

Religion and Politics in Heian-Period Japan¹

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Abstract

The religious culture of Japan's Heian period (794–1185), like that of other times and places, was structured by power differentials; it can therefore fruitfully be understood as political. Combining kami worship (popularly known as Shinto), esoteric and exoteric Buddhism, spirit possession, and local traditions, as well as moral and ritual practices derived from Confucianism and Daoism, Heian religious life was characterized by multiple religious affiliations and a syncretic outlook. From the era of the statutory (*ritsuryō*) state, through the court-centered polity (*ōchō kokka*), to the Fujiwara regency (*sekkō seiji*) and rule by retired emperors (*insei*), religion proved indispensable to sovereignty, political authority, and power relations. Rhetoric of the ideal Buddhist monarch shaped political ideology, while rites of kami worship portrayed the emperor as a sacral king. Gender politics structured differences in men and women's religious practice and expression at the same time that patronage and pilgrimage served as important means for lay people to legitimate themselves and compete politically. By amassing landholdings in the form of manorial estates (*shōen*), religious institutions came to exercise juridical and economic control of extensive natural and human resources. Known as “power blocs,” institutions of this type shared in rights and functions conventionally viewed as being proper to the state.

Contemporary public discourse may distinguish “politics” from “religion,” but for the men and women of Heian-period (794–1185) Japan, matters of governance and authority necessarily involved gods, spirits, buddhas, and bodhisattvas. Members of the educated elite claimed, for instance, that the kingly law and the Buddhist Dharma were interdependent, like two wheels on the same carriage (Kuroda 1996b). Peasants and princes alike called upon indigenous deities (*kami*) and locally enshrined buddhas to punish oath breakers (Satō 2003). Meanwhile, sex-based proscriptions starkly enacted gender politics by banning women from many of Japan's most sacred sites (Nishiguchi 2002; Ushiyama 2009).

Because the terms “religion” and “politics” are so loaded in contemporary Anglophone culture, narrow definitions can only skew our understanding of Heian society. Debates about the relative importance of religious doctrine in premodern Japanese culture underscore the need to keep our definitions broad (McMullin 1989a, 1992; Hubbard 1992). In this essay, by religion, I mean a porous domain of ritual and doctrine, ranging from court ceremonial to temple rites to domestic observances, and extending from erudite treatises written by educated clerics to vernacular lore about the doings of gods and buddhas. By “politics,” I refer not only to the execution of governance but also to the broader question of how men and women negotiated and contested power relations.

Although both the extant historical record and past research emphasize the official, notionally male business of the court and the activities of privileged monks, if we are to account for the political ramifications of religious thought and practice, we need to investigate provincial affairs, life on manorial estates (*shōen*), and the full range of shrine and temple society. We need to attend to questions of gender, women's activities, “Chinese learning” (*kangaku*), and interactions with the continent. This essay is intended primarily for an Anglophone

audience, but readers should be aware that the Japanese language literature on relations between the state, sovereignty, and religion is especially rich (e.g., Endō 2008; Ihara 1995; Okada 1994; Uejima 2010). Most Japanese historians working in this vein are trained in political and economic history; as a result, they often focus on administrative management, fiscal relationships, and institutional structures. They also tend to view the study of religion as a methodological tool rather than an end in itself. For instance, Endō Moto'o has commented that "rituals existed as mirrors of power relations" (Endō 2008, p. 186); in other words, in his view ritual is of interest for what it reflects rather than for what it is or how it works. A smaller number of researchers who take religion as their primary subject are working to elucidate political aspects of religious activity (e.g., Abe 2001; Kamikawa 2007; Satō 2003). It is by expanding in this area, theorizing the relationship between religious and political authority, and examining issues not directly related to the state that authors writing in Western languages stand to make the most important contributions.

In English, the second volume of the monumental *Cambridge History of Japan* has set the standard for Anglophone Heian studies; it contains several chapters on religious matters and remains a valuable reference (Shively & McCullough 1999). Essays in Adolphson *et al.* (2007) provide an interdisciplinary update especially useful to those interested in the 9th through 11th centuries. Readers wishing a familiarity with research in religious studies should consult Swanson and Chilson (2006), which includes excellent research reviews complemented by robust bibliographies. A brief, accessible survey of Heian history suitable for classroom use can be found in Hurst (2007).

Conceptualizing Heian Religion

Since the mid-1970s, virtually any investigation into the political significance of premodern Japanese religiosity has been shaped in some way by the work of Kuroda Toshio (Dobbins 1996; Kuroda 1994). Like many post-war historians, Kuroda's interpretive outlook was decidedly Marxian. He tended to view religion as a technology of control, maintaining, for instance, that premodern peasants were caught "in the thrall of thaumaturgy and polytheism" (Kuroda 1996c, pp. 288–89). At the same time, his work has provided a matrix for creative re-conceptualizations of the relationship between religion and politics. From within Kuroda's wide-ranging body of research, two contributions have been particularly important to religious history: the "theory of the power-bloc system" (*kenmon taisei ron*) and the "theory of the exoteric-esoteric system" (*kenmitsu taisei ron*).

With his *kenmon taisei ron*, Kuroda argued that the middle ages began in the mid-to-late Heian period and were characterized by a form of rulership in which three types of power blocs shared in state rights and functions (Kuroda 1994, vol. 1). These blocs, he maintained, comprised the court, the military houses, and shrine-temple complexes, with no bloc able fully to dominate the others. In relativizing the importance of the emperor – and in fact, the entire court – Kuroda's work served as a corrective to the imperialist historiography of the first half of the 20th century. It also drew attention to the overtly political activities of religious institutions, including "forceful protests" (*gōso*), in which monks and shrine workers took up arms and marched to the capital to voice their complaints – and sometimes run riot. Through such protests, religious institutions were able to negotiate with, and sometimes even coerce, the court (Adolphson 2000). As they became increasingly militarized, shrines and temples also entered into violent conflict with each other (Adolphson 2000, 2007; McMullin 1987).

With his *kenmitsu taisei ron*, Kuroda argued that from the 9th through 16th centuries, a mixture of exoteric and esoteric (*kenmitsu*) Buddhism functioned as a totalizing ideology (Kuroda 1994, vol. 2; 1996a). This *kenmitsu* Buddhism, he maintained, formed during the

early Heian. And subsumed *kami* worship to such a degree that no independent tradition recognizable as “Shintō” can be said to have existed prior to the Kamakura and Muromachi periods (Kuroda 1981). Furthermore, he characterized the so-called “new Buddhism” of the Kamakura period – the Pure Land, True Pure Land, Sōtō Zen, Rinzai Zen, and Nichiren schools – as heterodox movements that were of little consequence during the middle ages, especially in comparison to the *kenmitsu* establishment (Taira 1996). These arguments have not gone unchallenged, but they have spurred a thorough revision of historiographical models that neatly partitioned “Heian” from “Nara” and “Kamakura” Buddhism (Abé 1999; Payne 1998). They have also encouraged sweeping re-assessments of premodern *kami* worship (Teeuwen & Scheid 2002; Teeuwen & Breen 2002).

A related line of research critiques the application of modern conceptual categories, such as independent “religions” and “schools,” to premodern circumstances. During the early Meiji period (1868–1912) the government-mandated separation of *kami* and buddhas (*shinbutsu bunri*) enacted a categorical distinction between Buddhism and Shintō that continues to shape contemporary perceptions of the Heian past (Ketelaar 1990; Blair 2011). And yet, in decided contrast to modern preconceptions, Heian religiosity was characterized by multiple religious affiliations and a deeply synthetic outlook. In his influential work on institutional history and sacred space, Allan Grapard referred to these tendencies as “combinatory” (Grapard 1992, pp. 1–13). Foremost among the elements available for combination were esoteric and exoteric Buddhism (Abé 1999; Bauer 2011b), *kami* worship (Andreeva 2010; Stone 2006–2007), and spirit possession (Meeks 2011). Confucian morality and learning, rituals imported from the continent, and local traditions, as well as Daoist-inflected concerns with longevity, the dynamics of yin and yang, astronomy, astrology, and divination also made important contributions to religious culture (Como 2009; Buhrman 2012). Far from creating an undifferentiated amalgam, the combinatory practices of Heian men and women produced a complex religious landscape shaped by identity politics, institutional constraints, and many other factors.

In examining this landscape, two zones of inquiry are of particular note: the association of *kami* and buddhas (*shinbutsu shūgō*) and the religious culture of particular sites. The Heian period was a watershed for the development of a range of interpretive practices – ritual, visual, and linguistic – that identified *kami* as secondary manifestations of buddhas and bodhisattvas. Known as *honji suijaku*, these practices were integral to Buddhism’s assimilation of non-Buddhist beliefs and practices and thus were fraught with political significance (e.g., Teeuwen & Rambelli 2003; Kawane 2010). Because cults tended to be strongly localized, institutional history has also proven very important to our understanding of Heian religiosity (e.g., Hiraoka 1981; Nishiguchi 2004). As Kuroda pointed out, some temples and shrines developed into power-bloc institutions in command of extensive natural and human resources, as well as trade and production networks. For instance, during the 12th and 13th centuries, the complex formed by Kōfukuji and the Kasuga Shrine gradually extended political and economic control over the entire province of Yamato (Yasuda 2001; Kawabata 2000), growing so powerful that it was able to manipulate the court into supporting its interests (Adolphson 2000). Not surprisingly, Kōfukuji and Kasuga boasted a distinctive religious culture (Grapard 1992), including sophisticated iconography (Tyler 1992), narrative traditions (Tyler 1990), and close ritual ties to the court (Bauer 2011a).

Religion and the Political Scene

During the Heian period, the royal court presided over governance, as it had in the Nara period (710–784); however, state organization changed significantly between the 9th and

12th centuries. In the 600s, members of the elite had drawn on Chinese precedent to found a statutory state. Based on civil and criminal law codes known as the *ritsuryō* (Piggott 1997, ch. 6), this polity continued to operate through the first quarter of the Heian period, while many of its organizational forms survived for considerably longer. The Council of State, which was staffed by high-ranking noblemen, presided over a central bureaucracy, which was in turn augmented by a systematic provincial administration. (For more detailed outlines of Heian governmental structures, see Shively & McCullough 1999 and appendices in McCullough & McCullough 1980). The emperor was the head of state, but the Council – and the aristocracy, more generally – was of such importance that royal control of public affairs was far from total, even when the monarch was of age, mentally competent, and politically assertive (Hashimoto 1976; see also discussion of Kuroda's *kenmon taisei ron* above). Beginning in the Heian, only men acceded to the throne; the ninth century also saw a general erosion of women's social standing.

As conceived through the codes, the *ritsuryō* state was both patron and arbiter of religious culture, which fell into three discrete spheres, each with its own administrative body. The Council for Kami Affairs (Jingikan) technically enjoyed status equal to the Council of State. Its charge was the creation and maintenance of a centralized network for *kami* worship that would extend the state cult across the realm, bringing local practices under central influence (Mori 2003). Through the Bureau of Yin and Yang (Onmyōryō), the government sought to monopolize continental learning in the fields of astronomy, divination, prognostication, and time-keeping (Bock 1985; Ooms 2008, ch. 4). Finally, the state-sponsored Office for Monastic Affairs (Sōgō), which was staffed by eminent monks from major temples, was to oversee the activities of ordained Buddhists in cooperation with the Bureau for Foreign and Buddhist Affairs (Genbaryō) (Abé 1999, pp. 20–34). The Code for Monks and Nuns (*sōniryō*), promulgated as part of the civil code, laid out rules for proper behavior by ordained Buddhists (for a translation, see Piggott 1987, pp. 269–70).

Clearly, the *ritsuryō* state was deeply invested in channeling and controlling religious practice; just as clearly, reality did not necessarily match up with ideology. The exhaustive prescriptions for the practice of *kami* worship and the way of yin and yang (*onmyōdō*) given in the *Engi shiki* (*Procedures of the Engi Era*), a regulatory manual compiled in the first quarter of the tenth century, show just how extensive *ritsuryō* ambitions were (Bock 1970–72, 1985). On the other hand, the *Procedures* were promulgated in 967, at a time when governmental controls had already begun to fail. For instance, although the Office for Monastic Affairs retained prestige throughout the Heian period, its actual authority as a governing body attenuated dramatically (Ushiyama 1990). Similarly, control of Daoist-inflected practices lagged far behind rhetoric: from the mid-Heian on, Buddhist monks and others successfully marketed their services as ritualists, astrologers, and diviners to a populace eager to protect themselves from natural or supernatural disaster (Shigeta 2004; Buhrman 2012).

A new order, generally known as the royal court state (*ōchō kokka*), began to emerge in the 900s. Although the Council of State continued to play a role in the creation and enforcement of policy throughout the Heian period, the court's direct involvement in local governance, taxation, and military operations decreased sharply (Adolphson *et al.* 2007, ch. 2–4; Friday 1992; Katō 2002). Around the same time, aristocrats and royals, as well as religious institutions, began to develop manorial estates (*shōen*) over which they held sovereign rights; these became a matrix for a new economic and social order at the local level (Hall & Mass 1974, ch. 4–5; Kawabata 2000). Even though the emperor continued to be the source of utmost authority, other figures – first the Fujiwara regents and then the retired emperors – achieved political ascendancy in the mid-to-late Heian period. Accordingly, the period from the mid-900s to the late 11th century is known as the Fujiwara regency (*sekkan seiji*) (Piggott

& Yoshida 2008; Katō 2002; Yamamoto 2003), while that from circa 1086 to 1221 is known as the *insei*, literally “rule by retired emperors” (Hurst 1976; Inseiki bunka kenkyūkai 2001–2005; Motoki 1996; Mikawa 1996). In the wake of Kuroda’s interventions, the *insei* has come to be seen as the beginning of the middle ages (*chūsei*) (Motoki 2002; Rekishigaku Kenkyūkai & Nihonshi Kenkyūkai 2004).

No matter who the most powerful parties were at court, the religious establishment provided ritual and ideological protection to the Heian state (*chingo kokka*). Kingship was framed in Buddhist terms when, for instance, the emperor symbolically presided over an exoteric dispatch of relics in conjunction with his rites of accession (Ruppert 2000, ch. 3), or when he received esoteric Buddhist empowerments by proxy during the Latter Seven-Day Rite (*goshichinichi mishuhō*), which was held at the palace in the new year (Abé 1999, pp. 345–55). Importantly, both these rites illustrate the combinatory nature of Heian religious practice. Buddhist accession rites complemented but in no way obviated rites of investiture that focused on the *kami*. Similarly, the esoteric Latter Seven-Day Rite formed a pair with the exoteric Palace New Year’s Assembly (*misai-e*) (Sango 2007), and both observances included components devoted to the *kami*.

At the same time that kingship was expressed and legitimated in religious terms, the court sought to influence and control the activities of religious specialists. For instance, with respect to Buddhism, the early Heian court required the submission of doctrinal resumés; this prompted the articulation of discrete Buddhist schools and a surge in doctrinal production (Sone 2000). Around the same time, the court contributed to a reconfiguration of the Buddhist power structure by approving an independent ordination platform for the Tendai (Ch: Tiantai) school, thereby making it symbolically independent of influential temples in Nara (Groner 2000). Meanwhile, Kūkai’s (774–835) promulgation of “the esoteric teachings” (*mikkyō*) as a ritual technology subsuming and surpassing exoteric Buddhism ensured the pervasive influence of esoteric ritual and the Shingon (Ch: Zhenyan) school (Abé 1999; Stone 2006–2007).

Elaborating upon Nara-period precedents, the court designated certain Buddhist lecture assemblies held at court and at major temples as official rites; service at these events qualified clerics for promotion and appointment to the Office for Monks and Nuns (Uejima 2010; Sango 2007; Bauer 2011a). Debate featured prominently in these rites, making the ability to expound doctrine an indispensable tool for advancement within the increasingly politicized world of the major monasteries (Sango 2011). Doctrinal erudition also made individual monks attractive to powerful – and wealthy – patrons, enhancing their ability to render effective ritual service (Groner 2002). Doctrine, then, was not reducible to “mere” scholasticism; rather, the study and interpretation of scripture went hand in hand with ritual mastery and “served as the coinage by which . . . monks purchased power” (McMullin 1989b, p. 119).

Political concerns shaped developments in the sphere of *kami* worship, as well. Having abandoned the burdensome system outlined in the *Engi shiki*, the mid-Heian court granted special status to a limited number of shrines, first 16, and eventually 22 (Okada 1994). All of these institutions lay in the Kinai region, near the capital; many were also associated with the royal and Fujiwara families. Thus, they defined the court’s home territory, dramatized the emperor’s sacral status, and instantiated the power of eminent aristocratic families (Grapard 1988). Meanwhile, the person of the emperor became the axis for a new mode of *kami* worship: the reigning monarch began to dispatch royal envoys to shrines directly from the palace; he also began to make progresses to a limited number of shrines in person (Okada 1994; Ruppert 2006–2007). The regents and retired emperors vied with each other to dictate which shrines the king would visit; they also took to making progresses themselves, thereby inaugurating a new custom of pilgrimage among the lay elite (Mitsuhashi 2000).

Male and female members of the Heian court were immersed in a constant round of annual observances (*nenjū gyōji*), featuring Buddhist assemblies, rites of *kami* worship, dance performances, sporting events, and banquets. The ceremonial calendar is vividly depicted in the *Handscroll of Annual Observances (Nenjū gyōji emaki)*, currently extant as a 17th century copy of a Heian-period original (Komatsu 1987). Because knowledge of ceremonial was a form of cultural capital, courtiers kept diaries in which they carefully noted the details of the rites they attended (Piggott & Yoshida 2008). Despite differences of gender and genre, men and women's diaries provide invaluable information on the religious lifestyles of the elite. A limited number of these texts have been translated (e.g., Hérail 1987–1991 and 2001–2004; Piggott & Yoshida 2008; Arntzen 1997; Brewster 1977), but journals are only slowly entering the repertoire of scholars of religious studies (Ruppert 2000). Similarly, although it has been noted that overtly religious themes were integral to elite poetry and narrative (Morrell 1973; Marra 1991), research on religion has yet to capitalize fully upon the multivalent representations of religious life in Heian literature.

Because of notionally secular literary achievements, the Heian period is renowned as a feminine age in which vernacular Japanese fiction and poetry – much of it written by women – reached their apogee (Yoda 2004). In fact, the Heian period saw a considerable reduction in women's standing (see essays in Ruch 2002), though women with close ties to the throne continued to wield significant political influence. Discourses of female impurity burgeoned (Goodwin 2007, ch. 3), and despite the ongoing importance of female mediums and shamans (Meeks 2011), the ordination tradition for Buddhist nuns attenuated. Thus, even though dedicated Buddhist practice was a respected avenue for women, it became a comparatively private matter, especially among the nobility (Meeks 2006, 2010). Heian women's writing has been examined with an eye to religious issues and what might be called the politics of expression (Kamens 1990; Bargaen 1997); however, further work in this area and focused studies of the activities of particular individuals remain major desiderata.

The founding of temples provided both men and women with a highly visible means to express their piety; conversely, some religious institutions found it necessary to cultivate new constituencies. Temples and shrines that had been supported by the state or lineage groups faced major reorganization in the early to mid-Heian and later came to rely increasingly upon fundraising campaigns (Nishiguchi 2004; Goodwin 1994). On the other hand, in the late 10th and early 11th centuries, the regents took to building temples on a grand scale, and the retired emperors followed suit, founding institutions known as royal vow temples (*goganji*). These functioned not as monasteries charged with the training of a resident religious community but rather as ritual stages and quasi-private facilities for their sponsors (Yamagishi 1998; Endō 2008, ch. 6), who amplified their own political authority through spectacular rites and patronage (Uejima 2010; Hiraoka 1981). This type of activity was not limited to the capital: regional lords strove to legitimate themselves through their temple-building projects at the same time that they worked to differentiate themselves from their rivals at the center (Yiengpruksawan 1995, 1998). In a similar vein, when members of warrior houses and the class of provincial governors managed to make their way into the upper elite, they built their authority through conspicuous displays of piety and patronage (Blair 2013).

Pilgrimage, too, served as a stage for political-cum-devotional competition. In addition to visiting sites near the capital, like the Kamo Shrine or Enryakuji, the regents and retired emperors embarked upon more challenging pilgrimages to the “southern mountains” (*nanzan*) of the Kii Peninsula during the mid-to-late Heian. Whereas the regents favored pilgrimages to the sacred mountain Kinpusen, where a mood of abstinence prevailed (Blair forthcoming), the retired emperors made ostentatious journeys to Kumano; these have been characterized as performances in a Geertzian “theater of state” (Moerman 2006). Meanwhile, both groups were

active at Mt. Kōya, where their patronage reconfigured the mountainscape and linked it to secular and monastic politics (Londo 2002; Drummond 2007; Lindsay 2012). Gender-based bans at Kinpusen and Mt. Kōya notwithstanding, women participated actively in pilgrimage; in many cases, their journeys were connected with domestic power relations (Ambros 1997, esp. pp. 331–37).

Although studies of major religious complexes like that of Kōfukuji and Kasuga (see above) or particular deities like Hachiman (Tsuji 2003) are helping to shed light on regional religious culture, we know comparatively little about religious life in the provinces and/or among commoners. Lack of sources is a major issue, but since the mid-1990s breakthroughs in Japanese-language research have begun to remedy this situation. At the regional level, religion served the interest of the central elites by binding the provinces to the center. Sources indicate that by the late Heian, each province had designated one primary regional shrine (*ichinomiya*), and that it had become common practice to enshrine all the local deities in a collective shrine (*sōsha*). Both types of shrine were closely tied to the governor's offices (Okada 1994). Liturgical integration capitalized not only upon place but also time: the *nenjū gyōji* held on *shōen* mirrored those at court, with the same rites held on the same days at court and in the provinces (Ihara 1995; Uejima 2010).

Not surprisingly, Heian men and women were quite explicit about the interpenetration of religion and politics. For instance, they referred to the executive functions of government as *matsurigoto*, and to the regularly scheduled festivals that feted the *kami* as *matsuri*. Retired emperors who took the tonsure were known as Dharma kings (*hōō*), while their ordained sons became Dharma princes (*hosshinnō*) (Hiraoka 1981, pp. 633–55; Yokoyama 2005; Kamei 2006). Royal princesses were selected by divination to serve at the Kamo and Ise Shrines (Kamens 1990). And ritual was an important means for redressing political violence. One of the most dramatic examples of this is the apotheosis of the literatus and statesman Sugawara no Michizane (845–903). Exiled by his political rivals, Michizane died in disgrace; however, when disasters in the capital were attributed to his angry spirit, the court lent its support to efforts to pacify him (Borgen 1986; Kawane 2010). Enshrined as the deity Tenjin, Michizane continues to be revered today as a god of learning. At the same time that his cult epitomizes the worship – and pacification – of angry spirits (*onryō*, *goryō*) (McMullin 1988), it also exemplifies the combination of elements from notionally discrete religious traditions and the mutuality of religion and politics.

Short Biography

Heather Blair's research focuses on the religious history of Japan, especially the Heian period. She is interested in sacred landscapes, the political dimensions of religious practice, lay religiosity, and modern constructions of premodern religious culture. Her articles on these topics have appeared in *Monumenta Nipponica* and the *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies*; her monograph *Tracing Kinpusen, the Peak of Gold: Place and Pilgrimage in Heian Japan* is forthcoming from the Harvard University Asia Center. At present, she is conducting research on the religious lifestyles of lay people in order to examine how retired monarchs, court ladies, and literati shaped religious practice during the late Heian. Blair earned her PhD in religious studies from Harvard University, as well as an MPhil in the same field from Columbia University, an MA in comparative religion from the University of Washington, and a BA in Asian studies from Swarthmore College. Following a post-doctoral appointment at Stanford University, she joined the Department of Religious Studies at Indiana University. She has received research fellowships from the Fulbright Commission and the Japan Society for the Promotion of Science and has been a visiting researcher at Tokyo University, Kyoto Prefectural University, and Kyoto University.

Notes

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