

## Creating Devotional Art with Body Fragments

### The Buddhist Nun Bunchi and Her Father, Emperor Gomizuno-o

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*This article explores the relic-making activities of the Buddhist nun Bunchi, the eldest daughter of Emperor Gomizuno-o and founder of the imperial convent Enshō-ji in Nara. Influenced by her father's preoccupation with placing his own bodily relics, especially teeth, in Kyoto Zen temples, Bunchi created a variety of devotional objects using his bodily relics. These include several tablets inscribed with myōgō (names of Buddhist deities written as invocations) made with her father's fingernail clippings and a clay statue of Gomizuno-o with some of his hair inserted. She also transcribed sutras using some of her own blood. Bunchi's works are introduced and analyzed in connection with the tradition of relic worship in Japan. The motivation underlying the creating and placing of relics by father and daughter are also discussed.*

**Keywords:** devotional art — Bunchi — Emperor Gomizuno-o — myōgō — Enshō-ji — relics — fingernails

HUMAN BEINGS HAVE strong attachments to their own bodies and to the bodies of those close to them. In many respects, our identities are linked to our bodies, which are not just physical and biological realities but believed by many to embody some sort of soul or spiritual component. Many people feel a strong personal connection to a deceased person through possessing a personal belonging that had been in direct contact with him or her. This treasuring of personal

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belongings and, less often, body fragments suggests that the spirit of the deceased is believed to still inhabit the objects or body parts.

Our “attachments” to our bodies, together with a concern for material continuity, has led to the custom in many cultures of preserving and enshrining body fragments (or even the whole body) of the deceased. Moreover, corporeal relics are sometimes used to create objects that are commemorative or devotional in nature. The Buddhist nun Bunchi 文智 (1619–1697) used fingernail clippings and hair from her father, Emperor Gomizuno-o 後水尾 (1596–1680), to create mortuary art of a unique kind. In addition, she engaged in the not uncommon practice of using her own blood to transcribe scriptures. Bunchi might have been inspired by her father’s own idiosyncratic practice of actively creating relics from his body.

Coexisting with the Buddhist teachings of impermanence and non-attachment, there is a powerful tradition in most Buddhist countries of preserving and enshrining the body parts, sometimes even a mummy, of revered practitioners. It follows, then, that a religious object crafted with bodily relics is, by its very nature, more potent than an object made with conventional materials.

This article focuses on the relic-making activities of Bunchi and Emperor Gomizuno-o. In addition to examining the relics and devotional objects Bunchi created with fingernail clippings, hair, and blood, I will also consider the motivations of father and daughter in the context of other Buddhist imagery incorporating body fragments.

### *Biographical Sketch of Bunchi*

Bunchi (her childhood name was Umenomiya 梅宮) was a significant historical figure in the early Edo period.<sup>1</sup> The first daughter of Emperor Gomizuno-o, her position in the palace was tenuous after the shogun’s daughter Masako 和子 (Tōfukumon-in 東福門院, 1607–1678) arrived in 1620 and displaced Bunchi’s mother, Yotsutsuji Yotsuko 四辻與津子 (1589–1638). Shogun Tokugawa Hidetada 徳川秀忠 had pressured the emperor to marry his daughter in an unprecedented attempt to strengthen ties between the bakufu and the court. While Bunchi’s relationship with Tōfukumon-in, who was only twelve years older than her, must have been strained in the beginning, the two women became close in their later years, drawn together by their shared devotion to Buddhism.

Bunchi was married at the age of twelve (1631) to the courtier

<sup>1</sup> Biographical information on Bunchi is drawn from the most comprehensive source on her life, NISHIBORI and SUENAGA 1955.

Takatsugasa Norihira 鷹司教平 (1609–1668), who was ten years her senior. This was not a good match, as she reportedly suffered from ill health and after only three years separated from her husband and returned to the palace. Following in her father's footsteps, she became devoted to Buddhism and, in 1640, two years after her mother's death, she took the tonsure and became a pupil of the Zen master Isshi Monju 一絲文守 (1608–1646). Isshi gave her the name Bunchi, taking the character *bun* 文 from his own name.

Upon becoming a nun, Bunchi went to live at a small hermitage called Enshō-ji 円照寺 near Gomizuno-o's mountain villa, Shūgaku-in 修学院. She maintained a close relationship with her teacher, Isshi, until his death in 1646. She also received instruction from the Shingon priests Kōei Risshi 光影律師 and Unshō Risshi 雲松律師. Bunchi's practice deepened over the years and in 1656 she decided to move to Nara, presumably to devote herself more completely to religious training and to further distance herself from the aristocratic world. She was aided in finding land for a temple in the area of Hashima by her uncle, Ichijōin Songaku Hōsshinnō 一乘院尊覺法親王. Chimei Jōin 知明淨因 (1621–1700), a fellow disciple of Isshi, also played an important role in encouraging Bunchi to build her temple in Nara. Chimei was the chief priest of the temple Anmyō-ji 安明寺 located not far from where the new Enshō-ji was finally built. At the behest of Tōfukumon-in, Shogun Ietsuna 家綱 donated land amounting to 200 *koku* in 1668 and Tōfukumon-in herself contributed funds toward the temple's construction. The buildings initially erected in Hashima were shifted to the new plot of land in Yamamura, a bit south of the original location, and Bunchi moved there in 1669, serving as the first abbess of what became an imperial convent. She was joined by several other women who had taken vows and she established what was essentially a training center for women.

Enshō-ji has survived more or less intact and I have been fortunate to have been granted permission to study works in the temple's collection. The amount of material preserved documenting Bunchi's activities and devotional practices is astonishing. In addition to writing out poems and Buddhist scriptures, Bunchi created religious art, including paintings (both ink and color), sculptures, and embroidery.<sup>2</sup> Among the most extraordinary artifacts are works in which she glued slivers of her father's fingernails onto silk or wood to create Chinese characters and *myōgō* 名号 (the names of Buddhist deities as invocations).

<sup>2</sup> For reproductions of some of her works, see NISHIBORI and SUENAGA 1955.



**Figure 1.** The character 忍 formed with fingernail clippings (Enshō-ji collection).

#### *Bunchi's Fingernail Creations*

The first example (Figure 1) is approximately 5 cm in diameter. In the center are fragments of Gomizuno-o's fingernails, arranged and glued onto the red silk background so that they form the character *nin* 忍 (to endure).<sup>3</sup> Also in the Enshō-ji collection are two other examples in the form of *myōgō* (Figures 2 and 3). The characters forming the deities' names are all created with Gomizuno-o's fingernail clippings. In Figure 2, the center line reads *Namu Shakamuni butsu* 南無釈迦牟尼佛, with *Fugen bosatsu* 普賢菩薩 and *Monju bosatsu* 文殊菩薩 to the left and right. Figure 3 has *Namu Amida butsu* 南無阿彌陀佛 in the center with *Dai Seishi bosatsu* 大勢至菩薩 and *Kanzeon bosatsu* 觀世音菩薩 to the left and right.

It was a common practice to write out the names of Buddhist deities with brush and ink. I have also seen Buddhist inscriptions in

<sup>3</sup> The outer box inscription reads: Emperor Gomizuno-o's nails [in the shape of] the character *nin*, made by Kaisan Daishi 後水尾天皇御爪 忍の字 開山大師御作. (Kaisan Daishi is Bunchi.)



**Figure 2.** *Myōgō* created with fingernail clippings (Enshō-ji collection).

which the characters are formed with mother-of-pearl and inlaid in lacquered wood. But I know of no other examples made with fingernail clippings. The fingernail clippings are glued onto wooden plaques, about 13 x 11 cm, which are stored in small wooden shrines, about 24 cm high. Nowadays both are kept in the Enshō-ji storehouse. It is not clear where they would have been placed in Bunchi's time. Both wooden plaques have identical inscriptions written in red ink on the back:



**Figure 3.** *Myōgō* created with fingernail clippings (Enshō-ji collection).

This Trinity consists of fingernail clippings received from Gomizuno-o-in while he was still alive. On the seventh anniversary of his death, the master of Fumon, Daitsu Daishi [Bunchi], out of filial piety assembled them and attached the characters to this fragrant wood given by Gosai-in.

Third year of the Jōkyō era [1686], sixth month, nineteenth day

There is one more extant fingernail *myōgō* by Bunchi enshrined in the Gyokuhō-in 玉鳳院, or the Kaisan-dō 開山堂 (Founder's Hall), at



**Figure 4.** *Myōgo* of fingernail clippings placed in a bronze pagoda (Myōshin-ji collection). Photo from NISHIBORI and SUENAGA.

Myōshin-ji 妙心寺 in Kyoto. Housed within an impressive dark bronze pagoda-like shrine is a small wooden shrine, within which is a slightly irregular piece of sandalwood to which are glued Gomizuno-o's fingernail clippings, forming one line of characters reading *Namu Shō-Kanzeon bosatsu* 南無聖觀世音菩薩 (Figure 4).

At first I assumed that all of these works were made by Bunchi as personal memorials of her father after his death. However, the inner box inscription for the *nin* character (Figure 1) records that it was made in 1671, nine years before Gomizuno-o's death. Moreover, the Myōshin-ji *myōgō* was also made while the emperor was still alive, and he himself offered it in a ceremony at Myōshin-ji in the first month of 1680, in front of the image of the temple's founder, Hanazono-in 花園院 (KAWAKAMI 1921, pp. 241-42). Gomizuno-o died later that year. Five years later (1685), the same *Namu Shō-Kanzeon bosatsu* fingernail *myōgō* (Figure 4) was placed in the bronze pagoda along with some of Gomizuno-o's hair and bequeathed to Myōshin-ji. The document sent by Bunchi to Myōshin-ji at that time reads:

I have endeavored to affix Gomizuno-o-in's clipped fingernails to fragrant wood [in the form of] Kannon's *myōgō* to install on the altar as a memorial. Looking back, I recall how in his earthly life the deceased Retired Emperor was deeply devoted to the Buddha Mind School and invited [to the palace] several Zen masters to teach him the essentials. If this is given to a large temple, not only will it transmit the emperor's devotion forever, but it will also be something to tie Gomizuno-o with Emperor Hanazono and establish a karmic bond with him. Therefore I consulted with the elder priests and am enshrining it in Gyokuhō-in, fulfilling my humble aspiration.

Spring of 1685

Respectfully written by Bunchi of Fumonzan  
(NISHIBORI and SUENAGA 1955, p. 67)

### *Relic Veneration in Japan*

These fingernail creations by Bunchi are regarded as relics in Japan. Before proceeding further with a discussion of relics in connection with Emperor Gomizuno-o, I will give a brief summary of the tradition of Buddhist relics and relic worship in Japan.<sup>4</sup> According to the *Nirvana Sutra*, after Śākyamuni died his body was cremated, and his remains (J. *shari* 舍利 or *busshari* 仏舍利) were first kept by the Mathura clan. When the Mathura clan refused to share them with the kings and tribes from other lands who had embraced Buddhist teachings, a

<sup>4</sup> For the information in this summary, I relied upon the following sources: KAGEYAMA 1986, KAWADA 1989, and NARA KOKURITSU HAKUBUTSUKAN 1983. For a more in-depth discussion in English of the cult of relics in India and other parts of Asia, see RUPPERT 2000. For a discussion of the significance of relics in Buddhism, see SHARF 1999.



war broke out. The *busshari* were subsequently divided into eight portions, and stupas were constructed to house them. According to the account in the *Nirvana Sutra*, the worship of stupas containing the Buddha's bodily relics would nurture people's faith and guarantee their religious salvation. *Busshari* were potent symbols of the Buddhist religion, and followers came to worship them as embodiments of Śākyamuni.

Later, as legend has it, in the third century B.C. King Aśoka took the *busshari* from seven of these original stupas and redistributed them in 84,000 stupas constructed throughout his expansive kingdom as a way of honoring Śākyamuni and propagating the faith. The number 84,000 is said to represent the number of atoms in Śākyamuni's body as well as the number of his teachings, so in effect Aśoka was symbolically recreating the Buddha's physical body and spiritual doctrines (MORSE and MORSE 1996, p. 74). As powerful symbols of Śākyamuni and his teachings, relics played an important role in Buddhist worship and were fundamental to the spread of Buddhism throughout Asia.

In Japan, the practice of enshrining *busshari* in pagodas began in the sixth century soon after Buddhism was introduced. The *Nihon shoki*, for example, records that in 533 the king of the Korean kingdom of Paekche presented *busshari* to Japan and, in 593, *busshari* were installed in the foundation stone of the pillar of the pagoda of Hōkō-ji 法興寺. Pagodas were constructed at most early temple complexes and relics were placed either in the foundation stone beneath the central pillar or at the top. Which, if any, Japanese temples actually had "authentic" *busshari* is open to question.

*Seijinshari* 聖人舍利, the relics of Śākyamuni's famous disciples and other holy persons, were also highly venerated. When *shinshari* 身舍利 or *nikushari* 肉舍利, that is, actual bodily relics, were not available, symbolic *shari* were created and enshrined. These included pieces of glass, precious stones, pearls, colored pebbles, and occasionally fragments of bones. The *shari* enshrined at Japanese temples were probably mostly of this latter type. There were also *hōshari* 法舍利 (dharma relics) in the form of sutras that symbolized the Buddha's spiritual presence.

The number of relics in Japan increased dramatically in the Nara period, as the Chinese monk Jianzhen 鑑真 (J. Ganjin, 688–763) brought 3000 "grains" (granulated ashes) of relics in 754. Later, monks such as Kūkai 空海, Ennin 円仁, Engyō 円行, and Keiun 恵運 also brought back relics from China. The importance that was placed upon acquiring *shari* is indicative of the power and significance of relics in Buddhist worship. In short, it was believed that salvation could be attained by the act of establishing a direct bond with Śākyā-

muni or other holy persons through worshipping their corporeal remains.

The custom of enshrining and venerating the bone relics of Śākya-muni, his disciples, and other holy persons seems to have inspired members of the nobility to reconsider what to do with their own bone remains. YAMAORI Tetsuo has observed that some people regard corpses simply as dead bodies, to be discarded without a backward glance, and place importance on praying for the soul or spirit, while others feel an intimate connection between the corpse or bones and the spirit and believe that a living person can communicate with the dead through the corporeal remains of the deceased, which function as a lodging place for the spirit (1990, p. 57).

From the eleventh century on, some members of the nobility began to bury cremated remains and hair on Mt. Kōya 高野山, the location of the Shingon temple complex Kongōbu-ji, a major center of monastic practice founded by the monk Kūkai (774–835) in the ninth century. Kūkai came to be regarded as a kind of deified saint in Japan. The fact that his tomb is located on Mt. Kōya greatly enhanced its reputation as a sacred place, and even though it was distant from the capital, Mt. Kōya became attractive to courtiers as a burial ground. For example, some of the hair of Emperor Horikawa 堀河 (r. 1086–1107) was buried there after his death (YAMAORI 1990, p. 52). Hair and fingernails were apparently regarded in the same category as bones, all of these being viewed as possessing some of the essence of the deceased. The enshrined bodily relics functioned as a memorial to the deceased and facilitated interaction between this world and the next. Later, common people wanted to have their bones buried on Mt. Kōya, too. In response to this trend, temples located on other sacred mountains in Japan followed the example of Mt. Kōya and came to specialize in enshrining bone remains as well (YAMAORI 1990, p. 54).

*The Distribution of Relics by Emperor Gomizuno-o and His Family*

Emperor Gomizuno-o was known as a devout Buddhist and took the tonsure in 1651. He invited priests from various sects to lecture in the palace, but his strongest ties were perhaps with Zen. He had many teachers over the years, among them Isshi Monju (also Bunchi's teacher) of the Myōshin-ji Rinzai lineage and Ryōkei Shōsen 龍溪性潛 (1602–1670), who had converted to the Ōbaku 黄檗 school. Gomizuno-o actually became Ryōkei's dharma heir and is included in Ōbaku lineage charts (ŌTSUKI et al. 1988, p. 524). Thus, in addition to his kami-like status as emperor, in some Buddhist circles Gomizuno-o was also viewed as a spiritual master.

Gomizuno-o, his consort Tōfukumon-in, and other members of the imperial family had a fascination with and deep veneration for relics. Early in his career, in 1640, Gomizuno-o transferred relics from the imperial household to Sennyū-ji 泉涌寺, the Kyoto Shingon temple that had become the official family temple (*bodaiji* 菩提寺) for the imperial family (AKAMATSU 1984, p. 390). In 1666, Gomizuno-o presented the Chinese Ōbaku priest Ingen 隱元 with five Buddhist relics in a small reliquary and provided the funds to build a *shariden* 舍利殿 (relic hall) at Manpuku-ji (ŌTSUKI et al. 1988, p. 128). The next year he presented relics (three grains and one holy man's tooth), enshrined in a reliquary, to his teacher Ryōkei at Shōmyō-ji 正明寺 in present-day Shiga (NAKAO 1979, p. 80). Gomizuno-o's distribution of relics to Ōbaku temples at the time that the sect was just getting organized in Japan may have been a way of showing his support and helping to establish the credibility of the Ōbaku sect.<sup>5</sup>

What is of particular interest is that, at a certain point, Gomizuno-o began to create his own relics. He deposited them at Zen temples in Kyoto with which he was intimately connected. The first example occurred in 1653, two years after he had taken the tonsure. Shōkoku-ji 相国寺 was being rebuilt adjacent to the Sentō Gosho 仙洞御所, and Gomizuno-o had a tooth and some of his hair placed in the central pillar of the pagoda as it was being constructed. The hair was apparently some of the hair that had been cut when he took the tonsure. According to the *Bannensan Shōkoku-ji tō kuyō no ki* 萬年山相国寺塔供養之記 (Account of the dedication of the Bannensan Shōkoku-ji pagoda), hair from Gomizuno-o's son, Gokōmyō-in 後光明院 (1633–1654), was also deposited in the pillar, along with three grains of relics and sutras. The *Kakumeiki* 隔冥記 gives a slightly different list of the relics deposited in the pagoda: Gomizuno-o's hair, three grains of relics from the palace, one grain given by Hōkyō-ji Son-ni 宝鏡寺尊尼 (Rishō 理昌, one of Gomizuno-o's daughters), seven grains offered by Enshōji Son-ni 円照寺尊尼 (Bunchi), along with hair from the two nuns (SHŌKOKU-JI SHIRYŌ HENSAN IINKAI 1986, p. 351). The motivation behind placing the tooth and hair in the pagoda was probably similar to having corporeal remains buried on sacred ground such as Mt. Kōya: an act of uniting with the divine.

The Shōkoku-ji pagoda was destroyed by fire in 1788 and rebuilt again at the end of the Edo period. In 1900 the Imperial Household Agency moved the reconstructed pagoda to the south and constructed a mound on the plot of the original one (ADACHI and ARIMA 1976, p.

<sup>5</sup> For a discussion of the motivations underlying the distribution of relics, see RUPPERT 2000.



**Figure 5.** Mound containing Emperor Gomizuno-o's hair and tooth at Shōkoku-ji.

112). The mound is designated as “Gomizuno-o-in Tennō goshihatsuzuka” 後水尾院天皇御齒髮塚 (mound containing the tooth and hair of Emperor Gomizuno-o) (Figure 5). Although the hair of one of his sons and two of his daughters was also placed in the original pagoda, the present-day marker mentions only Gomizuno-o's tooth and hair, because as emperor his relics were obviously considered the most significant.

Later, in 1667, Gomizuno-o presented one tooth each to Reigen-ji 靈源寺 in Kyoto and Hōjō-ji 法常寺 in Tanba, both of which he had constructed for his first teacher, Isshi. According to a temple document at Reigen-ji, the teeth were presented with the order that they function “in the place of graves for him after his death” (KONDŌ 1991, p. 57). Both of these temples became, in effect, imperial temples (*chokuganji* 勅願寺). The tooth presented to Reigen-ji was first enshrined in a gold reliquary donated by Tōfukumon-in the same year (KONDŌ 1991, p. 30). However, in 1673, the tooth was removed and placed inside a statue of Gomizuno-o that was installed in the main worship hall (*butsuden* 仏殿). This all occurred prior to Gomizuno-o's death. The tooth given to Hōjō-ji is still kept in a reliquary and can be viewed as it is, enclosed



**Figure 6.** Reliquary containing Emperor Gomizuno-o's tooth (Hōjō-ji collection).

in glass (Figure 6).

A Kyoto physician has written about a fourth tooth of Gomizuno-o's that was given to the court physician, Chikayasu Mitsushige 親康光重 (1623–1685), after he had extracted it from the emperor's mouth (SUGITATE 1985, p. 36). Mitsushige served Gomizuno-o and the two successive emperors. He must have been highly respected by the imperial family, for he was granted the title *hokkyō* 法橋 by Gomizuno-o

in 1662 and *hōgen* 法眼 in 1685. Gomizuno-o's tooth was placed in a reliquary that bears the date: first year of the Kanbun era (1661). The tooth was examined by a contemporary dentist who diagnosed Gomizuno-o as having suffered from pyorrhea, inflammation of the tooth sockets, a disease that leads to loosening of the teeth (SUGITATE 1985, p. 36). This malady enabled the emperor to generate bodily relics rather painlessly while he was still alive. The Chikayasu family later presented the tooth to the Hokke sect temple Myōren-ji 妙蓮寺 in Kyoto, where it resides today. However, this tooth relic must be viewed slightly differently from Gomizuno-o's other corporeal relics, since he himself did not present it to a temple; we cannot even be sure that the emperor had any such religious plans in mind when he let his physician keep his tooth. Nonetheless, it is clear that from the physician's point of view the imperial tooth had the special properties of a relic.

In sum, in the second half of his life Gomizuno-o placed hair, teeth, or fingernail clippings at four Zen temples: Shōkoku-ji, Hōjō-ji, Reigen-ji, and Myōshin-ji. The relics were enshrined in various manners—in a pagoda pillar, in reliquaries, in a portrait sculpture, and in the form of a *myōgō*. Many questions come to mind about Gomizuno-o's distribution of his own bodily relics. What did he wish to gain? What did the temples where his bodily relics were deposited gain? Did Gomizuno-o regard himself as a holy person whose remains were worthy of veneration? Did his bodily relics function similarly to *busshari*? And what is the significance of the fragmentation, the depositing of his body parts in different places?

By Gomizuno-o's day, emperors were not cremated but were buried at Sennyū-ji. Earlier, when emperors were cremated their ashes were frequently distributed among various family temples resulting in multiple graves. According to the *Sennyū-ji-shi* (History of Sennyū-ji), at the time of the premature death (1654) of Gomizuno-o's son, Gokōmyō-in, emperors were no longer cremated (AKAMATSU 1984, p. 355). This practice made it much harder to obtain bodily relics. Knowing this, Gomizuno-o may have wanted to generate relics *before* he died. In fact, Gomizuno-o actually requested to be cremated, but his request was denied (SAITŌ 1987, pp. 240–41).<sup>6</sup> As a devout Buddhist, perhaps Gomizuno-o wished to have parts of himself preserved at Zen temples, where he had close connections, as a way of showing his enduring devotion. The historian of medieval Christianity Caroline BYNUM has pointed out that by 1300 in Europe there was widespread practice of dividing not only the bodies of saints to provide relics but also the bodies of the nobility to enable them to be buried in several places

<sup>6</sup> I am grateful to Andrew Bernstein for this reference, via Henry D. Smith.

near several saints (1991, p. 270). The greater number of parts and places, the greater the number of prayers the deceased would receive (BYNUM 1991, p. 280). Perhaps Gomizuno-o had a similar hope that the dispersal of his body parts, in the form of relics, would have a positive impact on his postmortem fate.

Was Gomizuno-o's distribution of his own bodily relics a private or public declaration of faith? In the case of Shōkoku-ji, the enshrining of Gomizuno-o's hair, tooth, and other relics in the pagoda was accompanied by a ceremony attended only by Buddhist priests and members of the court. I have not found any evidence suggesting that he was trying to establish a cult or intending for the public at large to worship his relics like *bushhari*. Hōjō-ji and Reigen-ji were his own private temples; the relics at Shōkoku-ji were installed in the upper level of the pagoda; and the fingernail *myōgō* at Myōshin-ji was privately placed in the Kaisan-dō. Therefore, I believe this relic distribution was motivated by personal devotion and a desire to be eternally connected to the divine.

Bunchi was no doubt influenced by her father's deep veneration of Buddhist relics and preoccupation with placing his own bodily relics in temples. Her fingernail *myōgō* suggest that Bunchi was connecting Gomizuno-o directly with buddhas and bodhisattvas, evoking her father's presence with his actual body parts and thereby tangibly manifesting his devotion. As such, the fingernail *myōgō* were both commemorative and devotional. In addition to the examples preserved at Enshō-ji and Myōshin-ji, Bunchi created another fingernail *myōgō*, *Miroku bosatsu* 弥勒菩薩, which she gave to her younger brother Shinkei Hōshinnō 真敬法親王 (1649–1706) in 1683, three years after her father's death. Its present whereabouts are unknown, but Shinkei recorded it in his diary, describing it as being made with *seisei tsume* 生生爪 (nails with life force and energy) (NISHIBORI and SUENAGA 1955, p. 124). This implies that the fingernails vividly evoked Gomizuno-o's presence.

An important question that I have not been able to answer is whether the fingernail *myōgō* were the result of Bunchi's own idiosyncratic inspiration or whether she had seen a previous example. These kinds of relics are not readily shown by temples, so knowledge in this area is very limited. It is possible that other fingernail *myōgō* exist, in addition to those made by Bunchi.

#### *Enshrining Bodily Relics inside Images*

Related to these fingernail *myōgō* is the tradition of depositing fingernails, hair, and ashes in Buddhist images and *chinzō* 頂相 sculptures



**Figure 7.** Clay statue of Emperor Gomizuno-o (Enshō-ji collection).

(realistic portraits of Zen Buddhist monks). The custom of enshrining relics inside Buddhist statues can be traced back to India. Numerous examples can be found in Japan (KURATA 1973). The act of commissioning an image and enshrining one's bodily relics within it was thought to be a way of demonstrating devotion and a way of assuring one's salvation.

In the case of portrait sculptures, which were usually made after a person's death, it was a way of investing images with the spirit of the deceased.<sup>7</sup> In some cases, hair was even implanted on the head and face. A famous example is the statue of Ikkyū Sōjun 一休宗純 (1394–1481) at Shūon-an 酬恩庵 near Kyoto. While possibly made while he was still alive, this statue was probably done just after his death in

<sup>7</sup> For discussions of mummified monks and portrait sculptures with bodily relics, see FAURE (1991, pp. 169–78), FOULK and SHARF 1993–1994, and SHARF 1992.





**Figure 8.** Clay statue of Emperor Gomizuno-o without cloth covering (Enshō-ji collection). Photo from NISHIBORI and SUENAGA.

1481. The hair was implanted not just to make the statue more outwardly realistic but to inject Ikkyū's spirit directly into the image (MORI 1977, p. 44). Likewise, ashes or bones were also sometimes deposited inside sculptural portraits. For example, the ashes of the famous monk Nichiren 日蓮 (1222–1282) were placed in a bronze container inside a portrait sculpture (now at Honmon-ji 本門寺 in Tokyo), which was dedicated on the sixth anniversary of his death in 1288 (KURATA 1973, plates #204 and #205). As with the addition of hair, the enshrining of such corporeal relics heightens the physical presence of the image.

Bunchi created a clay statue of her father (Figures 7 and 8) a few months after his death. According to temple records, she attached Gomizuno-o's actual hair to the face (NISHIBORI and SUENAGA 1955, p. 65). The image is still enshrined in the Entsū-den 円通殿 at Enshō-ji.

The hair is no longer visible and I was told that the face had been partially restored in recent years, so presumably the hairs fell out and were lost. By investing the image with Gomizuno-o's bodily relic, in this case his hair, it *became* her father and thus more effective than an image without corporeal relics. Bunchi's inscription placed inside the sculpture reads as follows:

This sacred image of Gomizuno-o-in, [made] in the eighth year of the Enpō era (1680), eighth month, nineteenth day.

Upon the Retired Emperor's death I went to the capital and observed the 49-day period of strict mourning. When it was over, I returned to this temple [Enshō-ji]. With clay I tried to capture his radiant gold quality. I wish to enshrine [this image] on the altar so that it can always be venerated and offerings can be made, and by doing so I can requite the deep debt of gratitude I owe him for bringing me up with care. In addition, family members and clergy have transcribed the five Mahayana sutras as an offering to extol his soul and to be an embellishment on his magnificent vehicle going to be reborn in the Pure Land.

100 days after [Gomizuno-o's death], 10th month, 29th day  
Respectfully written by Daitō Bunchi of Enshō-ji  
(NISHIBORI and SUENAGA 1955, p. 65)

The use of bodily relics to invoke the presence of her deceased father seems to have been the main motivation in a number of Bunchi's creations. Bunchi also placed an *ihai* 位牌 (mortuary tablet) symbolic of her father on the altar of the *hondō* at her temple after his death, but her fingernail creations and *chinzō* sculpture have a different, more visceral significance. They are not just symbols of Gomizuno-o, but they *are* her father. The spirit that animated Gomizuno-o's physical body lived on in his fingernails, teeth, and hair—all incorruptible entities. These relics represented what Robert SHARF describes as the "distilled essence of human corporeality," with impurities refined away (1999, p. 82). As Bernard FAURE points out, relics such as these body fragments that remain long after the dissolution of the person, bridge the gap between life and death (1991, p. 135).

#### *Made from Bones*

There is a tradition in China and Japan of making images with the bones and ashes of dead people, usually mixed with clay. In the fall of 1999, I went to see some of these *hone no butsumō* at Isshin-ji 一心寺 in



**Figure 9.** Hall enshrining Amida images made from bones at Isshin-ji.

Osaka. Since the Meiji period, this temple has collected bones from worshipers, pulverized them, then mixed the powder with cement to create images of Amida Buddha. An image is created every ten years, reportedly with bones contributed from approximately two million worshippers. Isshin-ji was burned down in World War II, so now it houses only the six Amidas made in the postwar period. When I asked the priest about the motives of the people contributing bones, he replied that it is a way of venerating the Buddha and, at the same time, it is a memorial to one's ancestors. Moreover, he said that people gain a sense of security from knowing that their bones will become part of an Amida statue, literally uniting with Buddha. The fact that the Amida images are enshrined in a special hall (Figure 9) where they are looked after by the temple and visited by many worshipers is also attractive.

The day I visited, there was a long line of people waiting to make arrangements to donate their relatives' bones. According to the priest at Isshin-ji, worshipers do not regard these images as art objects, but rather they see in them the faces of their ancestors. For Bunchi, forming her father's fingernails into a written image of a buddha or bodhisattva must have fulfilled a similar function.

*Written in Blood*

The purported purpose of transcribing sutras is to ensure the continued existence of the Buddhist teachings and for the transcriber to acquire merit. People commonly copied sutras to secure their future salvation or the salvation of a loved one. Dedications on behalf of deceased people are often appended at the end of sutras. In Bunchi's case, in addition to writing out scriptures with the conventional media of black or gold ink, she several times wrote out sutras in blood. Using one's own blood instead of ink was a way of showing extraordinary devotion involving "personal sacrifice." The virtues of this act were promoted in several scriptures; one example is the following passage in the *Ta chih tu lun* 大智度論 (J. *Daichidoron*): "If you truly love the [Buddhist] law, you should take your skin and use it as paper, take one of your bones and use it as a brush, and use your blood to write this" (T. 25.178c) (see YORITOMI and AKAO 1994, p. 160).

The earliest blood sutras I know of by Bunchi are three scrolls from the *Lotus Sutra* (J. *Hoke-kyō* 法華經) that she presented to Eigen-ji 永源寺 in Shiga prefecture in 1643, the year that her teacher Isshi became the eightieth abbot.<sup>8</sup> Bunchi later deposited some blood sutras as well as some *myōgō* written in blood at Kōzan-ji 高山寺 in Kyoto. They were originally placed in a cavity in the head of a Shaka image that she donated to Kōzan-ji (date unclear), and they were found and removed at a later date when the image was repaired (Figure 10) (NISHIBORI and SUENAGA 1955, p. 134). Several of the blood *myōgō* are now mounted separately.

Finally, there are also some blood sutras preserved at Bunchi's own temple, Enshō-ji (NISHIBORI and SUENAGA 1955, p. 103). These were transcribed in 1686, the seventh anniversary of Gomizuno-o's death and the same year in which Bunchi made the fingernail *myōgō* at Enshō-ji. The seven-year anniversary is an important mortuary rite in Japanese Buddhism, so it is not surprising that Bunchi was occupied with making dedicatory objects from her father's and her own bodily relics that year. But it is perhaps a bit startling to realize that she had kept her father's fingernails for at least six years, probably longer. Whether she had kept them for precisely this postmortem purpose is impossible to know.

Bunchi's blood writings have not been scientifically analyzed, but

<sup>8</sup> Bunchi's dedicatory inscription reads: "twentieth year of the Kan'ei era [1643], twelfth month, twenty-second day, [written by] the Buddhist nun Bunchi. The first daughter of the Keichō era emperor, Daitō Bunchi of Enshō-ji, makes a gift of three scrolls of the 'Fumon' chapter [from the *Lotus Sutra*] written in blood on the occasion of Priest Isshi becoming abbot of Eigen-ji." This suggests that writing out the sutra in blood was an expression of her devotion and a way of honoring her teacher.

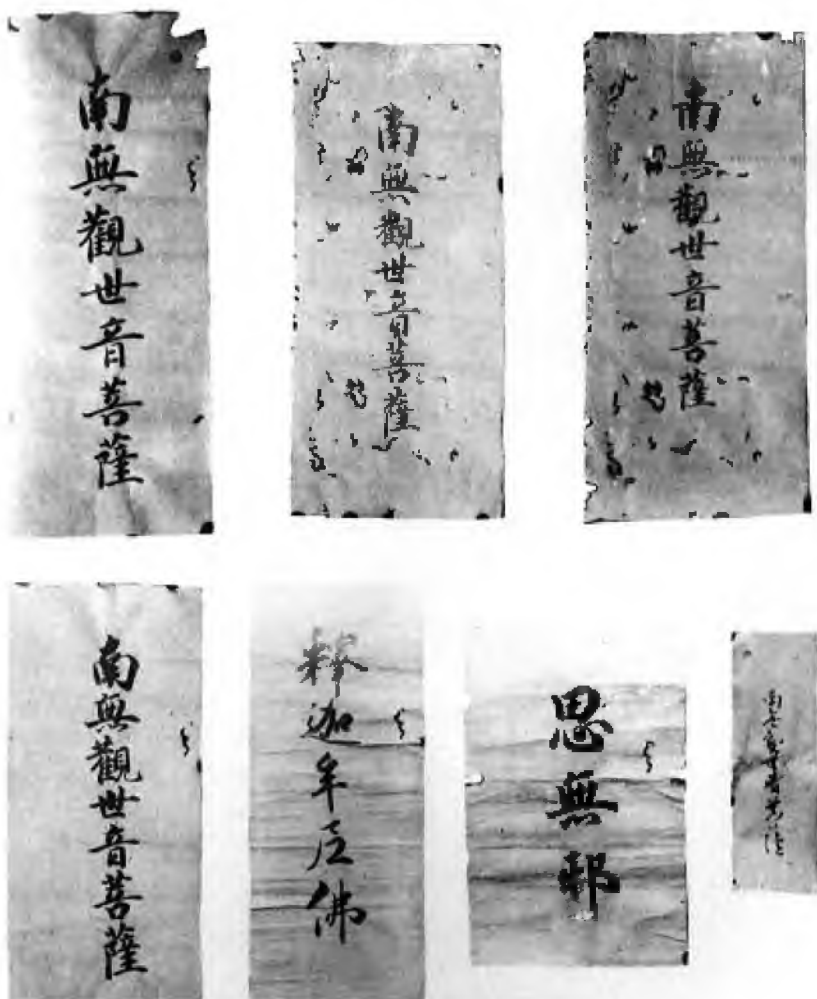


Figure 10. *Myōgō* written with blood (Kōzan-ji collection). Photo from NISHIBORI and SUENAGA.

apparently it was not uncommon for the blood used in copying scriptures to be mixed with red or black ink (YORITOMI and AKAO 1994, p. 160). According to a priest at Manpuku-ji, blood was probably drawn from the nose or ears, and probably only a little was added to the ink for symbolic purposes.<sup>9</sup> The practice of writing scriptures and painting images with blood was promoted in Japan by Ōbaku monks who had emigrated to Japan during the Edo period (YAMAMOTO 1941). Gomizuno-ō, as well as his son Shinkei Hōshinnō and daughter Mitsuko

<sup>9</sup> Interview with Tanaka Chishiki 田中知識 at the Manpuku-ji Bunka-den, November 1999.



Figure 11. Image of Amida painted with blood by Tetsugyū Dōki (Shōtai-ji collection).

Naishinnō 光子内親王 (Gen'yō 元瑤, 1634–1727), had close connections with several Ōbaku monks, so it is possible that Bunchi was inspired by this Ōbaku practice.

The Ōbaku priest Tetsugyū Dōki 鉄牛道機 (1628–1700), for example, painted multiple images of Amida Buddha with blood in 1662 on the occasion of the seventeenth anniversary of his mother's death (Figure 11). The inscription by Mokuan Shōtō 木庵性瑠 (1611–1684) on Tetsugyū's painting refers to “discarding one's body” (*shashin* 捨軀) through this practice. Of course in reality only a tiny amount of one's body is discarded, but through writing sutras with blood a small portion of one's blood literally becomes one with the Buddha's words, and by painting a Buddhist image with blood a portion of one's body literally becomes one with the Buddha's body. In other words, this practice was essentially a metaphorical sacrifice. As seen in the examples above, for Bunchi the “sacrificial” act of writing sutras or *myōgō* in blood had other resonances: it was a way of honoring her teacher, a way of forming an intimate bond with Buddha, and a way of showing her devotion to her father and helping to ensure his salvation.

#### *Made with Hair*

Previously, I discussed circumstances in which Gomizuno-o's hair was placed in a pagoda pillar (Shōkoku-ji) and a small devotional shrine (Myōshin-ji), as well as inserted in a portrait statue (Enshō-ji). Human hair was also used to create devotional works in Japan, the most common being embroidered images of Buddhist deities or *myōgō*.<sup>10</sup> If the hair was from a deceased person, the work served as a kind of *tsuizen* 追善 or memorial. Women also wove their own hair into embroidered Buddhist hangings as a kind of devotional practice or offering (*gyakushu* 逆修) (NARA KOKURITSU HAKUBUTSUKAN 1964, pp. 6–7). This seems to have been an especially common practice in Pure Land Buddhism.

Daiki Sonkō 大規尊臬 (1675–1719), Gomizuno-o's grand-daughter, who became the eighth abbess of the Kōshō-in 光照院 Imperial Convent in Kyoto, created a different kind of *myōgō* from hair. Instead of embroidering the characters, she took the long locks shorn when she took the tonsure and pasted them directly onto paper so that they form a vertical line of characters reading *Namu Kanzeon* (INSTITUTE FOR MEDIEVAL JAPANESE STUDIES 1998, pp. 3, 18). Since hair and fingernails were regarded equally as containing some of a person's life essence, the creation of such works from hair is thus conceptually similar to Bunchi's fingernail *myōgō*.

<sup>10</sup> See NARA KOKURITSU HAKUBUTSUKAN 1964 and TOKUGAWA BIJUTSUKAN 1998.

### Conclusion

The investigation of Emperor Gomizuno-o's distribution of his own corporeal relics, especially his teeth, and Bunchi's creation of artifacts with her father's cast-off body fragments, especially his fingernails, indicates that this father-daughter pair was unusually concerned with configuring the body as memorial art. In particular, Bunchi's fingernail-crafted *myōgō* may well have been her own unique innovation. Both the tonsured emperor and his nun daughter exhibited a creative energy in using body parts or body products for devotional purposes.

Gomizuno-o was heir to a long tradition of relic veneration. By his day, it was not uncommon for people to have a fragment of their body deposited in a temple or within an image. This was often accomplished after a person's death by his or her family members. However, Gomizuno-o was directly involved in the distribution of "himself." His preoccupation with his own body relics surely must have had an impact on Bunchi. We can only speculate on how and when she acquired her father's fingernail clippings. Judging from his own relic-placing activities outlined above, I suspect it may have been Gomizuno-o's idea to give his fingernail clippings to Bunchi. Possession of her father's body fragments allowed Bunchi to remain intimately connected to him both while he was alive and after his death. We must remember that Bunchi moved to Nara in 1656 and, while she made occasional trips to Kyoto, she saw her father only rarely. The special bond between father and daughter is evident in the fact that Bunchi (together with her sister Gen'yō, abbess of Rinkyū-ji 林丘寺) performed the task of washing Gomizuno-o's body after his death (AKAMATSU 1984, p. 403). That she created and then enshrined an image of Gomizuno-o in the *hondō* of her temple, Enshō-ji, after his death also reveals the depth of her reverence.

In closing, I would like to mention something about the artistic qualities of the works created from body fragments discussed above. There is no question that Bunchi's fingernail *myōgō* were sacred objects meant for prayers and rituals, not created specifically for aesthetic reasons. They do, however, contain aesthetic components. For example, just as in writing characters, Bunchi obviously made artistic decisions in choosing the shapes and in placing the fingernail clippings, balancing the lines and spaces. Aesthetic considerations are also apparent in the Buddha images created from pulverized bones or drawn with blood. Other cultures fashioned beautiful reliquaries to house body fragments, but in Japan there was a desire to fashion the fragments themselves into visually attractive objects.



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