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REDISCOVER ITAKO
REDISCOVER JAPAN

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イタコ
杉崎美智子

ITAKO イタコ

female shamans blind since a very young age, or since birth, Their main activity is the communication with the spirits of the dead and with the gods, alongside with some divination practices and health restoring practices.

They are part of a wider type of religious practitioners popular in the North-east Japan, which known under different names: Kamisama, gomiso, itako, ecc., depending on the prefecture.

Diffusion: Tohoku, Aomori-ken.



they are usually defined as *minkan fusha* 民間巫者
“Folk Shaman”

MINKAN 民間

Professional specialist that operate outside the established religious tradition. The term includes such a variety of identities that it is quite hard to make exact distinction between folk and non-folk tradition, also as a consequence of the particular religious inclination towards syncretism, typical of the Japanese culture

FUSHA 巫者

Issues concerning the actual nature of the magico-religious practice; from the standpoint of the traditional theory on shamanism, the Japanese fusha differs from other figures, such as faith healer and prophets; Issues concerning the discussion about trance and possession, since this elements are not so eminent in the itako experience

FROM TOKUGAWA (1603 -1868) TO MEIJI ERA (1868-1912)

The evolution and transformation of the practices and profession of Itako is connected to the wider historical evolution of modern and contemporary Japan

Great importance of the transition between Edo / Tokugawa era, (Japan isolation through the *sakoku* 鎖国 politics) and the following period (Meiji Era) when Japan was forced to open to other countries.

Acquisition of the western scientific practices, and complete revision of the Japanese culture, involving also the religious area.

Old pre-Buddhist practices identified under the term “Shinto” became the State religion, with a deep connection established with the pre-Buddhist past and traditions, in the attempt to recover the pure Japanese soul, freed from all the foreigner influences.

For this purpose, a whole set of practices and cults were singled out, since they didn't conform to the state guidelines.

MINKAN FUSHA IN THE MEIJI AND TAISHO ERA (1912-1926)

Between the 1873 and the 1874, The Ministry for Religious Education 教部省 released an official notification.

Strong prohibition for these specialists to “upset the people”, or “obstruct medicine”. Later on, this notification changed into a penal sentence, and all these practices began to be considered as social crimes (*shakaitekina hanzai* 社会的な犯罪)

Media and newspaper link their activity to the idea of crime, often in connection with other persecuted religious associations (New Religions such as Tenrikyō) or with the prosecution for private prostitution

POST-WAR PERIOD | 1945 – MID 50S

NEW CONSTITUTION

Freedom of religion was now granted, and the emperor was reduced to a symbol of the state, losing all his sacred and divine origin.

Beginning of the US occupation of Japan, which lasted until 1952

Starting from this period, the minkan fusha practices gained new consideration, in particular in connection with the rediscovery of sacred places, such as the Osorezan, and the beliefs connected.

ITAKO ENTERED THE POPULAR IMAGINATION

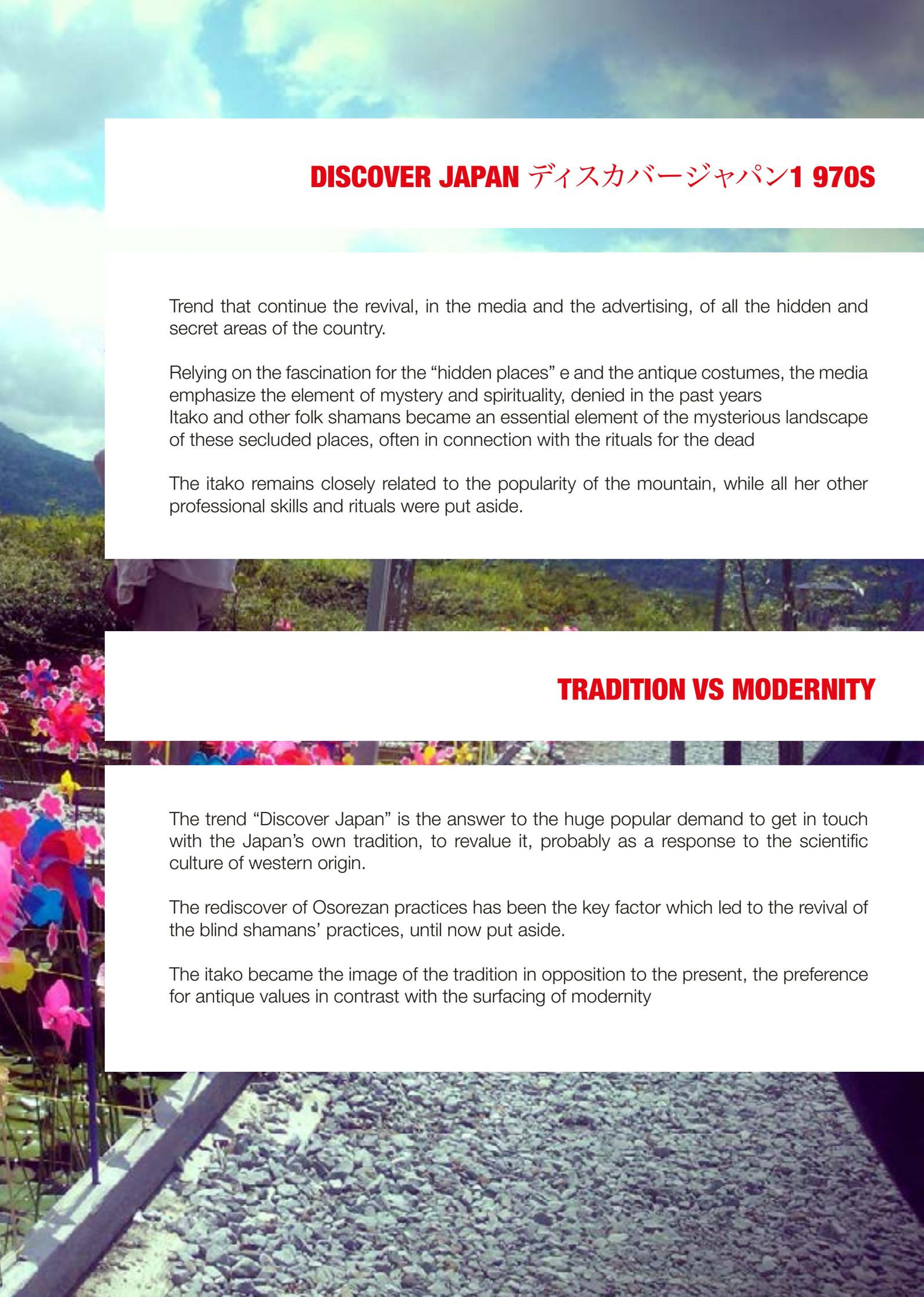
ITAKO BOOM | 1960S

They are now stable in the popular culture.

Shift of the focus from the sacred place (i.e. Osorezan) to the shaman herself, who becomes the undisputed protagonist in the media;

the opposition to the present is thus stressed, and the itako, far from being just some heritage from an ancient past, symbolize a resistance against modernity.



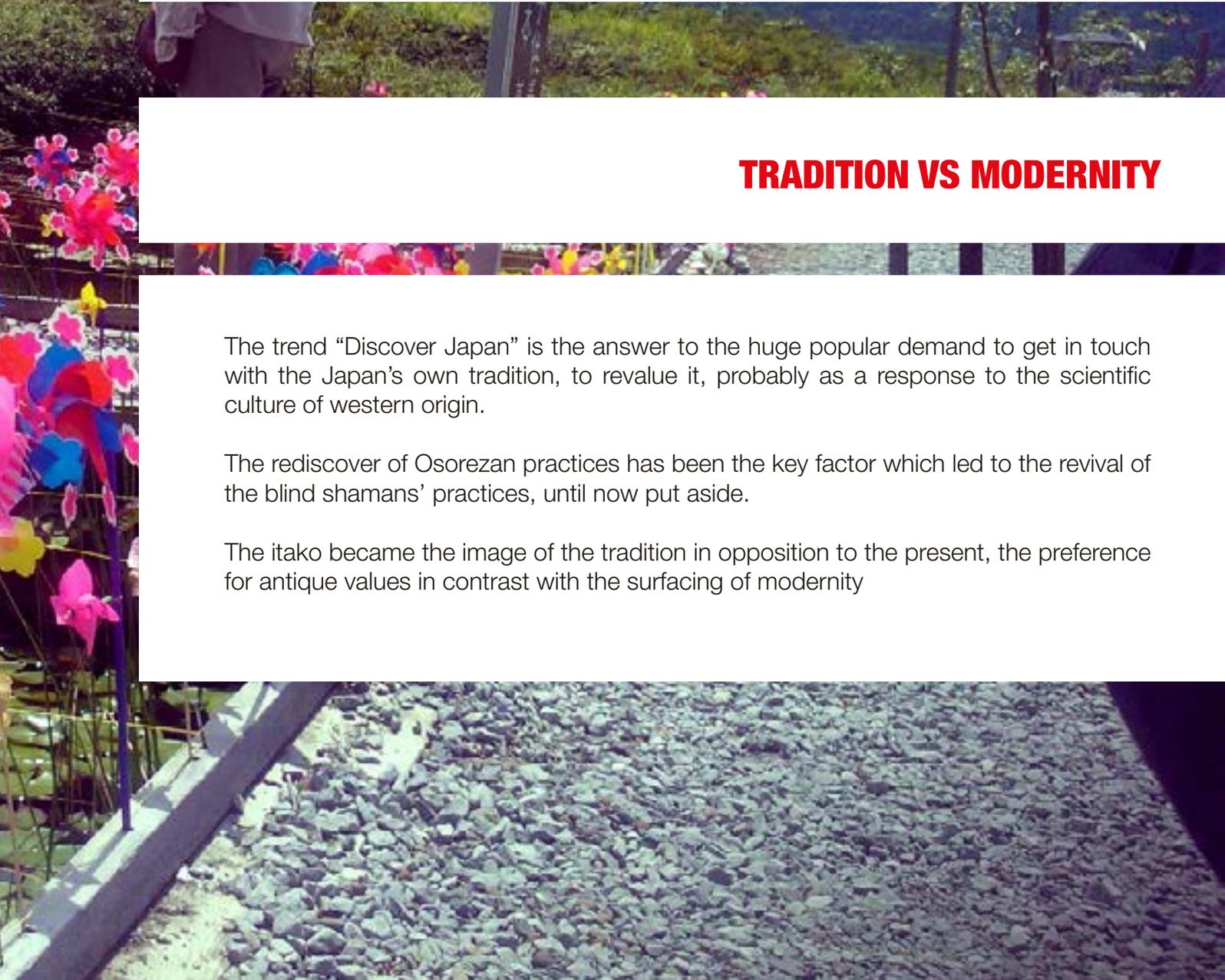


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Trend that continue the revival, in the media and the advertising, of all the hidden and secret areas of the country.

Relying on the fascination for the “hidden places” and the antique costumes, the media emphasize the element of mystery and spirituality, denied in the past years. Itako and other folk shamans became an essential element of the mysterious landscape of these secluded places, often in connection with the rituals for the dead.

The itako remains closely related to the popularity of the mountain, while all her other professional skills and rituals were put aside.



TRADITION VS MODERNITY

The trend “Discover Japan” is the answer to the huge popular demand to get in touch with the Japan’s own tradition, to revalue it, probably as a response to the scientific culture of western origin.

The rediscover of Osorezan practices has been the key factor which led to the revival of the blind shamans’ practices, until now put aside.

The itako became the image of the tradition in opposition to the present, the preference for antique values in contrast with the surfacing of modernity.

PRESENT-DAY ITAKO: MODIFICATIONS AND TRANSITIONS

The number of the practitioner is evidently dropping down,
aging of the older itako
absence of young blind apprentice to enter the profession.

New form of practice

The disciple is no longer blind,
Choose this path out of her own vocation or hereditary succession

New perception from the believers

Until the post-war era, various purposes such as healing and divination)
today stronger link with the Osorezan beliefs and rituals; their activity is almost exclusively represented by the kuchiyose.

This may open new possibilities to the research and to the interpretation of the phenomenon, since, their fame is still widespread in the country: still today we can find a strong link between the shamanic practice, especially of the itako,





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