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THE POSITION OF WOMAN IN THE JAPANESE FAMILY

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When I first came to Japan I was told by many Europeans, and even by a Japanese gentleman or two, that the Japanese woman was the head servant of her husband. Had I returned to my own country at once I might never have doubted this statement. However, I remained here. The first maid-servant I hired in Japan spoke to me in my own language; evidently women's education was not entirely neglected. In course of time I became acquainted with Japanese ladies, and found their home life very little different from that of my friends in my own country. Still, every book on Japan that I picked up dwelt at length on the subjection of woman. My Japanese friends boasted proudly that their Emperor had received command from the Sun-goddess herself to rule over this land. How to reconcile the reverence for Amaterasu-o-mi-kami with a low social position for women intrigued me. I felt there must be some explanation and I have found one that satisfies me. The idea of the inferiority of women has been super-imposed on the Japanese people by outside influences, and neither the men nor the women really subscribe to it! My paper today is an endeavour to place before you some of the reasons for reaching this conclusion.

THE roots of the family system of Japan extend back into mythological times. Every nation has its own history, its own traditions, its own character and Japan is unique in some respects. There are many opinions as to the origin of the Japanese people but all are agreed that since the dawn of their national life under the leadership of Jimmu Tenno, more than twenty-five centuries ago, they have lived under one and the same government and have maintained their ethnic unity with a common language, common custom and common mode of life. They have been governed by an unbroken line of one dynasty

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and the people regard the whole Japanese nation as one large family, with the Emperor as an hereditary patriarch. According to Japanese tradition they believe they descend from the same ancestors with the Emperor, and that the Imperial Family is the most original line of the descendants. They worship common ancestors and regard the Emperor as the High Priest of the nation. In the Japanese language the word "matsuri-goto" used for government is the same word as "matsuri" meaning religious ritual. The Emperor holds the supreme power, not as his own inherent right, but as an inheritance from his divine ancestor, Amaterasu-o-mi-kami, the Sun Goddess, and rules over the country as the supreme head of the vast family of the Japanese, the incarnate representative of the Imperial Ancestors. These ancestors are worshiped and obeyed not only because they are the ancestors of the reigning sovereign, but because they are the ancestors of the Japanese people.

The earliest migrations into Japan seem to have been made by families, not by individuals. In the ancient Japanese language "omo" means mother; and this word is the root word for "omoni" chiefly, "omote" face or surface, and "oyake" public. The word for father is of much later invention than that for mother and one word "tarachio" is the male form of "terachime" a word descriptive of mother. The word "oya" parent is derived from the same root. The mother was so important a member of the family that the house in which she as the head of the family lived was styled "omo-ya" originally meaning mother's house, later main house. The mother was the head or "kami" of the household, and today one word for wife in very common usage is "O-kami-san" honourable head. Woman was thus dominant in the ancient family till the combined forces of the teachings of Buddhism and the growth of the military spirit in Japan exalted the males of the family to the corresponding over-shadowing of the females.

When the members of the "omo-ya" became too numerous, a "waki-ya" or secondary house was built within the same compound or hedge. The term "uji", within the hedge, came to be used for all those who lived within the same enclosure. As the uji continued to increase in size and became unwieldy some of its members separated from the home-stead and taking up their abode in unoccupied land formed what were then termed "mure" group, this later became corrupted into "mura" a word in common use today. Sometimes the seceding groups from two or more *uji* joined together in these new settlements and they were known as "kopuri" or large group; "kopuri" in course of time became "kori" and then "kuni" country. Pre-historic Japanese were not exclusive and accepted the alien races with which they came in contact, often adopting them into the *uji*, sometimes merely attaching them to the *uji* as "yakko" or sons of the house. The larger *uji* sometimes established branch *uji*, the larger, or "O-*uji*" retaining the control of the branch *uji*. The term "kimi" used for the official head of a *kuni* is of the same origin as "kami" and means family head or patriarch. In historic times when the state of Japan was organized under Jimmu Tenno, the Emperor was the "O-kimi" of the Japanese national family and the court officials were named as if they were members of a family: "O-omi" Great Mother; "O-muraji" Great Father; "Wani" Greater Brother; "Sukune" Smaller Brother; and it is interesting to note that the "O-omi" highest officials in the land, are of the Kwobetsu class, the class of the Imperial Family from Jimmu Tenno down.

Before the time of Jimmu Tenno Japanese history is inextricably mixed with mythology, but Chinese records of the Han and Wei dynasties refer to Japan as "The Queen Country". One chronicle written in 240 relates, "At this time Queen Pimiku died. A great mound was raised over her, more than a thousand paces in diameter, and over a thousand of her male and female

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attendants followed her in death. Then a king was raised to the throne but the people would not obey him and civil war again broke out, not less than one thousand persons being slain. A girl of thirteen, a relative of Pimiku, named Iyo, was then made queen and order was restored.' This is verified to a certain extent by a passage from the Nihongi "A. D. 3rd year, 7th month, 6th day. The Empress Hibasu-hime-no-mikoto died. Some time before the burial the Emperor commanded his ministers saying, 'We have already recognized that the practice of following the dead is not good. What should now be done in performing this burial?' There-upon Nimi-no-Sukune came forward and said It is not good to bury living men upright at the tumulus of a prince. How can such a custom be handed down to posterity?'" This passage is interesting for two reasons. First: it is apparent that no distinction was made in burial honours between male and female of the Imperial Line; also, because it reveals the peculiar Japanese view of an obligation to posterity which is inseparably connected with ancestor worship in the Japanese mind. History records that from that time forward clay images were substituted for human beings, though the idea persists to this day in the voluntary following of a master to death. There is no record of the cruel custom of "sutti" ever being required of Japanese women.

At this period of Japanese history it appears that women had equal rights with men. There is no trace of marriage by capture; but there are records of a peculiar and interesting ceremony, that of "uta-gaki". This was a festival held at the foot of certain mountains near Kyoto when the youths and maidens of the surrounding country side assembled together and sang and danced. If a young man found favour in the eyes of a maiden she accepted a gift from him and that sealed their betrothal. It is recorded that in 730 the Emperor Shomu viewed such an *uta-gaki*, when two hundred and forty young people dressed in blue *kimono* with red

sashes questioned and answered one another in these impromptu songs. Up to this time the woman stayed at home with her own family and the man visited her at night only. All children belonged to the family of the mother. Japanese records, at least those available to translators, are very vague on this subject, but it was not until some time during the Nara period that any change in this custom took place and the woman went to the man's house. Even today one may find in secluded valleys north of the Japanese Alps whole families living under domestic institutions of the most primitive type. These families live under one roof and include not only parents and children but uncles, aunts, nieces, nephews, and grandchildren, sometimes to the number of fifty or more. The heads of these families exercise despotic control and only the heir, who is not necessarily the oldest son, is allowed to marry. The other sons contract irregular unions the children of which are adopted into the family of the mother. In other parts of Japan there still exist villages known as "kakadenka" or woman's throne, an appellation which hints of woman's sway over man not usually associated with the land of "Onna-daigaku".

The position of woman in ancient Japan may be described as "reasonably dependent". She was never shut up in harems and always enjoyed more liberty than that accorded to her sisters in other Oriental lands. There was no law, or tyranny of custom, to prevent her from taking a leading part in political or even military affairs when favored by circumstances and natural ability. There are cases where widowed Empresses retained the reigns of government after the deaths of their husbands. The Empress Jingo, after urging her husband in vain to attack Korea, herself led a conquering force to that country and established contact with the mainland of Asia, thus preparing the way for an inflow of culture into her country. After returning from this expedition she found the country in a state of unrest. She

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led her armies against the unruly chieftains, subdued them, placed her infant son on the throne and ruled as his regent.

To understand the part played by women in the Japanese family it will be necessary for us to understand the term "Yamato damashi", for this is the birthright of the Japanese woman as well as the Japanese man, Yamato Damashi is a phrase coined to express the spirit of the Japanese people; it is a term inclusive of many meanings, out of it sprang Bushido, and without it there would be no Japanese nation. In the last analysis it is a form of ancestor worship in which human ancestors, divine ancestors and the country itself are never differentiated by the Japanese. It is a concept difficult for a Westerner to grasp, this idea of the people, not as individuals but as one of a group, with its correlated idea of the nation as one family. It differs from Chinese ancestor worship, though it owes many of its forms to that country, in the idea of the nation as a family and a sense of obligation to posterity. In China ancestor worship is concerned with the worship of the dead; the glories of China are in the past, the duty of the present is to perpetuate the past. In Japan an integral idea of the worship of the dead is an idea of obligation to the future. Past, present and future are not so sharply defined in the mind of a Japanese as in that of a Westerner. Many writers miss the point when they condemn ancestor worship in Japan as the worship of the dead; to the Japanese, the worship of the dead is not to them as dead, but as the founders of a living line which extends "coeval with heaven and earth". That this idea developed early in Japan is proved by the earliest writings.

Buddhism was introduced into Japan from Korea in 552 A.D. and soon became the religion of the court. The development of this religion was fostered by the Soga family and a daughter of this family became consort of Emperor Bidatsu. After his death, and that of two other Emperors who succeeded him, she

became Empress. She ruled under the name of Empress Suiko and her nephew, Shotoku Taishi, was appointed regent, but she out-lived him several years. She was a devout Buddhist and encouraged the building of temples and the spread of Buddhist art. She instituted festivals of extreme magnificence ; and it was during her reign that Japan took great strides in every branch of learning.

Buddhism being chiefly concerned with the next world, its introduction did not tend to alter the form of society, except in-so-far as its propagation furnished an occasion for the rise in power of the Soga family ; but it was a different matter with Confucianism, which came in with Chinese learning about this time. Confucian ethics, with their civic morality, educational methods, and legal institutions, made a profound impression on the whole country, especially on the position of woman. The idea of family perpetuation and the importance of communal life, the virtues of valour and fidelity, always integral factors of Japan's indigenous religion, were strengthened. The development of the struggle between the court nobles and military leaders, under the Emperor, created a need for a sterner code than that furnished by either Shinto or Buddhism, and Confucianism met that need. It contributed greatly to the change that now took place : the idea of a family governed by the authority of a mother, through affection, gave way to the idea of the authority of the father as protector. Succession in the family began to descend through the male line. However, in the Imperial Line, only Imperial Sons whose mothers were of the Kwobetsu class inherited the throne. During the strict military regime of the Tokugawa Bakufu, continuation of the male line became so important that in all classes below the Kwobetsu the social class of the mother of the heir was no longer of importance.

One of the first results of the Confucian teachings in Japan was the Tai-kwa or Great Reform, which may broadly be stated

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as the transition from the Japanese system of heredity to the Chinese system of morality. This was followed by further legislation based on the principle that the people at large, without regard to rank, owed equal duty to the State. The attempt to supplant the idea of the Emperor as father of the national family with the idea of the "State" failed, and in course of time the people went back to the old system of family control; rather they never really abandoned it for the entire polity of the empire has always been based on the idea of the family.

At the time of these changes an Empress sat on the throne of Japan. The Empress Kogyoku reigned from 642 to 644 and again from 655 to 660. In 686 the throne was again occupied by a woman, this time Empress Jito, and to her credit must be ascribed the law minimizing the evil results of slavery for debt. It was during her reign, too, that compulsory military service was first inaugurated; and the date March 14th 696 is memorable in Japanese history as the date when the principle of primogeniture first received official approval. Six months later Empress Jito resigned in favour of Emperor Mommu.

The Emperor Mommu took as his consort the daughter of a Fujiwara official, and this marks the beginning of the influence of that family. The women of the Fujiwara family have always been noted for their beauty, and this, together with the astuteness of their men folks, secured for this family the social and political supremacy of the land. At one time three Fujiwara ladies served simultaneously in the palace, one as Imperial Empress and two as Imperial consorts.

When Emperor Mommu died his son was too young to succeed to the throne and his mother reigned in his stead as Empress Gemmyo. After seven years she abdicated in favour of her daughter who became the Empress Gonsho. During the reigns of these two Empresses, 707 to 723, the Kojiki and

Nihongi were compiled from oral records; and the capital of the country was moved to Nara.

The Emperor Shomu took as consort a daughter of a Fujiwara, the Lady Asuka. After the birth of a son, and by the aid of the now powerful Fujiwara family, she was raised to the position of Empress, though this was expressly forbidden to any but ladies of Kwobetsu, or Imperial rank. She is known in history as the Empress Komyo and is one of the most beautiful figures in Japanese history. She was a devout Buddhist and established asylums and free hospitals for the poor. It was at her instigation that the Emperor Shomu built the Todaiji at Nara with its great bronze image of Buddha. At his death she collected "rare state treasures, various objects of vertu, girdles, ivory sceptres, bows and arrows, swords, examples of calligraphy, musical instruments etc." things which he had used or handled, and offered them to the Buddha in his memory. These she caused to be placed in a storehouse in the Todaiji compound called the Shoso-in, and they form today an invaluable source for the study of the art, music and customs of that time. Emperor Shomu before his death abdicated in favour of his daughter and retired to a monastery. His daughter reigned as Empress Koken and after four years retired in favour of the Crown Prince, but becoming dissatisfied with him she degraded him to the rank of prince and again assumed the Imperial title under the name of Empress Shotoku. Unfortunately her record is marred by an excessive partiality for Buddhist priests; and, as a woman writer naïvely remarks, "The unfortunate experience of her reign taught the country that it was undesirable to have a woman on the throne and for about ten centuries following it was exclusively occupied by men." However, under the Shogunate, two Empresses graced the throne. With the Restoration the Imperial House Law was changed and succession now follows the male line of the Imperial Descendants.

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The Heian period, 784-986, with the capital in Kyoto, was the golden age when women excelled in all polite accomplishments and her desirability for wifehood was considered to depend on her ability to extemporize a witty poem. Murasaki-Shikibu, a court lady belonging to the Fujiwara family, was the author of *Genji Monogatari*. She was the creator of the Japanese novel and she drew men and women with an intense reality, portraying their everyday lives and giving us a minute and intimate picture of the society of her time. As a novelist she stands pre-eminent in the world of her time; there is nothing in the Western world of literature to compare with her. There were other women writers of lesser importance in the world field of literature, but of equal importance in Japanese literature. It was a convention of that time for scholars to write in Chinese (as at one time Europeans wrote in Latin) and women played a very important part in developing the true Japanese language, in poetry as well as prose.

With the close of the Heian period and the shifting of power from the luxury loving nobles of the Imperial Court to the sterner military leaders of the north, women ceased to shine in literature and art, and, with a few brilliant exceptions, they were no longer able to exercise any direct influence on the government of the nation. The *samurai* was a student of Confucian teachings, attracted thereto by its doctrine of loyalty to a superior, a code necessary to the military organization which now developed in Japan. His women were brought up as daughters of soldiers, trained to become wives of fighting men whose very existence depended on their prowess in arms. They were taught the use of the halberd in defence of their homes and the use of the *kozuka*, small sword, to remove them beyond the reach of dishonour by self-destruction.

One of the most remarkable women in Japanese history was Hojo Masako, wife of the Shogun Yoritomo. She possessed

high courage and intellectual endowments of an extraordinary distinction. She was distinguished for the masculine character of her mind and heart. When her father's plans did not agree with hers she forced him into exile. At the death of her second son she shaved her head and entered a religious order but continued to direct public affairs from her place of retirement. The Shoguns who succeeded her husband were men of inferior ability and, on the death of Shogun Sanetomo, she asked for and received permission to place a two year old child of a Fujiwara family in the office of Shogun and she exercised the real power of government as his guardian. She died in 1225 at the age of seventy after a very active life. Hers was a supreme example of a woman's rise to eminence, but it was by no means without parallel in feudal Japan. At this time feminine influence was strong both in the court circles and in the sterner military society and there is nothing to show that the position of women was definitely subordinate, as it later became.

The Jōei Code, promulgated 1232, allows woman considerable liberty; she "could be dowered with, or inherit, fiefs and transmit a legal title to them to her own children"; and a childless woman was empowered to adopt an heir. Succession to the property was not necessarily through the eldest son, even though legitimate, and the only indication of the hard and fast rule of male succession which developed in the Tokugawa period, was the provision that the eldest son, whether of wife or concubine could claim one-fifth of his father's estate. At this time the position of woman in Japan was as high if not higher than that of her sisters in Europe. A woman could hold fiefs separately from her husband. Her position in the family was an honoured one, not only as the mother of descendants in the male line for the house into which she was married, but as a valuable pawn in the game of alliances and counter-alliances formed by the great families during this turbulent period.

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For some time after the establishment of the Bakufu the relation between lord and vassal partook more of the nature of family loyalty than of a contractual obligation. In spite of outside influences which tended to change the structure of society, clan feeling again and again asserted itself and found expression in the rise, one after another, of powerful families tending to act as self-contained units. The early feudal relations of lord and vassal owe much to the patriarchial system of pre-feudal and even prehistoric times. Couquered enemies were invited to become house-men, a connection approaching kinship, and analogous to the old "yakko". As the size of these military families increased, rules governing the relations between members, matters of marriage, succession and ancestral rites came to be formulated. These rules were known as House Laws of the different families; and the clan leader and his military men were in the same relation to one another as the court noble and his dependents. The House Law of the Minamoto family became in time the common law for Japan. The women of this age were the devoted servants and trusted companions of their lords and seem to have had a good deal to do with the practical management of the feudal estates.

We come now to the collapse of the *uji*, or clan, system and the replacing of it by the family system, where loyalty to the *uji-kami*, or head of the clan, gives way to loyalty to the head of the household. The family makes its appearance as a social unit, the custom of primogeniture has its inception and the subjection of women, in contrast to the high position she had held under the Fujiwara regime and earlier feudalism, begins. In a time of anarchy and warfare the ablest and strongest member of the family must be made the head, or the family will be destroyed. The ideal of that time was the maintenance of the family, the preservation of its property and the enhancement of its prestige. To assure this alliances were made with

other and more powerful families through intermarriage.

The code of Bushido was taught and lived, but never named till the late Inazo Nitobe, at the request of our own President Roosevelt, attempted to make it understandable to the Westerner. Let me quote Mr Nitobe. "Bushido borrowed its forms of expression largely from Chinese classics, from Confucius and Mencius, but even those sages, if I may be allowed to say so, were exploited more to enrich the native vocabulary than to impart, much less inspire, moral sentiments; hence, when we speak of the deep and wide influence of these Chinese teachers we must bear in mind that their most valuable services consisted in awakening our own inborn ethical consciousness. For example, when Confucius taught of the five moral relations: viz, between parent and child, husband and wife, master and servant, brother and sister, friend and friend—and gave them names, it was the nomenclature, and not the morals that we adopted."

Bushido teaches submission to authority, utter devotion to one's over-lord and self-sacrifice of all private interest, whether of self or family, to the common welfare. Bushido is the Greater Learning for Men, as compared to the Greater Learning for women, or "Onna-daigaku".

Much has been made of the Onna-daigaku as a proof of the subjection of women in the feudal age, but the doctrine is but one form of Bushido. In the seventeenth century many Confucian scholars appeared and some of these directed their attention to the education of women. Kaibara Ekken, one of these, formulated a set of rules for the education of woman which has since been known as the Onna Daigaku and it is more than possible that he was assisted in this by his wife, Hatsuko, a very able woman who "accompanied him on all his travels and assisted him in his literary works". It is said that many of his diaries were written by her. Ekken wrote, "A woman has no particular lord; she must look to her husband". Bushido commands

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loyalty to one's lord, the *Onna Daigaku* commands loyalty to one's husband; and the position of the *bushi* to his lord was in essence the position of a woman to her husband.

The structure of the Tokugawa government was based on the theory of an armed camp of a great feudal baron. Local governments followed the pattern of the central government and the laws of the Shogunate replaced the feudal House Laws. Tokugawa laws were in the main repressive, but unlike Western laws, they were not a systematic setting forth of specific injunctions and prohibitions, but were merely statements in writing of the principals underlying customary laws. These restrictions entered into the minutest detail of the lives of the people. Even the Imperial Court did not escape. In 1649 a law was issued ordering peasants to rise early, to work at night, not to eat rice but to be content with coarser fare, and if their wives were flighty and liked visiting temples or rambling in the hills they were to divorce them at once! It is easy to understand that in such an atmosphere woman's position was not high and the wave of Confucian learning that swept over the country at this time did nothing toward elevating it. Still one of the wealthiest and most influential families in Japan today traces its origin back to a "woman of Ise wise enough to realize that the field of activities for her sons, grandsons and descendants should be commerce". This remarkable woman of *samurai* family, bore and educated eight children and with amazing insight encouraged them to enter the business world at a time when business was considered beneath the notice of her class.

That even under these adverse circumstances the picture of these times is not all dark is testified to by Commander Perry, he of the Black Ships that played such an important part in opening Japan to Western influences after two centuries and a half of self-imposed retirement from the world. In his official report of his mission written for the United States Government

he says. "There is one feature in the society of Japan, by which the superiority of the people, to all the other Oriental nations, is clearly manifest. Woman is recognized as a companion, and not merely treated as a slave. Her position is certainly not as elevated as in those countries under the influence of the Christian dispensation but the mother, wife, and daughter of Japan are neither the chattels and household drudges of China, nor the purchased objects of the capricious lust of the harems of Turkey. The fact of the non-existence of polygamy is a distinctive feature, which pre-eminently characterizes the Japanese as the most moral and refined of all Eastern nations. The absence of this degrading practice shows itself, not only in the superior character of the women, but in the natural consequence of the greater prevalence of the domestic virtues. The Japanese woman, always excepting the disgusting black teeth of those who are married, are not ill-looking. The young girls are well formed and rather pretty, and have much of that vivacity and self-reliance in manners, which come from a consciousness of dignity derived from the comparatively high regard in which they are held. In the ordinary intercourse of friends and families the women have their share and the rounds of visiting and tea parties are kept up as briskly in Japan as in the United States".

With the black ships came the re-introduction and propagation of Christianity with its teaching of the value of the individual. The modern economic system of the Western nations, with its cry of "efficiency" in all departments, deals with individuals, not with families. The political revolution which took place at the beginning of the Meiji era abolished, once again, as did the Taikwa Reform, the old family system and made the people each and every one directly responsible to the Emperor. The old idea of loyalty to the feudal lord, even of loyalty to the head of the family, yielded to the idea of loyalty

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to the State, typified as it had been centuries ago by loyalty to the Emperor. That history repeats itself is an exceedingly trite but true saying. Already the observant bystander may see the old process beginning all over again: the *uji-kami* replaced by the clan head; the clan head replaced by the feudal lord; the feudal lord now being replaced by the capitalist. The old family alliances have not been destroyed, they have changed their outward garments only. But a real and, I believe, a lasting change has come in the position of woman in Japan. No longer is the stability of the family dependent on the prowess of the male members, economically the female is equal to the male.

I venture no prophecy concerning the position of woman in the future. Today women have entered all ranks of life; they are employed as sales, girls in the big stores; as conductors and even as motor-men on busses and street cars; as taxi drivers. They are active in literary, educational and international peace movements. Much to their credit, the first official women's organizations were for the promotion of social welfare, for the protection of children, for relief for the families of soldiers killed in warfare. Women are now doctors, lawyers and research scholars. As is always the case in a transition period there are some unlovely manifestations of the new freedom for women and the bobbed hair "*moga*" has made her appearance. But for one *moga* there are thousands of home-loving, noble minded women who pursue their daily tasks with the quiet assurance that they have an honoured part to play in the building of a great modern nation, they are the mothers of the future. That Japan has reached the position it has today is due in a large measure to its women; no nation rises on trampled womanhood.