabe show Internet usage in Japan had doubled,¹⁶ and as of 2010, Japan had 99.1 million Internet users, an increase of 111% covering nearly 80% of the population.¹⁷ Statistics alone only say so much, though, and the real phenomenon of Japanese Internet usage can be found in the plethora of Japanese websites and the emerging field of Japanese digital media studies.

This rapid increase in Internet users can be seen through two areas of technological improvement in Japan. First, Japanese cell phone mobile technology first became available in 1997 and changed the ease with which people could connect to the Internet. Cell phone users could use their device to establish a direct, mobile connection to the Internet and browse special mobile websites anywhere in Japan, a boon for a

¹⁵ “The incredible growth of the Internet since 2000,” last modified October 22, 2010, <http://royal.pingdom.com/2010/10/22/incredible-growth-of-the-Internet-since-2000/>

¹⁶ Sachiko Nakano and Yoko Watanabe, "The Virtual Doubling of Japanese Internet Use: 2001–2006," *Social Indicators Research*. 93.1 (2009): 235-238. Accessed March 13, 2013, <http://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s11205-008-9368-7>

¹⁷ “Incredible Growth.”

heavily commuter culture where long train rides are the norm.¹⁸ Additionally, cell phone developers kept mobile Internet technology simple and easy to use in order to appeal to a more general mass audience.¹⁹ Thus, though cell phones in Japan were usually more advanced in terms of technological capabilities in comparison to other countries at the time (ability to watch TV, download music, etc.), the actual mobile technology remained stagnant and severely limited what people could do with their online experience.²⁰ Secondly, Kushida and Oh point to some changes in corporate policy for major Internet and phone services providers in Japan that directly effected home Internet service capabilities. Japan began a process of deregulation of corporate policies to increase competition between different service providers. This deregulation stimulated growth and caused for more rapid and cost efficient developments in broadband technology, leading to widespread high-speed broadband at affordable prices.²¹ From this combination of simple mobile Internet technology and high-speed home networks via broadband, Japanese Internet culture grew and as did the number of academics and researchers who study it.

¹⁸ Noriko Manabe, "Going Mobile: The Mobile Internet, Ringtones, and the Music Market in Japan" in *Internationalizing Internet Studies : Beyond Anglophone Paradigms*, ed. Mark J. McLelland and Gerard Goggin. 2009. eBook Collection (EBSCOhost). Accessed March 13, 2013.

¹⁹ Mito Akiyoshi and Hiroshi Ono, "The Diffusion of Mobile Internet in Japan," *The Information Society*. 24.5 (2008): 292-303. Accessed March 13, 2013. DOI:10.1080/01972240802356067

²⁰ Joo-Young Jung and LTD INDERSCIENCE ENTERPRISES, "Where Do You Go Online? a Comparison of Internet Connectedness Via Personal Computers and Mobile Phones in Japan," *International Journal of Mobile Communications*, 7.1 (2009): 21-35. Accessed March 16, 2013. <http://dl.acm.org/citation.cfm?id=1463637>

²¹ Kenji Kushida and Seung-Youn Oh, "The Political Economies of Broadband Development in Korea and Japan," *Asian Survey*, 47.3 (2007): 481-504. Accessed March 17, 2013. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.1525/as.2007.47.3.481>

Japanese digital media studies examine every aspect of new media, from the spaces such as websites and blogs, to the things such as online videos and memes, to the people themselves and how they interact online through social communities. For my purposes, understanding the Japanese online mentality and how and why people visit and participate in online communities sheds light on why there are so many similarities in certain aspects of each mizuko kuyō website I look at despite each site containing very different information and features. The following studies focus on Japanese Internet users participation in online communities, studies that provide insight into understanding why people post what they do on mizuko kuyō websites.

Ozawa-De Silva studied online suicide group communities in Japan and how users utilized such websites in terms of both online and offline presence. Individual users who posted to an online suicide group could share their feelings of no longer wanting to live and receive positive support from the community.²² This represents the strictly online aspects of the community that provided a network of like individuals who could freely express themselves in an open and safe environment. However, Ozawa-De Silva also discusses how these online communities promote finding other users with whom to commit group suicide, the mentality being that people wanted to die but they did not want to die alone.²³ In this way, online communities can potentially serve a dual function of providing the means for real life, offline interaction and connection between users. The duality of online communities serving a purpose in both virtual and real space is

²² Chikako Ozawa-De Silva, "Shared Death: Self, Sociality and Internet Group Suicide in Japan," *Transcultural Psychiatry*, 47.3 (2010): 392-418. Accessed March 12, 2013. <http://tps.sagepub.com/content/47/3/392>

²³ Ozawa-De Silva, "Share Death," 395.

supported by Onosaka's research on Japanese women using online space to promote both online and offline activism.²⁴ Such communities function to foster online space and interactions while providing the opportunity for users to extend their relationships into the real world.

However, the dual nature of some websites or online communities to successfully cultivate relationships in both virtual and real space does not represent Internet usage in Japan as a whole. In a contradictory study, Ishii and Ogasahara found Japanese online community members tend to favor forming anonymous or strictly virtual relationships rather than using such communities to foster and strengthen real world relationships.²⁵ Their research supports the idea that Japanese prefer to keep an online community both anonymous and free from any ties to real life people in a real world setting.²⁶ The popularity of the forum 2chan (2channel or 2チャンネル), in which all posts are completely anonymous and assigned numbers based on posting order, supports Ishii and Ogasahara's argument of a Japanese penchant for discretion in online activities. As Matsutani says, the "key to 2channel's power, and gravitational pull, is its anonymity."²⁷ But because both types of online communities exist and are flourishing in Japan, to say

²⁴ Junko R Onosaka, "Challenging society through the information grid: Japanese women's activism on the Net," in *Japanese Cybercultures*, ed. Gottlieb, Nanette, and Mark J. McLelland. (London: Routledge, 2003).

²⁵ Kenichi Ishii and Morihiko Ogasahara, "Links Between Real And Virtual Networks: A Comparative Study Of Online Communities In Japan And Korea," in *Cyberpsychology & Behavior* 10.2 (2007): 252-257. Accessed March 17, 2013. <http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=pbh&AN=25963252&site=ehost-live>

²⁶ Interestingly enough, the study found the opposite to be true for Korea: Koreans used online communities and interactions to better foster real world relationships with their friends and colleagues.

²⁷ Minoru Matsutani, "2channel's success rests on anonymity," *Japan Times*, April 6, 2010. Accessed May 4, 2013.

one view or the other is truly representative of typical Japanese Internet usage ignores the diversity of individual users and the type of interaction each person is looking for when participating in an online community.

What these studies neglect to include are community lurkers. Lurkers are website users who use a social network, user-based online community, or user-generated content website but do not actively participate with the content or interact with other users on the website.²⁸ Nielsen places the number of total lurkers on such websites as being as high as 90% of the total user base with only 1% of the total user population contributing significantly through posting or commenting. Schneider et al. attribute the high number of community lurkers to “epistemic” curiosity, “the individual desire to gain new knowledge by closing information and knowledge gaps and tackling intellectual problems.”²⁹ They base this idea on how individual personality traits let some people be satisfied by simply browsing and gaining knowledge passively without the need for more in-depth or participative interaction when browsing a subject.³⁰

The ways in which people lurk vary from website to website due to the changing nature of social networking and user-generated content websites. Lurking as described in the previous paragraph focused mostly on no interaction between the lurker and the poster or the content of a website but did not include features such as ratings, “likes” or

²⁸ Jakob Nielsen, “Participation Inequality: Encouraging More Users to Contribute,” Nielsen Norman Group. October 9, 2006. Accessed April 25, 2013. <http://www.nngroup.com/articles/participation-inequality/>

²⁹ Andreas Schneider, Georg von Krogh, Peter Jaeger, and LTD PERGAMON-ELSEVIER SCIENCE, “What’s Coming Next? Epistemic Curiosity and Lurking Behavior in Online Communities,” in *Computers in Human Behavior*, 29.1 (2013): 294. Accessed April 25, 2013. <http://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0747563212002658>

³⁰ Schneider et al, “What’s Coming Next?” 295.

sharing that allow all users to passively contribute to a community yet still “lurk.” The user-generated content based website Reddit is an excellent example of how some websites have turned lurking into a more participatory practice that allows users to have an active role in the community without directly interacting with other users. Reddit is based on a system of “upvotes” (a vote of approval for a piece of content) and “downvotes” (a similar vote but of disapproval) which allows for all registered community members to “vote” on whether or not they like a comment, a post, a video, a link or an image. A top daily post, for example, may have some 25,000 upvotes and 15,000 downvotes for a total of 40,000 unique user votes but only generate some 500 comments, not all of them posted by unique users. In this way, Reddit allows for an active community of posters who generate comments and original content as well as a passive community of lurkers that interacts directly with the content but indirectly with other users.³¹ In addition, registered users can completely ignore the upvote/downvote system and choose only to view the content without voting on it, showing how the site still caters towards the true “lurker.” Thus voting and rating websites provide their users with an alternative to the lurker/active participant dichotomy by presenting a third option, that of the passive participant, the active lurker who takes from the site but still contributes to the online community in an indirect manner. This type of participation will be the focus of the second website I discuss, mizukokuyou.com.

³¹ When a comment or post is voted on, the user generates “karma,” upvotes generate positive karma or points, downvotes generate negative karma. These are useless Internet points with no real meaning but are a useful method of determining the popularity of a post and judging how many people have interacted with that content.

Here we have three different ways to think about how people are using the Internet in Japan and participating in online communities. One study shows a desire for individuals to connect to each other both on and offline while a second states users want anonymity above all. Lurking as well is a significant part of web browsing for many people during their online experiences. These three ideas will reappear as I move into the next chapters, where the three mizuko kuyō websites will come under knife and be dissected to show what kind of participation lies beneath.

CHAPTER III

BUDDHISM AND BLOGS: MIZUKO KUYŌ ON A TEMPLE WEBSITE

Temples are no longer as strongly associated with fear mongering in terms of mizuko kuyō, and the days of the menacing fetus, while not over, are well past their heyday. Hundreds of temple websites litter Japanese online spaces, some very low tech and reminiscent of a mid 1990s Geocities homepage, others highly sophisticated using Flash to display images and enabling Java script. Temples use their websites to advertise their services and spread Buddhist messages to browsers. However, Honju-in, the temple at the center of this chapter, offers a different experience to those browsing its mizuko kuyō website. Of course Honju-in promotes its own services and does so in a strictly Buddhist manner, but at the same time, the temple has created an online space for its users and past practitioners to voice their own feelings and opinions on mizuko kuyō. This chapter will explore the dual nature of the Honju-in website, how it actively strives to accomplish its own agenda while creating an online network explicitly constructed as a means of providing an outlet for free expression about mizuko kuyō to its users.

Honju-in 本寿院 is a Tendai Buddhist temple located in Tokyo's Ōda ward that originated during the Empō era (1673-1681) of the Edo period (1600-1868). Open to the public and practitioners of all faiths, Honju-in promotes itself as a temple devoted not to a specific teacher or generation of Buddhist practice but to the practice of mizuko kuyō and the construction of Buddhist images, specifically those of the bodhisattva Jizō, the patron saint of mizuko kuyō. The head priest, Miura Takaaki, inherited the temple through his father. The temple is relatively well-known for its clay statues of Jizō, or *tsuchibotoke* つ

ちぼとけ, that are hand-made at the temple site. Different department stores throughout Japan have held displays of the *tsuchibotoke*, and the temple works with different centers like the NHK Gakuin and the Japan TV Culture Center to host educational classes on making *tsuchibotoke* or giving Buddhist sermons.³² Honju-in offers mizuko kuyō five times a day seven days a week, either by appointment or simply by registering at the temple the day of.

I originally became interested in Honju-in because of its extreme popularity on another site I had started researching at the time, mizukokuyou.com. In early 2012, Honju-in was the most popular temple on all of mizukokuyou.com, though it no longer holds this position since the latter site was updated in Fall 2012. This led me to the temple website, where I learned Honju-in promoted itself as a temple specifically devoted to mizuko kuyō and extensively incorporated the bodhisattva Jizō, the patron saint of mizuko kuyō, into both its website and its real life practice. My personal fondness for Jizō naturally made me biased towards a Jizō friendly temple, and the fact that the temple specialized in mizuko kuyō over any other religious practice drew further incentive to study Honju-in. Additionally, the Honju-in website included a Youtube video, a blog for the head priest, a digital manga about children's limbo using the bodhisattva Jizō, and various message boards. This embracing of digital media and utilization of different methods of online technology to promote itself and connect with its audience does not make Honju-in unique, but the extent with which the mizuko kuyō site utilizes different

³² 本寿院、「本寿院について」 <http://honjyuin.com/tera.html>

user friendly features does. For all of the above reasons, Honju-in made sense as a focal point for my examination of a mizuko kuyō temple website.

Upon further investigation of how the Honju-in website was set up and how it functioned, it became clear that understanding the temple website required more than just discussing the hows and whys of its digital media and interactive features. Unlike the independent websites discussed in the next chapter, Honju-in serves as a business website in addition to a mizuko kuyō information website; bringing in practitioners through the website essentially means money for the temple. This means the temple website must actively strive to be at the forefront of mizuko kuyō practice. Honju-in uses a mixture of different methods to establish itself as a true authority on mizuko kuyō and attract new practitioners to the temple, and these methods will be examined as well in order to better understand the business side of the website.

Selling Death: Honju-in and Mizuko Kuyō as a Business

Temples operate independently and must be self-sufficient in providing income to maintain basic temple services and functionality. Contemporary Japanese Buddhism is strongly associated with death and funerals, a traditional carry-over from the Tokugawa period when the *bakufu* created the *danka* system in order to stomp out Christianity and control society. Families were required to register with their local temple in order to be granted basic social rights such as being able to get married, travel, or do business. Funerals, too, fell predominately under the jurisdiction of Buddhist temples and became a major source of income. In contemporary Kyoto, the sight of dozens of Buddhist priests on scooters in full priestly attire zipping from one home to another to perform funerary

services for a fee during Obon, the August festival for the dead, is a clear indicator that Buddhist temples still profit from the dead and use memorial and funerary services as a source of economic stability. Bays recognized contemporary Japanese temples mostly function as businesses providing needed religious and cultural services to a broad clientele who may or may not believe in the religious significance of said services.³³ Additionally, because Honju-in is a Tendai Buddhist temple, it cannot ignore its Buddhist roots. This section will focus on how Honju-in uses its website to sell not only its services to potential practitioners of mizuko kuyō but how it uses online spaces to promote a specific Buddhist interpretation of mizuko kuyō and thus still represents mizuko kuyō more reminiscent of the 1970s.

The religious basis for mizuko kuyō, discussed in depth in the About Mizuko Kuyō section,³⁴ at Honju-in is predominately drawn from the book 「愛—もし生まれていたら」 (*Ai, moshi umareteitara*, Love - If I had been born), and in English, “The Forgotten Child” (author’s translated title) written by a Buddhist priest named Miura Michimei, the current head priest’s father, in 1981. Part of the book was formerly available for purchase on the website for 720 yen (\$7), but because the book is out of stock, the website offers a free PDF excerpt of one of the fundamental chapters about the link between men, women, and children. This book is one method Honju-in utilizes to establish itself as an authority on mizuko kuyō and appeal to potential practitioners and bring in money. Other temples may offer mizuko kuyō, but not many of them had their former head priest write an entire book on the subject, showing extreme expertise and

³³ Bays, *Jizō Bodhisattva*, 52-58.

³⁴ 本寿院、「大切な水子供養」 <http://111.or.jp/mousikomi.html>

understanding of the topic. The idea of needing to establish expertise on mizuko kuyō is a legitimate concern for the temple; what practitioner wants an unexperienced priest performing rites for the spirit of her unborn child? This book gives Honju-in more credibility as a legitimate source for mizuko kuyō and promotes the temple positively to new users.

Prior to the update of the Honju-in website in Fall 2012, the About Mizuko Kuyō section contained this message directly from the book. This passage remains pertinent to understanding Honju-in's religious focus on mizuko kuyō despite its removal during the update in 2012:

Original: 「これは、小さな命に対する、大きな祈りである。水子一親は子を知ることもなく、子、また親を知ることもなく暗闇の世界へ行ってしまった。人間等しく幸せや成功を願うが、この気がかりな存在を放置し供養もしないこと（悪因）でどうして幸せ（善果）を手にすることができるであろうか。」

Translation: “This is a big prayer for a small life. Mizuko - Parents who never knew their child, a child who likewise does not know its parents goes into a world of darkness.

People equally wish for happiness and success, but if one neglects the worrisome existence of the child by not performing the funerary ritual (evil cause), then how can one obtain happiness (good result)?”³⁵

³⁵ Excerpt from 「愛—もし生まれていたら」 1981.

This focus on *mizuko kuyō* as a funerary service with undertones of religious responsibility for the parents permeates the Honju-in About Mizuko Kuyō section. The inclusion of this excerpt filled with Buddhist ethics, beliefs, and concepts represents the actual practice and belief systems of the priests and the temple and the type of *mizuko kuyō* they are promoting to their practitioners. This passage leads into an extremely dogmatic description of *mizuko kuyō* that highlights Honju-in's Buddhist viewpoint.

Honju-in focuses on using Buddhist theology to present what is essentially a Buddhist sermon about *mizuko*, *mizuko kuyō*, and the Buddhist concepts surrounding both. Terms such as *bonnō* (煩惱), worldly desires or evil passions, are used to discuss the connection between having an abortion and the parent/child relationship. Buddhist metaphysical philosophy about karma (因果 *inga*) is used to show how an abortion can lead to bad results (悪果 *akka*) for both the child and the parents should the misdeed of terminating a pregnancy not be atoned for (滅罪 *metsuzai*) in this life. The intricate discussion of Buddhist thought continues, complete with a chart, with an in-depth examination of how the *mizuko* can negatively affect the entire family (mother, father, and living children) should the spirit of the *mizuko* not be appeased through atonement.³⁶ The goal of the About Mizuko Kuyō section is not to present information 'about' *mizuko kuyō* as a practice or mourning ritual. Rather, Honju-in focuses strictly on the religious aspects of *mizuko kuyō*, how the *mizuko* is directly affected karmically by the selfishness of the parents who have an abortion, how the *mizuko* is suffering and tormented by its inability to be born into this world, and how the *mizuko* can and will bring about bad luck

³⁶ 本寿院、「大切な水子供養」<http://111.or.jp/mousikomi.html>

and negative karmic consequences if not appeased through the proper mourning ritual of *mizuko kuyō*. The focus seems to be on creating a sense of guilt in the mother for having allowed such karmic suffering to fall onto her child rather than to alleviate the worries a mother might have about her child in the other world or to cater to her feelings of personal loss or regret for having terminated a pregnancy, regardless of the reason for the abortion. The fact that Honju-in presents *mizuko kuyō* in this way is by no means surprising; Honju-in is a Buddhist temple, and temples preach Buddhist beliefs. However, as will be discussed later, what the temple preaches as the reasons for *mizuko kuyō* is not necessarily what the people themselves are using *mizuko kuyō* for, and this disconnect can be seen right on the Honju-in webpage.

Honju-in offers a selection of different types of *mizuko kuyō* practice to suit every need and every budget. *Eitai-kuyō* 永代供養, an elaborate ceremony in which rites are served in perpetuity for a departed spirit, costs 35,000 yen (approximately \$350) for one spirit 霊 and includes the choosing of a *kaimyō* 戒名, posthumous name, the creation of an *ihai* 位牌, mortuary tablet, and the standard *mizuko kuyō* ritual. The *dokyō-kuyō* 読経供養 is a one-time ceremony in which the sutras are chanted for the departed for 5000 yen (\$50) and does not include an *ihai* or a *kaimyō*. The *kaimyō-kuyō* 戒名供養 provides the perpetual recitation of the sutras and the *kaimyō* but excludes the *ihai* for 20,000 (\$200) yen per spirit. The website includes a handy chart that outlines what each ceremony includes plus its cost.³⁷

³⁷ 本寿院、「水子供養とは、」 <http://111.or.jp/mizukokuyōu.html>

Honju-in fully embraces itself as a business by offering what might be thought of as ‘discount rituals.’ The temple advertises special pricing for performing each *kuyō* with the intention of appeasing multiple spirits/*mizuko*. If someone wishes to have the *eitai-kuyō* performed for two *mizuko* the price is 50,000 yen (\$500), a 10,000 yen discount, while performing the rites for three *mizuko* is only 65,000 (\$650). The *kaimyō-kuyō* has a similar discount as well with the price of the ceremony being discounted for two or three *mizuko* while the *dokyō-kai* offers the ceremony for more than one spirit but without a discounted price. Far from religious in nature, the combined discounts for having more than one ceremony performed at once highlights the underlying principle that, while the temple no doubt desires to help women and offers them a service they desire, it is still intent on making a profit through *mizuko kuyō*. In this instance online space acts as a means of advertising the temple’s prices and services and uses bargains to draw in customers. Having multiple types of ceremonies allows for practitioners to choose the one that best suits their individual needs both religiously/spiritually or financially.

What is more, the *kaimyō-kuyō* is actually a new ceremony introduced to the temple with the most recent website update in Fall 2012. This new addition to the temple’s lineup of *mizuko kuyō* ceremonies highlights one element of *mizuko kuyō* that has not changed since the ceremony developed in the 1970s: temple control. Buddhist temples retain a certain level of control over what exactly *mizuko kuyō* is and how it is practiced because, with the exception of a few shrines, they are the only places that offer the ceremony. Prior to the Fall 2012 updating of Honju-in’s *mizuko kuyō* website, the temple only offered two services, the *dokyō-kuyō* and the *eitai-kuyō*. Both these services were prominently listed and, as already discussed above, included prices and ‘group’

discounts. The introduction of the *kaimyō-kuyō*, which represents a kind of ‘middle way’ between the pricey *eitai-kuyō* and the more affordable *dokyō-kuyō*. *Dokyō-kuyō* might be seen as a bare minimum bargain *mizuko kuyō*, with no religious funerary extras like the *ihai* and *kaimyō* while the *eitai-kuyō* is the deluxe package with all inclusive funerary benefits. More than likely, the Honju-in priests decided a middle practice was necessary, possibly for the humanistic purposes of making an eternal *kuyō* more affordable to practitioners on a budget, possibly for business purposes to bring in more income by creating a third, mid-priced option. Regardless of the reasons why the temple added this new practice, the fact that they could add it demonstrates how much of a hold temples actually have on how *mizuko kuyō* is practiced because they can add or abandon a specific type of ceremony at any given time without question from the public. *Mizuko kuyō* remains a form of women’s agency because women choose to practice it and the ceremony does provide a necessary service that some women desire. However, one cannot ignore the fact that temples still maintain complete control over how they offer *mizuko kuyō* at their temple and thus shape the ways in which *mizuko kuyō* is practiced. This also shows that despite the temple website providing open spaces for people, it still has not shifted away from its original purpose of offering a Buddhist religious ceremony for a set fee.

Honju-in also sells its own handmade *Jizō* statues, *tsuchibotoke*, in three different sizes. Before the website’s reconstruction, prices for *tsuchibotoke* were unlisted and nothing suggested different statue sizes were available for purchase. Now Honju-in clearly distinguishes three types of *tsuchibotoke*: a small pebble sized *tsuchibotoke mizuko Jizō* costing 3000 yen (\$30), a medium for 6000 yen (\$60) and a large

tsuchibotoke for 12,000 yen (\$120). However, unlike the fees for the ceremony which go to the temple, all the profits made from the sale of *tsuchibotoke Jizō* go to Honju-in's charity school construction program in Laos. Additionally, unlike most other temples where the statue of Jizō is left on the temple grounds, *tsuchibotoke Jizō* are meant to be taken home for a memorial inside the house.³⁸ This incorporation of Jizō works for the temple in two ways: it gives the temple something special and something distinct that sets it apart from other temples that offer mizuko kuyō; and it connects its mizuko kuyō practice to the beloved figure of Jizō, whose presence will soothe the child on *Sai no Kawara*.³⁹ The uniqueness of the *tsuchibotoke* makes the temple more memorable to those browsing the site while having statues handmade by the head monk himself creates the idea that Honju-in provides a mizuko kuyō ceremony that is more special than any other place. In this way, the *tsuchibotoke* help Honju-in establish more authority as a legitimate source of mizuko kuyō practice.

Though application is not necessary, Honju-in website provides three different methods for applying for the ceremony for users wishing to make an appointment. One can simply call the temple to arrange a service, download and fill out an application form then send it by fax, or apply through an online application. Additionally, one can apply by using a cell phone website directly linked on the webpage through a QR code.⁴⁰ The

³⁸ 本寿院、「大切な水子供養」<http://111.or.jp/mousikomi.html>

³⁹ *Sai no Kawara* 賽の河原 is Buddhist limbo for children. Children who die before hearing the teachings of the Buddha suffer on the banks of the river Sai. They stack stone towers by day only to have demons knock them down at night. This cycle of suffering and torment at the hands of the demons can only be ended by the intervention of Jizō, who comforts the children in limbo and helps them to move on to the next existence.

⁴⁰ Quick Response Code - a barcode found on PC websites or merchandise that can be scanned by a cell phone that then directs the user to a mobile website.

online and downloadable forms are virtually the same and ask for the basic information of the practitioner including name, address, phone number, age, and email address. The form also asks the practitioner to choose which ceremony she would like performed from the aforementioned options as well as the desired time and method of payment. However, the only required information are the name, the home prefecture, and what kind of ceremony the person desires, allowing for the user to maintain some anonymity in the application process. Messages throughout Honju-in's various webpages encourage users to contact the temple should they have any questions about arranging a service or the aforementioned services.

Herein lies one of the fundamental differences between the services and interconnectivity that temple websites like Honju-in can provide as opposed to an independent community or blog site like mizukokuyou.com. Honju-in not only encourages a direct human connection via its website but provides a variety of ways in which a potential practitioner can achieve this connection. In this way Honju-in establishes its authority on mizuko kuyō by providing expert advice through direct conversation whether via phone, email, or in person. Potential practitioners can rely on the advice and consultation of a trained professional monk or temple staff member. A user whose questions about mizuko kuyō or the temple extend beyond the scope of what the website offers can easily and conveniently ask her question directly to someone at the temple without a delay of information. Phone calls would elicit an immediate response and emails would, with an attentive staff dedicated to serving its customers, no doubt be answered promptly.

Sites like mizukokuyou.com or Let's Perform Mizuko Kuyō do not offer the ability to connect directly with a real person to this extent, if at all. Mizukokuyou.com does have an email address for questions about the site, but they cannot answer questions about specific temples or their services. Otherwise, all interactions are done individually through reading comments or entries, checking FAQs, and visiting temple websites. This consequently means specific information a user may be looking for might not be posted on the site. Additionally, posting on a message board or bulletin board means losing control over response time and being held at the will of the respondents. If a woman posts to Yahoo! Answers about mizuko kuyō, she may receive a detailed response in a timely manner from someone with personal or expert experience, but she may also have her question ignored, trolled, or inadequately answered. A useful reply from another user may take an hour, it may take a week, or it may never come. In this way, user generated content websites can be lacking in their ability to provide the fullest amount of information possible and do not focus on serving their users because the users are not customers.

This is not to say that anonymous forums and user generated content websites are not beneficial nor useful; rather these types of websites cater to a specific audience. As Setoyama et al., showed, lurkers or inactive participants in an online forum can still benefit in the exact same way as those who actively participate.⁴¹ For women who wish to remain completely anonymous to the point where they may be too shy or nervous to directly contact a temple, community sites like mizukokuyou.com offer a completely private and anonymous experience without the need for human interaction. For those

⁴¹ Setoyama et al, "Benefits of Peer Support," e122.

users who have less anxiety about discussing an abortion or mizuko kuyō, a temple website and its connection to a real life staff of knowledgeable individuals can be extremely helpful and beneficial to the user's experience both online and off.

In the case of a temple, having a staff of knowledgeable and helpful individuals creates a sense of authority and grounds the website in reality in an online-offline parallel. The temple exists in the same way both online and offline; it offers the same services, it has the same priests, and it preaches the same message regardless of whether someone browses the temple's website or visits the temple directly in person. In the case of Honju-in, the browser sees the temple website as a direct representation of the temple itself. By having this online-offline parallel, something like Honju-in can stand to profit by bringing in traffic directed by mizuko kuyō searches on its virtual site into the reality of offline business. The goal of the website is less to create a community in its online spaces but to use those spaces to persuade potential practitioners online that Honju-in is the right temple for mizuko kuyō practice offline.

A website like LPMK, on the other hand, exists only in virtual space and because of this is online exclusive with no real world, real place equivalent representation. In some instances, online exclusive spaces can be used to arrange offline meetings as seen in Ozawa-De Silva's work with group suicide online communities. Though the community does not exist in any real place, users could use the online space to connect with each other to discuss meeting in a designated real life space in order to commit suicide.⁴² However, mizukokuyou.com and LPMK as online exclusive spaces lack the real world support network Honju-in can offer. They still offer valuable services to browsers of their

⁴² Ozawa-De Silva, "Shared Death," 395.

sites, and this lack of offline presence is by no means detrimental to the goals of each website as a source of uncensored information about mizuko kuyō. In fact, having an offline space representative of each website would ruin each site's emphasis on anonymity, and thus both websites function better as strictly online spaces.

Having a real life staff available both on and offline makes perfect business sense for Honju-in. In addition to creating a sense of trust between the temple and the potential practitioner, the temple establishes itself as an expert on mizuko kuyō by being able to provide immediate answers to the curious. Moreover, having both a knowledgeable staff and a website that describes in detail its services and prices furthers the agenda of the temple to make a profit from death. Here we see how Honju-in truly utilizes online spaces to promote its mizuko kuyō, to connect with users both on and offline, and to spread its Buddhist beliefs. However, this more practical and business-oriented aspect of the Honju-in website is only one half of the experience a user can expect. Honju-in offers additional online spaces where the users can speak for themselves and have more freedom to discuss mizuko kuyō in their own words and on their own terms.

Express Yourself: Message Boards and Posting at Honju-in

Honju-in has two specific features that make it accessible to users and create a public yet anonymous forum for users to express themselves. One is a community bulletin board where users are encouraged to post questions or leave comments for the temple. The other is a blog/posting site called Letter to My Baby where users can anonymously post messages to the child they performed mizuko kuyō for. Though similar in nature in how they include the voices of the practitioners of mizuko kuyō, each feature

serves a completely different function on the website and thus leads to separate and distinct users experiences.

The Honju-in bulletin board 掲示板 (*keijiban*) is part of the mizuko kuyō homepage and serves as a method of communication between the temple and potential practitioners. At the top of the page a message encourages users to leave their thanks, information, questions, advice or opinions on the bulletin board. There are four pages containing one hundred and eleven entries dating back to January 8, 2010 when the bulletin board was first created. Despite the open invitation to freely post on the bulletin board, the vast majority of entries are scanned letters written by people who had practiced mizuko kuyō at the temple and then filled out a feedback form, either at the temple or later through the mail. Scattered amongst these scanned letter postings are legitimate questions from curious users, but what are these letters and why do they dominate the bulletin board?

The scanned letter posts follow the same basic format. The post is given a title based on the text in the letter. The letter itself can be viewed either in its transcribed version within the post or as the actual scanned letter that opens in a separate link image. Letters differ in their content but generally follow the same basic format. First the writer states the she/he performed mizuko kuyō at Honju-in, then that she/he felt emotionally relieved after, and finally the writer thanks the temple for being so kind. Because of the way in which the letters are written, they seem to function more as testimonials of the quality of the temple and the benefits of its mizuko kuyō service rather than a form of free expression about mizuko kuyō. The scanned letters represent more of the

aforementioned business aspect of Honju-in where bringing in new practitioners of mizuko kuyō essentially brings more money into the temple. Scanning and posting letters from past practitioners creates a positive online image of the temple based on real practitioner experience and acts to give the temple more authority on mizuko kuyō. If so many customers are satisfied with their mizuko kuyō experience at Honju-in, they must be good! In this way, the bulletin board acts less like an outlet for public expression and more like a personal Honju-in Yelp⁴³ but with exclusively positive reviews and feedback.

The bulletin board also raises the question of what Honju-in is trying to accomplish with these types of interactive features. The bulletin board certainly makes Honju-in more accessible to those who may have questions but are too nervous to call and speak to an actual person. But much like a bulletin board in the real world, the goal is not to create a community but rather to be an outlet within a community for information. Honju-in is not attempting to create an online community for users to express themselves about mizuko kuyō nor is the temple trying to maintain a steady user base and promote continuous interactive experience on the bulletin board. Rather, by using the scanned letters and allowing individuals to post questions and comments, the Honju-in bulletin board acts as a source of information about the quality of the temple and its services, regardless of the positive bias.

Honju-in does, however, have a separate webpage explicitly constructed for previous practitioners of mizuko kuyō to express themselves in an open and safe environment. Letter to My Baby 赤ちゃんへの手紙 (*Akachan heno tegami*) allows users

⁴³ Yelp is a website that showcases user-generated reviews and ratings of restaurants, shops, and services.

to anonymously post digital letters directed to their lost child. The main message on the Letter page states that the purpose of the site is to provide a space in which people who have practiced mizuko kuyō at the temple can express the things they wanted to say to their child but were unable to before. Because of this many of them are absolutely heart-breaking in content, with the poster relinquishing all emotional boundaries and sharing deeply private feelings of loss and sadness as well as personal information about the loss of the child or their current lives and children.

There are fifty-six individual posts on the page. There is no set format for people posting on Letter nor any set requirements for what can be posted. The basic form on the posting page contains three areas of input: one for the name of the poster (real names are not necessary), one for the actual letter, and one for anything the poster might want to say to the head priest or the temple. Each post varies in length and content, some short and to the point, others long letters detailing the specifics of why a child could not be born. Some posters included a message of thanks to the priests or the temple but others left this section blank. Either way, some key themes and messages arise in nearly all posts, a phenomenon that will be discussed shortly.

The page itself is a light cherry blossom pink and each post contains a cute digital image such as a bear sitting on the moon or a cupid shooting an arrow on a background of hearts. The text of each post is in color with some being green, others orange or blue. This use of color and images makes the website appear more like a page for children rather than a page for adults to send messages to their dead children. This is part of the appeal of the site to the user. Rather than be a space for parents only, making the site

more childlike makes the space seem as if it is for the children and that, whether anyone actually believes it or not, the letters might really be reaching the child. For some parents, no doubt, posting on Letter is simply a cathartic experience, the chance to gain some kind of closure or put words to pent up feelings. For others, however, the concept of the letters somehow reaching the spirit of the child is not so farfetched.

One common theme amongst posts is an indication of some kind of belief in the spirit of the child. Often posters do this in the form of wishing the child happiness, implying that the spirit exists somewhere. However, the desire for a child's happiness seems to be unrelated to any conceptions that the child is suffering in hell or in Buddhist limbo. In fact, all posters seem to believe that the spirit of their child exists but with little to no actual stated belief in where or how. A few posters believe the spirit of the child is now in heaven, but most simply imply that the spirit exists somewhere and is need to of reassurance and those heartfelt wishes for happiness. No post includes any kind of severe religious doctrine as prescribed on Honju-in's webpage. Honju-in upholds a certain set of beliefs they associate with mizuko kuyō and present as legitimate religious reasons for performing it. But posters clearly are either dismissing these beliefs or not incorporating them into their mizuko kuyō. Karmic retribution and suffering and torment in *Sai no Kawara* are completely absent from any of the posts. There is a severe disconnect between what the temple preaches as a reason for mizuko kuyō and why people actually perform it.

This detachment between what the temple believes and what the people believe shows the reality of the state of mizuko kuyō as a contemporary practice. On the one

hand, temples preach a certain set of doctrine that they take to be truth in relation to mizuko kuyō. However, these “truths,” as evident in these postings and seen again later when discussing Let’s Perform Mizuko Kuyō blog postings, hardly represent what the people who are actually practicing mizuko kuyō think and feel about their child or the practice itself. Some posters believe in heaven, others make no mention of it. Some suggest perhaps their child is unhappy but not that it is suffering in limbo. These letters show the reasons people are practicing mizuko kuyō are less about karmic retribution and more about alleviating feelings of guilt for not having the child or expressing regret that the baby could not be born into this world. However, to the temple’s credit, rather than dismiss these feelings for not aligning with their preachings, Honju-in embraces them and makes them available for all to see. This shows the temple’s acceptance of the reality of a situation where what the temple preaches and what the people believe are not necessarily the same.

Feelings of regret or guilt accompanied with apologizes are the second most common theme within the posts made on the Honju-in Letter to My Baby message board. This can most often be seen in the use of the phrase 「ごめんなさい」 *gomennasai*, or “I’m sorry.” One poster recognizes her own youthful indiscretions and inability to understand the importance of life as a reason to apologize. Her youth prevented her from understanding why it was wrong to have an abortion, an act she later came to regret.⁴⁴ A few others state poor health or illness as a reason for abortion and convey feelings of

⁴⁴ Anonymous, September 2, 2011 (13:03), post on 赤ちゃんへの手紙, 「沢山の大切な事」 http://honjyuin-otegami.at.webry.info/201109/article_1.html

regret that things could not have turned out differently.⁴⁵ Most posts, however, are much less specific and simply include an “I’m sorry” along with the rest of the message. These posts show the reality of mizuko kuyō for the people who practice it. All their stories differ, and the exact reasons why they lost a child, whether through abortion or miscarriage, is less important than the fact that they felt the need to somehow acknowledge this loss. They do not necessarily fear karmic retribution for themselves nor do they worry about the suffering of their child in limbo. Rather, they feel regret that there was a life that could have been but, for whatever circumstances, was not. For the practitioners themselves, mizuko kuyō is about facing their feelings, facing their past, and coming to terms with how a specific situation surrounding the loss of a child turned out. Honju-in provides people an outlet through which to confront what happened and hopefully, through writing a letter, feel some sort of relief.

A surprising discovery on the Honju-in Letter to My Baby section was the voice of men. Academics focus on mizuko kuyō as a ceremony based on female agency or female exploitation, depending on the researcher. Advertising campaigns and the vengeful *tatari* were aimed at specifically at women. But men, too, can participate in mizuko kuyō and clearly do. Nine posts either contain messages from a father in conjunction with a mother or posted solely by a father. One father noted he went to

⁴⁵ Anonymous, October, 11, 2011 (13:58), post on 赤ちゃんへの手紙, 「きっと、いつまでも」 http://honjyuin-otegami.at.webry.info/201110/article_3.html

Anonymous, April 2, 2012 (16:34), post on 赤ちゃんへの手紙, 「また遭える日まで」 http://honjyuin-otegami.at.webry.info/201204/article_2.html

practice alone, the mother still unable to go.⁴⁶ Another blamed himself for the loss of a child and wrote a detailed letter introducing his two living children to the lost child.⁴⁷ One father posted a light-hearted message to his child on what would have been its first birthday, asking the child if it had lots of friends up in heaven and adding jokingly, if it was anything like his mother, certainly it had at least one hundred.⁴⁸ These posts show that men are not absent from mizuko kuyō nor are they completely unaffected by abortion or miscarriages. Sometimes a child is wanted by both the mother and father. Sometimes an unexpected child is still desired by the man, but not by the woman. Abortions or miscarriages happen to a woman physically, but they can and do affect both parties in any relationship mentally or emotionally. While it is unknown what percentage of men practice mizuko kuyō, whether alone or with a female partner, from these posts it is clear that men have a noticeable presence in mizuko kuyō and can also be negatively affected by the loss of a child. Additionally, mizuko kuyō can no longer be thought of simply as a women's ritual. The fact that men not only actively participate but also, in some cases, even go by themselves to practice shows they not only embrace mizuko kuyō but use it in much the same way women do: to alleviate feelings of guilt or regret, to mourn the loss of a child, or to heal a pained heart.

⁴⁶ Anonymous, March 13, 2012 (14:37), post on 赤ちゃんへの手紙, 「優」 http://honjyuin-otegami.at.webry.info/201203/article_2.html

⁴⁷ Anonymous, April 16, 2013 (17:37), post on 赤ちゃんへの手紙, 「パパより」 . http://honjyuin-otegami.at.webry.info/201304/article_2.html

⁴⁸ Anonymous, January 11, 2013 (14:16), post on 赤ちゃんへの手紙, 「メリークリスマス」 http://honjyuin-otegami.at.webry.info/201301/article_8.html

However, one must wonder if the posts were made by the actual person or whether they were posted by the temple itself. If the testimonials and letters of thanks on the bulletin board were all scans, could the letters themselves not be original posts? Honju-in would have you believe every letter was posted by the original author, but the time-stamping on each suggests a different story. The most recent two posts were both made on the same day, April 16, 2013, five minutes apart. The next eighteen posts were all made on January 11, 2013, within a six hour range with no posts before or after. Is this a case of Honju-in again transcribing letters people wrote at the temple and posting them online under anonymous profiles? Or was there some kind of system disruption on the message board that created a backlog of posts? Does each post require reading before being approved and the priest simply had not gotten around to checking his messages? Or did the website update its blog and thus transfer posts over during a period of time on that day in January 2013? As we have already seen Honju-in posted scanned letters in the bulletin board section, could these heartbreaking letters not be legitimate acts of user agency in online space?

Finding no ethical qualms with posting a letter to my baby, I filled out the form on the Honju-in website with nothing but gibberish to see what kind of response I would get. Would my post go immediately through and be recognized? Would I face some second screen confirming my message? Would I be subject to review? Upon hitting the send button, a message popped up on my screen thanking me for my submission and telling me I was application number fifteen. This proves that Honju-in does in fact screen the posts made on Letter and then formats them with color and character images on the site,

posting them all at once rather than allowing anyone to post any message at any time.

This explains the delay between posts, the spamming of eighteen separate letters in one day onto the site, and why the site is free from any form of advertising spam or trolling.

This does raise the question as to whether all legitimate entries are posted or if some are left off of the site. I have little hope that my nothing of a letter will ever be featured on the site, but I would much rather leave that space for the people who need it.

This website shows how the idea of the temple as a fear-mongering entity that controls women and scares them into practice is no longer very accurate. Honju-in does emphasize the suffering of the child in limbo and emphasizes karmic retribution for not performing mizuko kuyō, but as a Buddhist institution, this is more or less part of what they do. While temples do use mizuko kuyō as a source of income, seeing the inclusion of different user-friendly interfaces shows how temples also can act as support networks for those in need. The bulletin board does act as a method for the temple to share testimonials of its users and promote its own mizuko kuyō services, but at the same time, one cannot overlook the fact that former practitioners themselves wrote those letters, not temple staff. Here Honju-in once again utilizes its dual nature to actively promote itself while actively promoting the expression of its practitioners and website users.

Additionally, the Letter to My Baby section predominately functions as a support base and mode of expressing grief, sadness, regret, or any emotion a poster desires in a public setting. These posts work to create an archive of letters that lurkers can read and use as a basis for deciding whether or not to perform mizuko kuyō or use as a type of anonymous bonding experience with other parents who have shared similar experiences. Honju-in

shows that it has developed its practitioner support system extensively by using online interactive features while still maintaining its primary function as a Buddhist business offering services to people offline, a stark contrast to the coercive, misogynist priests of previous decades.

CHAPTER IV

FINDING A VOICE: INDEPENDENT MIZUKO KUYŌ WEBSITES

Temples websites still dominate the search results for mizuko kuyō on Yahoo! Japan, but the number of independent or non-affiliated mizuko kuyō websites continues to grow. From blogs to ranking sites to question and answer pages, mizuko kuyō has found an independent and more secular life outside of temple influences or religious doctrine. Independent mizuko kuyō websites are run anonymously and benefit from user contributions, user feedback or commentary on temples, and personal narratives about performing mizuko kuyō. Some act to create online communities that promote open expression for users while others provide a more broad understanding of what mizuko kuyō practice means outside of a religious structure. The key element of all of these independent websites is that they function based on free and uncensored expression that ranges from the passive rating of a temple to blog entries that are both explicitly detailed and deeply personal. Additionally, independent websites stand to make little to no profits from maintaining their websites; unlike a temple, these websites are not attempting to bring in practitioners (read “customers”) but rather to provide an alternative outlet to discuss mizuko kuyō from a first person, unedited point of view.

This chapter focuses on two specific websites that demonstrate two different ways of incorporating non-affiliated free expression and individuality into online mizuko kuyō space. Mizukokuyou.com represents an online space that mixes the online religious source of mizuko kuyō, temple websites, with more secular views of mizuko kuyō. On this site temples hold little power; they are held to public review by anonymous users

through posted comments and their service is rated through a rating and ranking system controlled by users of the site. To further secularize itself, mizukokuyou.com actively dismisses fear of *tatari* as a reason to practice mizuko kuyō and emphasizes the benefits of mizuko kuyō for women or parents. Specific features of the website appeal to both lurkers and active participants and provide a truly unique experience for anyone visiting the site.

Let's Perform Mizuko Kuyō 水子供養をしましょう (LPMK) is an independently run anonymous blog site that, while currently inactive, maintains a visible archive of all entries focused on a variety of topics surrounding mizuko kuyō. The entries suggest multiple authors based on content, but all are pro-mizuko kuyō and often provide explicit personal detail of the poster's mizuko kuyō experience or the loss of her child. LPMK is unique among the three websites because of its open, frank discussion of not just mizuko kuyō but different issues surrounding the ceremony.

Some of the question this chapter will explore are how online space has been created outside of the direct temple influence, how religion does, to some extent, still play a vital role in mizuko kuyō both online and offline on these independent websites, and how users place themselves both in relation to and outside of the religious structure in terms of expressing themselves in online spaces. Additionally I will look at the ways each website contributes to the online mizuko kuyō community and what the agenda of each site is for its users.

Mizukokuyou.com

Mizukokuyou.com 水子供養ドットコム is known as a *kuchi-komi saito* 口コミ サイト meaning it is a site for sharing information by word of mouth, personal experience, and independent reviews. The website is unique in how it creates online space for its users to interact with the content of the site, the way it provides and displays information about mizuko kuyō and temples, and its emphasis of mizuko kuyō as a more secularist mourning practice rather than a religious ritual to heal a *tatari* spirit. Additionally, mizukokuyou.com returns as one of the top websites for searches for mizuko kuyō or mizuko kuyō temples on Yahoo! Japan, showing its strong presence within the mizuko kuyō online community and its popularity among users. For all of these reasons, I chose to study and analyze mizukokuyou.com and its online spaces.

The site contains individual informational postings from different temples across Japan that offer mizuko kuyō. Users can browse through temples in their region or home prefecture or see which temples are most popular or have the highest rating and from there visit a temple's website. Despite using temples as a means to practice mizuko kuyō, the website does not promote mizuko kuyō as a religious experience but rather focuses on how it can be beneficial to the health and mental well-being of women who have lost a child, regardless of whether through abortion, miscarriage, or a child dying young. Mizukokuyou.com provides online space for users to make anonymous posts on each temple listing and encourages them to leave comments about their experience at a specific temple and with mizuko kuyō. Despite these more open interactive features, lurking and passive participation are the most prevalent means of community interaction

on mizukokuyou.com and represent the key way in which information is shared and spread on the site.

Mizukokuyou.com is hosted on XOOPS Cube, a free open source web application platform, but the actual webmaster for the site is unknown. The website invite users with questions or link requests to send a email to kuyoinfo@gmail.com, but this is the only contact one has with an actual person. I debated whether to email the address and inquire about who ran the website but ultimately decided against it. Whether mizukokuyou.com is run by a priest at a mizuko kuyō temple somewhere in Japan or a woman sitting alone in her Tokyo apartment who created the site after performing mizuko kuyō, the goal of the website is to maintain complete user anonymity. So, too, will the webmaster for mizukokuyou.com remain anonymous. This anonymity does, of course, leave some questions unanswered: what was the original purpose for starting this website? Does the webmaster work in conjunction with a temple or alone, and what is that person's connection to mizuko kuyō? The answers to these questions will remain unknown much like the identities of the users who post on the website.

Mizukokuyou.com offers a listing of 117 unique temples in 46 prefectures in Japan. The greater Tokyo metropolitan area contains the most listings, but all prefectures, with the exception of Ehime, which has no temples listed,⁴⁹ have at least one temple posted on the site. Temples are searchable by region through a series of links or by prefecture using an interactive map, but not by any form of religious affiliation,

⁴⁹ The fact that Ehime prefecture did not have any temple listings was surprising as I have personally visited two different temples in Ehime that offered mizuko kuyō. This could be a result of temples in the prefecture being unaware of mizukokuyou.com's services, the temples not having a website, or the temples not feeling the need to advertise themselves through a separate and independent website, amongst other things.

suggesting the location of the temple is more important to the users than the actual sect of Buddhism the temple represents. The major metropolitan areas (Tokyo, Shinagawa, Saitama, Osaka, Nagoya, and Kyoto) have their own separate listings due to the high concentration of both temples and people within each area. In addition to listing temples by area, mizukokuyou.com allows users to search temples in three other ways: by the fifteen most popular websites (number of individual hits for each website in a listing), the fifteen top rated sites (based on individual user ratings), and by temples that specifically promote themselves as mizuko kuyō temples (such as Honju-in).

Temple postings vary from listing to listing with some being quite basic and minimalist with others being detailed and flashy, but all contain essentially the same content. The top of the listing contains the temple's name, address, phone and fax numbers, and the category of the temple (area, mizuko kuyō specific) as well as a direct link to a Google map of the temple's location. In the top righthand corner is a PageRank box with a number that should display the rating of the temple based on individual user ratings. However, all temple listings have a PageRank of 0, a phenomenon that will be discussed in-depth later. Each listing contains a message to users about the temple and can contain pictures, links, or additional contact information. Honju-in's listing, for example, contains the hours of operation for the temple, two promotions for home services and for the book the temple publishes on mizuko kuyō, and a link to the previously discussed bulletin board, complete with glowing testimonials of the temple's services. These temple listings act as a gateway through which users can explore different

temples by whatever criterion they desire in order to find the temple that works best for what they desire most from mizuko kuyō practice.

This concept of there being a “right temple for everyone” is one of the driving points of mizukokuyou.com. The site recognizes women and men perform mizuko kuyō for a wide variety of reasons and for differing circumstances. Some users may be searching to alleviate their own grief or sadness, some to heal feelings of guilt for not being able to bring a child into this world, while others may want to heal the spirit of their child, wherever it may be. The basic purpose of the site is to make finding a temple easier for individuals and remove the burden of searching through hundreds of individual online sites for the right place to practice mizuko kuyō. The different search criterion give users the freedom to find a temple based on what they hope to get out of their mizuko kuyō experience. Women who practice mizuko kuyō often go to a temple that is not their family or local temple, preferring the anonymity of a temple in another city or prefecture. The inclusion of an interactive map by prefecture as well as area and city specific listings gives the user the ability to quickly and easily narrow her search and can save time and energy that would have been spent on individual searches. In this way, mizukokuyou.com provides users the tools they need to easily and quickly search for the temple that is right for them without placing pressure on them to practice mizuko kuyō at a specific place or for any religious reasons.

Please Leave a Message: User-generated Comments

In addition to providing interactive maps and plenty of useful links, mizukokuyou.com provides a variety of other helpful features for its users to aid them in their search for a mizuko kuyō temple. One of the unique user interfaces of the website is a comments section where users can select a temple they have used for mizuko kuyō and write an anonymous comment about the temple, provide a review of the temple and its services or post a message of thanks. These comments sections have a dual function of providing users an online space in which they can freely express their opinions or experiences with a specific temple as well as giving lurkers the opportunity to read posted comments to aid in their decision on a mizuko kuyō temple.

As previously noted, mizukokuyou.com was reconstructed and redesigned in Fall 2012. Prior to the update, the newest comments were listed on the front page allowing browsers to immediately see what others were posting about temples. New posts are no longer presented on the first page, and one must search from temple to temple to see if any new posts have been made. Interestingly, old comments made on temple postings were (mostly) transferred to the new website design in their original form with the date of posting changed to the date of transfer. The transfer of these comments shows how mizukokuyou.com values the previous input of its users on the website and how it desires to maintain an open archive of past comments as a means of preserving the history of the community.

Comments left on temple listings vary greatly in content, detail, and length. Some contain person details, others do not. Some praise and thank the temples, others outline

the own poster's experience with mizuko kuyō. In this example, the user choose a more minimalistic approach and used brevity over detail:

Original: 「水子供養をしていただいてから不安で眠れないということがなくなりました。私の子は大丈夫だとわかり安心しました。またお参りに行かせて戴きます。」

Translation: “Since performing mizuko kuyō, the anxiety and inability to sleep that I had have disappeared. I am relieved to know my child is alright. I will visit there again.”⁵⁰

Though the comment is short, it provides significant insights into the mentality of the poster and her reasons for performing mizuko kuyō. Suffering sleep loss and anxiety, presumably over the loss of the child, the user decided to perform mizuko kuyō, thus alleviating all her problems. Though the user does not attribute her sleep loss and anxiety to a *tatari* she does acknowledge that she believes the spirit of her child still exists, whether in limbo or somewhere else, and implies that performing mizuko kuyō helped her child and thus helped her own problems as well. Her comment does not include any specific or useful information about the temple, Butsuganji, or the priests who performed the ceremony, but her post is personal and offers reassurance to women that mizuko kuyō can be a means of alleviating negative feelings surrounding the loss of a child. Her comment will appeal to those potential practitioners who are looking for support or

⁵⁰ Anonymous, November 13, 2011 (14:21), comment on Butsuganji temple listing, *Mizukokuyou.com*, October 19, 2012, <http://mizukokuyōu.3zoku.com/mizuko/modules/weblinks/singlelink.php?lid=6#comment>

Comment was originally posted January 17, 2012.

reassurance that the anxiety or mental suffering they are experiencing due to a lost child is normal and can be healed with mizuko kuyō.

On the opposite end of the spectrum, some use the comments section as a means of presenting more personal information on mizuko kuyō experience at a temple. The following comment provides explicit detail about the user's visit to the temple and her experience with the priest:

Original: 「 供養ができてよかったです。先日、10年ほど前に人工中絶し{て}しまったわが子の水子供養をしていただきました。お坊さんは私自身の今のこと、過去のことこの子が今どのようなになっているのかなどとてもわかりやすくお話し
ていただきました。

そして、丁寧にお経をあげて供養をしてくださり
私は流れる涙を抑えることができませんでした。

仏事の作法を何もわかっていなかったのにいやな顔せず対応してくださいまし
た。

いつも門は空いているので、これからちょくちょくお参りに行こうと思っています。
す。」

Translation: “I am very glad I performed mizuko kuyō. The other day I performed kuyō for a child I unfortunately had to abort nearly ten years ago. The priest talked with me in an easy to understand manner about my current state and what had now become of this child of my past.

Then he very politely recited the sutras for me and performed the ceremony.

I could not suppress my tears.

Even though I knew nothing anything about the etiquette for Buddhist funeral services,

he (the priest) dealt with me with patience and kindness.

The gate to the temple is always open, and from now on I think I will visit the temple.”⁵¹

The second poster includes extensive personal information about herself that allows for those reading the website to get a glimpse of what mizuko kuyō might actually be like. This post shows how users on the website can indirectly answer a wide range of questions and directly alleviate the anxieties potential practitioners may have about practicing mizuko kuyō at a temple. By including that she had no knowledge of Buddhist funerary practices, readers who might be questioning their own ineptness with Buddhist rituals may feel relief to know they will not be scorned by the priests. Her own inability to withhold her tears during the ceremony might alleviate the anxiety of women who may feel apprehensive about crying during the ceremony or worry it might not be proper form to do so. Both of these posts, despite being quite different in content and detail, showcase how comments on the temple listings actively work to form a community in which both lurkers and active participants benefit. Those who post comments gain an open forum in which they can express their own thoughts, feelings, and experience with a particular temple and thus influence other people, whether positively or negatively. Lurkers see comments and gain the information they desire through them. Questions they may have

⁵¹ Anonymous, October 24, 2012 (18:12), comment on Juhōji listing, *Mizukokuyou.com*, October 24, 2012, <http://mizukokuyōu.3zoku.com/mizuko/modules/weblinks/singlelink.php?lid=99#comment>

Comment originally posted on January 4, 2011.

about mizuko kuyō or a temple might be answered without the need for direct interaction with another user.

However, because comments are temple specific and made at the whim of the user, one of the drawbacks of mizukokuyou.com's comments section is that some temples are either underrepresented or completely void of representation. Many temple site listings contain no comments whatsoever while others only contain older posts. Older posts remain an important source of support and can provide information to potential practitioners, but they may not be an accurate reflection of the current state of the temple and its mizuko kuyō practice. Furthermore, while old comments were imported with the website update, the actual dates of posting were lost, making the whole comments section seem to stagnant. Anyone reading the comments no longer knows the time frame in which those comments were made. The first comment discussed above with the sleepless user does not necessarily need to be placed in time; her comments can appeal to any user because they are about individual feelings associated with child loss and mizuko kuyō. Regardless of when another user reads this comment, it can be read as being positive reinforcement for mizuko kuyō as both a practice to help the mother and the lost child. The second comment, however, represents a set time and place, and excluding the date of the original post may make her comments inapplicable to the current state of the temple's services. It is doubtful a temple will suddenly implement a new "no-crying during mizuko kuyō" policy, but perhaps a temple may get a new head priest who is not as forgiving to those uneducated in Buddhist ritual etiquette. As discussed with Honju-in, temples have the ability to change their services easily, and types of practice fluctuate

with time. The lack of an accurate time stamp on a post can lead to inaccurate and outdated information being shared outside of the context of time. Additionally, having the comments state their original posting date can make the site seem more credible by creating a longer history rather than seeming new and perhaps inexperienced or lacking in mizuko kuyō authority. From a research standpoint as well, having inaccurate time stamps means collecting and understanding data from the site can be difficult. Figuring out the average posting rates for comments, trying to find patterns in posting times, or seeing how a listing's comment section has developed over time becomes impossible.

On a final note, despite searching through all the comments left by users, no users posted a negative comment in regards to a temple. Whether this is simply because users think it is rude to negatively comment on a temple or because practitioners have had only positive experiences with the temples is unknown. One must also wonder again about who runs the site and whether or not this individual is subject to biases of her or his own. Is it possible that negative comments about a temple are removed from the website? Could the person running the site desire to keep all comments positive? If so, why include a rating system that allows users to give a low score to a temple? Are negative words more hurtful and disreputable than a bad rating? I considered testing whether negative comments were deleted or left alone but decided purposefully leaving a negative comment on a temple listing for research purposes would be unethical and troll-like. My own assumption is because users can participate on mizukokuyou.com through rating a temple free from restrictions, they can politely give a temple a poor score while allowing the temple to save face in the comments section. Because comments can be old or

outdated or temple listings may have no comments at all, the ratings system for the each temple on mizukokuyou.com becomes all the more important.

Ten out of Ten: Temple Ratings and Popularity

One of the most fascinating aspects of mizukokuyou.com is the rating system in which users can give a temple a score between one and ten, and temples are then ranked by their overall score. Or, more aptly, this was one of the most fascinating aspects of the website prior to its update in Fall 2012. Before the update, individual users, when browsing a temple's posting, could see how other users had rated the temple. There was no basis for the rating system, no rules or guidelines for how one should judge a temple. One user might rate a temple based on her own experience with mizuko kuyō, another might base her rating on the friendliness or openness of the staff, still another user may be completely arbitrary in her rating, thinking about the temple grounds or how poor the weather was when rating the temple. Moreover, there was no correlation between the rating of a temple and its overall popularity in terms of individual hits on to the site from its listing. For example, in March 2012, the most popular temple was Honju-in in Tokyo's Ōda ward with over 40,000 individual hits but the overall rating for the temple was 6.78 out of 10 based on the ratings of 330 users. In contrast, a relatively unpopular (in terms of hits) temple group in Ibaraki, Kaiun no Tera and Iwamanami-kiri Fudouji, had a popularity rating of 9.5 as voted by two users. This rating and ranking system allowed users to easily see which temples were receiving the most positive feedback without needing to read comments. Obviously there is a huge difference between a small temple

with a high rating based on only two ratings and a large, popular temple with a mediocre rating based on 300+ ratings, but the fact remains that a high popularity ranking did not guarantee a high score in the ratings.

Each temple posting now has PageRank bar with a zero next to it in the top righthand corner of every posting. However, nowhere on the website, not under comments, nor anywhere in the temple posting nor on the side bar, can a user actually rate the temple. This means all temples have a PageRank of 0 with a completely empty bar next to it (I surmise the bar would be filled to an appropriate amount, probably in color, depending on the numerical rating of the temple). Because mizukokuyou.com originated as a ranking and rating website, the exclusion of one of the most prominent and useful features of the site weakens the power the website once had for discussing temples and their services and takes away the voice of a key user base: the lurkers. Ratings, no matter how high or how low, no matter how few or how many, gave users the ability to directly interact with the content of the site and provide a useful, if nondescript, review of a temple's services. Excluding a rating section weakens mizukokuyou.com because it takes away the key passive participation element most utilized by lurkers. As previously discussed, 90% of the people using a website are lurking and absorbing information or passively participating through non-member interactive features rather than posting comments or content. The rating system allowed for lurkers and passive participants to remain anonymous and discreet while directly contributing to website community. Perhaps it was an oversight in the development of the new version of the website to exclude a rating system. Maybe temples with lower ratings pushed back

against the webmaster to discontinue the rating system. Alternatively, perhaps mizukokuyou.com decided to end the rating system all together and focus solely on providing unbiased information. Yet the question remains, if the site no longer offers a temple rating system, why include a PageRank section that does nothing?

Mizukokuyou.com lost a valuable connection with its lurkers and passive participants by removing the temple rating system. The previous rating system allowed for users who did not want to post comments to still participate on the website and in the community by voicing their opinions on temples based on a numerical rating. Furthermore, a lack of an actual rating system is detrimental to new lurkers who may be basing their temple choices on user-generated comments (especially if a listing has no comments) and the temple website itself. Not having a temple rating means lurkers only have one method of judging the temple's services in an unbiased manner rather than two. Moreover, only having comments means the amount of feedback available to a lurker is significantly lessened. In the case of Honju-in, instead of having a high number of individual ratings to base a decision on (300+), a user only has six total comments of feedback on which to base her temple decision. Since mizukokuyou.com tries so hard to maintain a website where the user has control of finding the right temple for individual mizuko kuyō practice, why the rating system was removed becomes even more baffling.

In addition to the participation of lurkers, the loss of the rating system took away one of the key elements of mizukokuyou.com that appealed not only to me but no doubt to other users as well: the website provided a completely uncensored experience. The reason this site is so important to the online mizuko kuyō community is because it allows for

people to rate their experience with mizuko kuyō at a specific temple in a space where the temple has no power and users control whether feedback is positive or negative. With Honju-in, for example, all the messages on the bulletin board, all the posted feedback, even the Letter to My Baby section contained nothing but praise and positivity from the users to the temple and its services. But these postings are completely controlled by the temple and whomever maintains the website. Certainly not everyone who has practiced mizuko kuyō at Honju-in has had a pleasant experience or found it to be particularly rewarding or alleviating of sadness or guilt. But should a user contribute a negative comment, that post could easily be deleted because it tarnishes the website's name and services when the main purpose of the website is to bring in new customers. Additionally, a past practitioner may not want to post a negative review or leave negative comments on the actual website of the temple simply out of courtesy or politeness or because this action would seem confrontational or cause the temple to lose face. Mizukokuyou.com gave users an outlet to voice their dissatisfaction without needing to be confrontational or resort to public criticism. People could rate the temple based on their real feelings on a non-affiliated site, thus completely bypassing the temple but allowing for those ratings to be public. No one was going to censor a user if she or he gave a temple a rating of 5 out of 10. No one was going to delete anyone's rating contribution. This gave the users complete control of their opinion on the temple, and without the re-inclusion of this key feature, the new mizukokuyou.com does not carry the same impact it once did nor does it serve its users or the online mizuko kuyō community in the same way.

Mizukokuyou.com walks the line between completely free and independent mizuko kuyō practice and Buddhist-centric temple practice. On the one hand the website still caters towards a more traditional conception of mizuko kuyō in which temples dictate practice, and this practice is limited to the confines of religious spaces. In this respect, mizukokuyou.com recognizes that temples still have significant control in terms of how mizuko kuyō can be expressed. On the other hand, the website represents a significant culture shift in which temples no longer exist unchecked and unscrutinized. Mizuko kuyō temples now are subject to public criticism and ratings much like any other business offering a service. In addition, users have the ability to express what mizuko kuyō means to them as a practice while exercising power over a temple community that once actively oppressed and exploited them.

Telling It How It Is: Free Expression on Let's Perform Mizuko Kuyō

Let's Perform Mizuko Kuyō (LPMK)⁵² is an independently produced archived blog powered by a company called RCN who runs meblog, a free Japanese blog service. Nine separate blog posts from various times in 2008 discuss mizuko kuyō in a candid and uncensored manner. Entries range from the deeply personal experiences of performing mizuko kuyō to sassy and jocular comments on the youth of today. Posters touch on a wide variety of topics surrounding mizuko kuyō, from the practical aspects such as standard forms of practice to different conceptions of child spirits. Unlike a more “professional” site like Honju-in, all information provided by LPMK is anecdotal and

⁵² 「水子供養をしましろう」 <http://mizukokuyou.meblog.biz/>

based exclusively on personal opinions and experience rather than priestly doctrine or established methods of practice. Some entries are openly critical of some of the beliefs surrounding mizuko kuyō, such as that of the vengeful baby spirit *tatari* while others chastise young women who take abortion lightly and think of mizuko kuyō as “old-fashioned.”

While a valuable source of first person narrative about mizuko kuyō practice, the blog itself has some contradictions that make understanding exactly how it functions unclear. The blog originated in 2008 and contains nine different posts. Before translating each entry, I originally assumed they were all by the same author because it is a blog and all posts are made under the same user handle Mizuko Kuyō 水子供養. However, contradictions in belief and messages began to surface from entry to entry. For example, two separate post discuss the mizuko kuyō experience of the writer, one a woman who had a miscarriage after her third child and performed mizuko kuyō with her husband,⁵³ the other a woman who was expecting her first child, miscarried and decided to perform mizuko kuyō alone.⁵⁴ Clearly, these posts were made by different authors who had unique experiences they wanted to share. However, no posts have been made on LPMK since August 2008, and currently there is no place on the site for anyone to make a new post either anonymously or by signing in to an account. Nowhere on the site can one contact a webmaster nor even know who created the site as the original blogger. Searching for the

⁵³ 水子供養, February 13, 2008 (9:25pm), 「私たちの赤ちゃんが産まれなかったのは」 <http://mizukokuyōu.meblog.biz/article/370340.html>

⁵⁴ 水子供養, August 11, 2008 (12:03am), 「水子供養をしました」 <http://mizukokuyōu.meblog.biz/article/196898.html>

posts elsewhere online to see if perhaps they were copied and pasted rendered no results. Who posted these blogs, and why did they contain stories and experience from different women?

More than likely the blog was once an open space in which any person could add an entry much like how Letter to My Baby functions on the Honju-in mizuko kuyō website. Users could possibly log in or post under the name Mizuko Kuyō in order to share a story or express an opinion related to mizuko kuyō yet still do so anonymously. Since the blog formed in 2008, the company could have changed its registration policies or content and functionality to no longer allow anonymous or shared posting privileges. Or the person who created the blog originally could have decided to disable posting but keep entries that had already been posted. Thus the blog remains as a type of mizuko kuyō archive but is no longer active. The reality is knowing the original setup of the website is impossible, but an open posting format seems most plausible. This would explain the contradictions in beliefs between posts, the different stories in each entry, and different writing styles.

Regardless of how LPMK gathered its entries, each one offers a unique look into how the poster thinks about and understands mizuko kuyō in contemporary Japanese society. More than anything, LPMK has a distinct personality that sets it apart from both Honju-in and mizukokuyou.com. One poster spends an entire paragraph wondering about whether or not Okinawa has mizuko kuyō (finally concluding that they must, since it *is* part of Japan)⁵⁵ while another talks explicitly about the abortion process as if she were

⁵⁵ 水子供養, May 6, 2008 (8:58am), 「水子供養は古くさい？」 <http://mizukokuyōu.meblog.biz/article/833602.html>

writing a noire novel.⁵⁶ Because posters have more space to write and are given free rein to discuss whatever subject they desire relating to mizuko kuyō, entries tend to be more colorful and show more personality than more solemn postings on Letters or short comments about temple service on mizukokuyou.com. This website can appeal more to users who want to know about mizuko kuyō as posted by people who have no reservations to reveal what they really think about mizuko kuyō, about losing a child, or about practice at a temple. No doubt to some people browsing LPMK, some entries will seem abrasive, almost offensive at times due to their content, but to others they will be a refreshing look at the reality of mizuko kuyō as it exists in the lives of women without interference or influence from the temple. This frankness of writing, the the colorfulness of each entry, and the fact that the website is completely removed from any temple influence, whether directly or indirectly, led me to choose LPMK as a source of study.

Vengeful Spirits, Mourning Mothers, and Blogging Biases

Let's Perform Mizuko Kuyō provides individuals with the opportunity to discover mizuko kuyō completely free from temple influence and affiliation and to read about the real-world experiences and opinions of women in an extremely candid manner. No subject matter is taboo. Religious beliefs and superstitions are questioned and dismissed in some ways while supported in others. The feelings of women and mothers who have lost a child, whether to abortion or miscarriage, are openly discussed without reservation. LPMK does something neither the Honju-in mizuko kuyō website nor mizukokuyou.com

⁵⁶ 水子供養, August 11, 2008 (12:03am), 「中絶しても水子供養は必要」 <http://mizukokuyōu.meblog.biz/article/204515.html>

could do; it provides a wide variety of opinions in an honest manner allowing users to discuss mizuko kuyō as a more than just a religious ritual but as a personal experience. This openness does, however, invite personal biases to shine through, something that both helps and hinders the website as a whole.

Much like Honju-in has its biases towards Buddhist malevolent spirits and negative karmic retribution as the reasons for mizuko kuyō practice, LPMK, too, has its own biases that are most often blatantly expressed. Every entry on LPMK advocates mizuko kuyō for women who have had an abortion or lost a child to miscarriage in some way. However, the attitudes of each poster towards mizuko kuyō as well as how they discuss it and promote it as a practice varies significantly from entry to entry.

One entry focuses on the carelessness of some women about pregnancy and their disregard for human life and lightheartedness over terminating life. In an entry entitled “The Importance of Life” 命の重み (literally the weight of life),⁵⁷ one poster rants against young women who see abortion as just something one does when one gets pregnant while praising those who understanding the importance of life:

Original: 「同じ人間であっても、命に対してこれほどの差があるのです。片や「妊娠したら堕ろせばいいよ。水子供養？ そんなの関係ねえ！」とケタケタ笑い、片や「宿った命は私の分身であり、大切な命。それが生きて生まれなかったら、水子供養をしてあげたい。私が死ぬまでずっと大切に思いたい」と祈り、
本当に人間の質の差が出ます。」

⁵⁷ 水子供養, January 28, 2008 (7:31am), 「命の重み」 <http://mizukokuyou.meblog.biz/article/295012.html>

Translation: “People are people, but with regards to attitudes towards life we differ to this extent.

On the one hand, some people laugh foolishly and say, “I can just get an abortion if I get pregnant. Mizuko kuyō? Who cares about that!” On the other hand some pray and say, “This life inside me is a part of me; it’s an important life. If it can’t be born and live, then I want to perform mizuko kuyō. Until the day I die, I always want to cherish [the memory of the child].” It really shows the differences in what people are made of.”

The people reading the LPMK website entries, she believes, understand how valuable life is and encourages them to not be embarrassed about going to perform mizuko kuyō. Yet for people who choose not to perform mizuko kuyō the poster offers no sympathy and deems them callous and devoid of compassion for human life.

A second entry creates a line between “us” and “them,” or those who choose to perform mizuko kuyō and those who do not. This entry stresses the carelessness of people who get pregnant, just shrug it off, and get an abortion and says that LPMK is not a website for them. Rather, LPMK is a place for people who are caring and concerned for the well-being of their child where ever it may be.⁵⁸ A third entry continues this sentiment in a more toned down manner. She acknowledges not all women need mizuko kuyō after an abortion and does not criticize those people directly, but contradicts herself at the end of her post by saying anyone who has had an abortion should be performing mizuko kuyō.⁵⁹ While LPMK does create a space in which women can openly discuss mizuko

⁵⁸ 水子供養, blog entry, 「水子供養はだれのために？」

⁵⁹ 水子供養, blog entry, 「中絶しても水子供養は必要」

kuyō, the reality is the site is really only for women who have performed mizuko kuyō or who are thinking about doing it. This space is not particularly welcoming to women who may be on the fence about practicing mizuko kuyō in their own lives nor is it a place for open discussion about the necessity of mizuko kuyō in people's lives.

Enough women and men practice mizuko kuyō to make it a noteworthy religious or social phenomenon, and as someone who spends large amounts of time researching and thinking about mizuko kuyō, it is easy to forget that there are plenty of women out there who are unaffected emotionally or mentally by having an abortion. Mizuko kuyō, while an important ceremony for some women, is by no means a universal practice. Some women do not feel a sense of loss or a need to mourn nor do they believe in any form of baby spirit, whether malevolent or benevolent. Perhaps some people do think of having an abortion in terms of removing a non-living object from the body rather than associating the fetus with a life. This lack of attachment to their pregnancy and disinterest in mizuko kuyō in no way makes such women terrible human beings. As the vast majority of cultures in the world have no equivalent to mizuko kuyō, how can not performing the ceremony be associated with having no care or concern for a life that could have been? Attacking women who do not perform mizuko kuyō and calling them careless and foolish highlights these posters' biases towards the ceremony and their lack of respect for how other women deal with abortions. While those who practice mizuko kuyō are the subject of this study, it would be interesting to see the opposite opinion as well and find out why some women actively choose not to perform mizuko kuyō or how people perceive of the fetus as a life or an object in more contemporary times.

In contrast to these more negative and biased posts that cause a rift between women who do and do not perform mizuko kuyo, one woman emphasizes how she uses her experience with mizuko kuyō to teach her children. She felt relieved and wanted to continue to hold a memorial for the lost child as a family in order to help her children understand the importance of life. The emphasis in this post is on using mizuko kuyō to maintain a strong family bond, something the poster believes other people can benefit from as well.⁶⁰ The poster maintains neutrality on mizuko kuyō, showing how the ceremony can be used to alleviate emotional pain and showcasing one method for making mizuko kuyō into a habit rather than a one time experience. In this way, mizuko kuyō can be used not as an individual ceremony nor just based on the parents of the child but can incorporate the entire family, showing how the dynamics of mizuko kuyō as a woman's practice has shifted to now incorporate entire families in the ceremony.

In addition to showing the biases of some posters, entries also provide valuable insight into understanding the reasons why women chose to perform mizuko kuyō. *Tatari*, the vengeful baby spirit, was the inspiration for Hardacre's book title, and the concept of the suffering, angry spirit still permeates temple mizuko kuyō culture as can be seen on the Honju-in About Mizuko Kuyō section. But what do women think of this concept now? How do some women think of the child they had to abort or miscarried in spiritual terms? Posters on LPMK mention their own understandings of the spirits of their baby or, in some case, discredit such spirits. In one entry the poster attempts to use reason to combat the superstitious belief in *tatari* and supernatural hauntings:

⁶⁰ 水子供養, January 19, 2008 (8:45am), 「水子供養をしたあとの過ごし方」 <http://mizukokuyou.meblog.biz/article/265553.html>

Original: 「ちょっと考えてみてください。あなたの子供がどうしてあなたを祟ったり呪ったりしますか？ 子供は生まれてきても死んでしまっても、あなたを永遠に親として思っていると考えるべきなのです。」

Translation: “Think about it for a moment. Why would your child haunt you and put a curse on you? Even if the child is born, even if the child died, you should understand that it will think of you as its parents eternally.”⁶¹

Here the poster appeals to a user’s logic and uses a persuasive argument to convince the reader: even if you believe the spirit of your child exists, the idea that it would haunt you seems ludicrous because you are still its parent, regardless of what happened. While this poster seems to dismiss the concept of any type of baby spirit, whether benevolent, malevolent, or suffering in limbo, she does acknowledge spirits of the dead need to be consoled. To her, *mizuko kuyō* predominately functions as a type of funerary ceremony that, while consoling the spirits of the dead, should focus more on the feelings of the woman performing it and the real world effects it has for her and her life.

However, this criticism of *tatari* is only one voice of many and does not mean other posters lack any sort of belief in the spirit of the child, whether while it was living or after it had departed. On the contrary, in one entry the poster discusses her own experience with having a miscarriage after her third child. She and her husband had been lamenting the birth of the baby due to the increased expenses when they were already

⁶¹ 水子供養, blog entry, 「古くさい？」

having difficulty making ends meet. Having decided to keep the baby, she learned a short time later that her child had died in the womb. Rather than blame natural causes, the poster saw this as an example of her “child” realizing the burden it would place on the family by being born and thus took it upon itself to not be born.⁶² Another post entitled “I Performed Mizuko Kuyō” discusses how a woman had a miscarriage and had nightmares about a crying baby after she was able to finally give birth to her first child. Distraught that her lost child might be suffering, she performed mizuko kuyō and then dreamed of a baby smiling at her.⁶³ These two posts show how some women believe in the power of the spirit of the child, in the first case as a means of making sense of a miscarriage and in the other to help alleviate pent-up anxieties over losing a much desired baby. The basis for these women performing mizuko kuyō was to bring peace to the child and remember it but by performing mizuko kuyō, they, too were able to comfort themselves and overcome the pain of losing a child.

To complete the spectrum of spirit belief in mizuko kuyō practice, one entry expresses concrete belief in the suffering of the child in the afterlife and how performing mizuko kuyō acts to console a child that could not be born. Here the poster emphasizes the dual nature of mizuko kuyō as both a memorial to help the mother and to help the child:

Original: 「手を合わせて霊を慰める。その行為が自分の心の傷を癒してくれることがあるのです。ですから、水子供養は子供のためであると同時に親自身のためでもあるのです。」

⁶² 水子供養, blog entry, 「私たちの赤ちゃん」

⁶³ 水子供養, blog entry, 「水子供養をしました」

Translation: “Put your hands together in prayer and comfort a soul. This action helps to heal a wounded heart. For this reason, mizuko kuyō is for the child, and at the same time, it’s for the parents as well.”⁶⁴

Praying comforts the soul of the baby by offering up prayers that will alleviate its suffering limbo. Praying also comforts the heart of the mother or father by providing a much needed funerary service to alleviate the emotional suffering of the parents. In a situation where both parties have lost, the child does not get to live and the parents do not get a child, mizuko kuyō offers a spiritual win-win situation; all parties are healed by mizuko kuyō as they suffer through a traumatic event.

These four different entries represent how diverse the beliefs surrounding mizuko kuyō are. One of the biggest debates over mizuko kuyō amongst those previously mentioned academics has been understanding why women perform mizuko kuyō. This blog offers some key insights into understanding the mentality of the women who are performing mizuko kuyō and why they chose to do so. What is clear from all of these entries is that there is no uniform reason why women and men practice mizuko kuyō. In some entries, the woman clearly favors a more Buddhist interpretation of mizuko kuyō and incorporates beliefs in spirits and the suffering of children in the next life as a reason to perform mizuko kuyō. Yet others see mizuko kuyō as a personal experience not separate from spirituality but more focused on the well-being of the mother or parents than that of a baby spirit. In terms of emotions, some emphasized their sadness while

⁶⁴ 水子供養, January 6, 2008 (9:28pm), blog entry, 「水子供養はだれのために？」 <http://mizukokuyōu.meblog.biz/article/219909.html>

others their guilt or their sense of self-reproach and yet others thought of performing mizuko kuyō as a natural response to human death.

The ability of LPMK to bring together so many unique and sometimes opposing opinions on mizuko kuyō makes it an ideal website for understanding contemporary attitudes towards the practice. Honju-in places more emphasis on the suffering of the spirit of the child in limbo than the mental and emotional well-being of the parents despite still providing outlets for individual expression. Mizukokuyou.com focuses more on the practice as an emotional outlet for the parents and completely dismisses any notions of suffering children and *tatari* spirits. These two websites are ignoring the fact that mizuko kuyō practice is based on complex feelings that, for quite a few women, incorporate both the Buddhist concepts of spirits and the pain that can accompany the death of a baby. Through its nine separate entries, LPMK lets women speak for themselves and gives them an online space to showcase the complexity of thoughts and emotions that accompany mizuko kuyō practice. In this way, LPMK is an invaluable archive for understanding the cultural, religious, and emotional factors that influence women to perform mizuko kuyō. The fact that it is no longer active and thus does not continuously provide new voices and opinions is regrettable.

CHAPTER V

CONCLUSION

I began researching mizuko kuyō as an undergraduate at Ohio University and wrote my senior thesis on the subject. Upon entering graduate school, I searched for a new topic of research only to find myself pulled back in to mizuko kuyō studies after discovering different websites about it. Seeing these websites, from the temple webpages expounding Buddhist faith to the independent websites promoting a more secular way, I realized I had the opportunity to examine a new aspect of mizuko kuyō that had never been explored before. Numerous academics had tackled the issue in the past, but they did so in a time before websites were widely available to the public as a means of communication and information dissemination. These researchers focused more on the ritual itself and how it developed and functioned within Japanese society. From this research, I came to understand the complexity of the the issues surrounding mizuko kuyō, the diversity of opinions about women's agency, temple and media influence and coercive tactics, religious significance and so on, which is why these websites became so fascinating to me. Here was a chance to see how mizuko kuyō had been incorporated into online spaces in the digital age. Originally information about mizuko kuyō was predominately spread through the temples that offered it and through women's magazines, using ads and the now infamous menacing fetus of Hardacre's book as a means of drawing in practitioners. Information about mizuko kuyō in the public sphere was almost completely controlled by these agencies. But there is the key word in that phrase: was.

Thanks to the Internet, information about mizuko kuyō is no longer limited or controlled by a few dominant entities. Rather, online spaces provide a diverse amount of opinions about mizuko kuyō, from how to practice to why to practice and even the consequences of practice. Despite being different in agenda and in content, the three websites I translated and analyzed provided great insight into exactly how people are thinking about mizuko kuyō and what it means to them in their lives. In addition, each website has its own methods of promoting free expression and giving voices to the people who actually practice mizuko kuyō, showing a shifting power dynamic in a once temple and media dominated ritual.

In terms of the business aspect of Honju-in, the website constantly works to establish itself as an authority of mizuko kuyō. From a mizuko kuyō book written by the former head priest to handmade Jizō statues made right at the temple, Honju-in uses business tactics to make itself stand out to browsers of its website and convince them that Honju-in offers a unique and trustworthy mizuko kuyō experience. These are just a few of the ways in which Honju-in markets its services. While the bulletin board postings are clearly open testimonials to the greatness of the temple's mizuko kuyō services, even Honju-in's Letter to My Baby page can be thought of as a more personal extension of a clever marketing scheme in which the letters are representative of the emotional benefits and effects of Honju-in's mizuko kuyō. The reality of Honju-in's website is that all the user-friendly features, the postings, the letters, and the book are part of the commercialist nature of mizuko kuyō as a practice. For some, if not most temples, the service is a commodity to be bought and sold, and these websites function predominately as online

advertisements for those services. However, is the commercialist nature of mizuko kuyō at some temples in Japan any different from how exploitive Christian pop culture in the United States can be? Were WWJD (What Would Jesus Do) bracelets nothing more than a marketing ploy to sell Christianity as ‘cool’ to young people? People pay for expensive caskets and gravestones to bury their dead adult loved ones in the US, in Japan they pay for cremations and funeral rites at the temple, why is buying a statue and saying prayers for a dead fetus any different? Is it simply because mizuko kuyō is marketed towards a certain group of people who have had a specific experience, namely women who have aborted a fetus? Or is it because mizuko kuyō is not really a ‘necessity’ as a service? If this type of funerary or memorial service were truly needed as a means of mourning, would not some equivalent be available to women all over the world? Or is it simply that no other culture has developed such a ritual yet and people in other cultures could benefit from mizuko kuyō?

Jan Chozen Bays, an American zen Buddhist, pediatrician and author, writes about her experience after first performing mizuko kuyō:

“Also relieved was the hidden sorrow of my own miscarriage twelve years before. I did not talk or think much about the miscarriage because people could not understand long-lasting grief over an eight-week-old fetus. Until then I had discounted the power of an “invented” ceremony. When I realized how important this ceremony was, and how deep and long-lasting its effects could be, I ... began to offer the ceremony in Portland.”⁶⁵

⁶⁵ “Jizo Bodhisattva,” Zen Community of Oregon, Accessed June 6, 2013. <https://www.zendust.org/greatvow/jizo-bodhisattva>

Here we can see that even for women who are not Japanese and who are not familiar with the ceremony as a culture construct can not only practice mizuko kuyō but experience certain emotional and psychological relief because of it. Yes, mizuko kuyō is an invented tradition, but aren't most traditions somehow constructed based on culture or historical events? It is commercialized and sold for profit, but so are events like Christmas and Christian paraphernalia like crosses and rosaries. It did, and probably still does, exploit some women, yet other women clearly practice without any feelings of exploitation. Buddhist temples can and do create the product of mizuko kuyō and the practitioners, who freely choose to consume the product, benefit from it. Just because a service or a product is highly commercialized does not mean people cannot benefit from that service as can be seen from the posts of both Japanese men and women and from Bays' personal experience outside of the Japanese cultural construct of mizuko kuyō.

Despite the commercialistic nature of mizuko kuyō and the temple website, Honju-in represents what I believe to be the changing relationship between the temple and its practitioners. Regardless of how the site uses such features as Letter to My Baby, the fact remains that the temple now actively includes the voices and experiences of its practitioners rather than only allowing for dogmatic interpretations of mizuko kuyō. This incorporation of individual beliefs demonstrates how mizuko kuyō has shifted from being a practice completely controlled by the temples to a more open ritual in which the voices of the people are an important part of the overall mizuko kuyō dialogue. Perhaps such spaces on Honju-in's websites are strictly for the commercial aspect of the ritual, but people still use them for their own needs and purposes without specific regard to how the temple might be using them. If this is indeed the case, perhaps Honju-in is less dualistic

in that it incorporates both its own religious dogma as well as practitioner beliefs and experiences with mizuko kuyō simply as a form of business tolerance rather than because the establishment is open and accepting. However, I maintain the opinion that such spaces were created to promote expression and create an online community rather than simply to profit from mizuko kuyō and exploit the experiences of users of the website but concede that the latter may be the case.

I believe mizukokuyou.com suffers without its former rating system. The lack of a rating system takes away a significant amount of passive user participation and weakens the power the website had as an independent critical voice of the temples who offer mizuko kuyō. Nonetheless, the site provides a valuable service to those wishing to learn more about mizuko kuyō without the direct influence of a temple. The tricky part of mizukokuyou.com is that though it does promote a more secular, practitioner centric portrayal of mizuko kuyō, it still uses temples to reach this means. But this seems to show how temples are the means to an end for individuals desiring mizuko kuyō services. If a person really wants to perform this ritual, regardless of the reason, and the only way to do it is through a temple, then they will go through the temple. I think of it in the same way people in the United States might get married in a church without actually being Christian or still celebrate Christmas as a cultural holiday rather than a religious one. This concept actually runs parallel to Japan in terms of the adoption of Christian cultural events but differs in that there is no understanding of the actual religious significance of an event. In Japan, it is very fashionable to get married at a chapel by a ‘priest’ while the bride wears a white wedding dress despite having no Christian beliefs or knowing the cultural

background. Additionally, many people in Japan celebrate Christmas as a couples holiday of gift giving and cake eating with no real understanding of the contemporary religious association of the day with the birth of Christ. Is mizuko kuyō the same kind of cultural practice, the use of something religious for more practical or personal needs? I think to an extent it most certainly is, and mizukokuyou.com recognizes that people have a need and temples are the means of fulfilling that need. The non-biased nature of the website is more than likely a result of this understanding. As can be seen on all three websites, some people do legitimately believe in the spirit of their baby, but the extent to which they believe this as part of Buddhist beliefs over cultural or superstitious ones is debatable as shown by the lack of acknowledgement of Buddhist concepts of suffering and children's limbo. Additionally, as a tool for research and comparison, mizukokuyou.com is an invaluable resource to both women and men who might be beginning their journey with mizuko kuyō. The ease of searching for temples, the means of categorizing them, and the ability to see how others have commented on them provides a comfortable and pressure free means of finding the temple that is right for each user.

Let's Perform Mizuko Kuyō is the most candid of all three websites in its brutally honest portrayal of mizuko kuyō. Here, in what I can only assume are female voices, posters take complete control of their feelings about mizuko kuyō and share their opinions and experiences with the ritual in an open and frank manner. The differing content for each post highlights how diverse individual opinions and viewpoints are for what mizuko kuyō is and should be. A surprising element of the blog was the inclusion of such severe criticism and even feelings of disgust at women who have an abortion and do

not perform mizuko kuyō. While this does not represent every post on the page, the fact that there are some women who look upon other women with disdain for not performing the ritual comes as a shock. Is mizuko kuyō not supposed to be about bringing women together into a safe space and empowering them in a misogynist religious realm? Or have these women fallen into the same type of gender biases that temples once, and to an extent still do, promote? With Japan still having a strong sense of traditional gender roles, why create disharmony amongst women over a ritual?

Additionally, the posts on LPMK often give detailed accounts of the circumstances leading up to a woman performing mizuko kuyō. They show that the reasons for mizuko kuyō truly do vary from person to person. One post sees mizuko kuyō as an outlet for personal mourning while another sees it as a way to heal the spirit of her lost child. While most incorporate some idea of the spirit of the child, as with the Letter to My Baby page, again, none focus on the Buddhist aspects of spirits, showing just how unorthodox beliefs have become. The real question is why hasn't a new space opened up like this one to showcase the real, uncensored feelings of people who have practiced mizuko kuyō? Japanese Internet thrives on anonymity, so why not keep making these types of sites? Is the demand not there? Or have temple sites like Honju-in or other independent sites like mizukokuyou.com taken the place of an open blog format like LPMK? I think a dive into a forum like 2chan or scouring personal blogs would be an excellent way to discover if and how people still share their candid opinions on mizuko kuyō.

Having re-examined the websites here, what do they mean for mizuko kuyō studies? One aspect of mizuko kuyō studies I have seen absent in the past is the inclusion of what people are actually doing, saying, and thinking in terms of mizuko kuyō and how and why they practice. Generalizations abound about practitioners, and there is a lack of real hard data on the people themselves. What are the age groups of people practicing? What percentage is male? What percentage is solely male? What are the economic factors of those participating? These are the kinds of questions that are difficult to answer because of the personal nature of the ritual and the desire for privacy around it. These websites may not provide solid data on the demographics of mizuko kuyō but they do provide amazing insight into what people are really thinking about the ceremony and the effects it has on them and potentially on the spirit of the child. Rather than finding out how many men practice mizuko kuyō, we can see how some men are just as affected by losing a child as women and how they use the ritual in much the same way women do. Instead of seeing the age groups, we can see life stages and indications of age groups. Some posts reflect on children lost twenty years ago, some only a year. Others indicate living children of all ages, placing the parents into certain age groups. Some posts show women who have had more than one abortion while others used mizuko kuyō for a child they miscarried instead of aborted. We do not necessarily see specific economic factors such as a recession or unemployment, but we see reasons why it was not the right time for a child. Health factors for either parent, the disintegration of personal relationships, economic hardships or lack of money, or simple youthful negligence and indiscretion represent just some of the reasons a fetus was aborted. These posts, from the blogs of

LPMK to the comments on temple listings at mizukokuyou.com to the Letter to My Baby section at Honju-in, shed light onto the reality of mizuko kuyō as a contemporary religious ritual.

I think of particular note here is, again, the presence of men within these online spaces. Expecting to find all posts to be from the female perspective, it was both surprising and enlightening to see so many posts made by men. I personally have often discussed mizuko kuyō as a ritual for women, promoting women's agency and empowerment in a world controlled by men. But can mizuko kuyō just be thought of in terms of a women's ritual now? Or has it become less gendered as it has developed as a social and cultural practice? Additionally there are plenty of examples of entire families performing mizuko kuyō or parents bringing their children to visit the temple and pray by the statue of the lost child. Here is an entirely new dynamic to consider when trying to understand mizuko kuyō's place as a women's ritual. Has mizuko kuyō become the equivalent of a family visit to the grave of a lost loved one without the same symbolic meaning it once had as a reaction to a male-controlled religious system? A deeper look into the role of men and the family in relation to mizuko kuyō would be a very interesting study and shed light even more on to how mizuko kuyō has shifted as a practice since its inception.

Are there menacing fetuses still lurking about on the Internet? Yes, but they seem to be more like relics of a different era of mizuko kuyō promotion and are not on the minds of the people practicing the ceremony. The toned down viewpoints of Honju-in do not represent the coercive misogynist Buddhist priests of the late 20th century despite the

continuation of mizuko kuyō as a viable source of income for the temple. The fear of a *tatari*, or that vengeful baby spirit, seem all but absent on these three sites. Mizuko kuyō in the digital age has given rise to more free-thinking about what the ceremony is and what it represents rather than adhering to a specific set of standards. It has done this by providing spaces in which women, and now men, can share their own personal experience with the ritual and actively discuss what it means to them.

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