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Editors' Introduction

Vernacular Buddhism and Medieval Japanese Literature

IN MARCH OF 2008, the Department of Asian Languages and Civilizations at the University of Colorado, Boulder, hosted a small interdisciplinary conference titled “Illustrating the Dharma: Popular Buddhism in Medieval Japanese Fiction.” The conference featured ten presentations and one keynote speech devoted to exploring aspects of “popular” (as opposed to monastic, elite, or orthodox doctrinal) Buddhism in the illustrated fiction of the Kamakura, Muromachi, and early Edo periods—roughly the thirteenth through seventeenth centuries. Participants considered a variety of hand-illustrated and woodblock-printed texts from an array of methodological perspectives—literary, historical, Buddhological, and art historical—concentrating in particular on issues of religious doctrine, practice, and representation in the literary genres of *setsuwa* 説話 (tales), *otogizōshi* お伽草子 (Muromachi-period fiction), *ko-jōruri* 古浄瑠璃 (early puppet theater), *jisha engi* 寺社縁起 (temple and shrine histories), and *kōwakamai* 幸若舞 (ballad-dramas).

The present thematic issue of the *Japanese Journal of Religious Studies* is an indirect result of that 2008 conference. Five of the seven essays included here were first presented at the Boulder event, which also inspired our underlying (and, it was intended, unifying) approach: to consider premodern Japanese religious culture through the lens of literature, rather than more traditional Buddhist scriptural, historical, biographical, and exegetical sources. Our two corollary desiderata have been, from the start, to explore the roles of Buddhist

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sectarian and/or didactic concerns in the production of late-Heian and medieval literature, and to consider the place and significance of “visuality” in the illustrated textual media of medieval and early-Edo Japan (including illuminated sutras, *emaki* 絵巻 picture scrolls, *nara ehon* 奈良絵本 picture books, and woodblock-printed books and maps).¹ The seven contributors to this volume have approached these issues in different ways, but each engages the three topics of Buddhism, literature, and visual representation.

Terminological Considerations:

Popular Buddhism, Folk Buddhism, Vernacular Buddhism

Medieval religious culture in Japan was fundamentally trans-sectarian, constituting a rich amalgam of diverse and occasionally incompatible elements, rather than an organized or internally consistent universe of practice and belief. Specialized cults dedicated to particular deities, bodhisattvas, and celebrity icons flourished in the cities and surrounding communities, dominating the religious landscape and competing for a limited pool of potential devotees. Itinerant preacher-entertainers plied the roadways, frightening audiences with stories and images of hell, extolling the Buddhas and the bodhisattvas, and collecting temple donations. Insofar as many works of medieval Japanese fiction are understood to derive from the proselytizing and fund-raising activities of these street-level preacher-entertainers, including *biwa hōshi* 琵琶法師 (*biwa*-playing priests), *etoki hōshi* 絵解法師 (picture-explaining priests), Kumano *bikuni* 熊野比丘尼 (nuns of Kumano), *kanjin hijiri* 勧進聖 (fund-raising priests), Kōya *hijiri* 高野聖 (priests of Mt. Kōya), *shōmonji* 唱門師 (low-caste chanters), *miko* 巫女 (female mediums), and the like, their study promises insights into popular medieval religious culture in a way that the study of sutras, commentaries, and learned treatises does not. At least, such was the idea that inspired the Boulder conference.

The reader will notice, however, that what was “popular Buddhism” in the conference title has become “vernacular Buddhism” here. In the course of working on this special issue of the *Japanese Journal of Religious Studies*, we the editors came to feel that the former term did not accurately reflect the diversity of the works discussed in the articles. After all, a number of the texts treated by our authors originated in the highest circles of ecclesiastical authority, rather than in the world of street preaching. There are in fact many works of medieval literature that appear to derive from the “official” proselytizing and public relations activities of specific sects and institutions, including the vast majority of *jisha*

1. Below, references to “medieval literature” should be understood to encompass the late-Heian and early Edo works also under consideration in this volume.

engi (the lavishly illustrated temple and shrine mytho-histories of the Muro-machi period, such as *Chikurinji engi* 竹林寺縁起, which Haruko Wakabayashi discusses in her article), and particular *otogizōshi* (like *Tsukumogami ki* 付喪神記 and *Shuhanron* 酒飯論, which Noriko Reider and Takeshi Watanabe discuss in their respective contributions). As learned and finely illustrated objets d'art, many of these works are unmistakably “elite.” They are also notably vernacular insofar as they employ traditionally secular literary forms, rather than more orthodox Buddhist ones, to convey their own particular sectarian or institutional agenda. Moreover, like their more popular cousins rooted in medieval oral traditions, such as the *otogizōshi Hachikazuki* 鉢かづき and the *kōwakamai Shizuka* しづか, which Monika Dix and Elizabeth Oyler discuss in their articles, they can provide insights into medieval religious culture that are unavailable through the study of standard Buddhist texts. It is with this idea in mind—the notion that there is much to be learned about medieval Japanese religion through the study of vernacular textual and visual sources (including, in Charlotte Eubanks’s and Max Moerman’s articles, Heian, medieval, and Edo-period maps, *setsuwa*, and illuminated sutra scrolls)—that we have sought to compile this special issue of the *Japanese Journal of Religious Studies*.

One impetus, therefore, for the move from “popular Buddhism” to “vernacular Buddhism” pertains to the class diversity of audiences and materials under consideration here. Additionally, by using the word “vernacular,” we hope to convey a sense of pervasiveness and dissemination throughout the culture. The term is a rather vague and imperfect one, of course, but we feel that it is an improvement on the notion of “popular.”

The category of “popular religion” is one that has been much analyzed and criticized in scholarly discourse, along with the related rubric of “folk religion.” While it is not our intention here to enter deeply into these debates, we would like to point to some of the reasons that we prefer the term “vernacular religion” (“vernacular Buddhism”) and briefly outline what we mean by its use. First, the term “popular Buddhism” (or “folk Buddhism,” even more so) implies an opposing entity that could be called “official Buddhism,” “orthodox Buddhism,” or “institutional Buddhism” (or worse yet, as others have suggested, “unpopular Buddhism”), and it is our feeling that this does more to obscure than to clarify the cultural situation we are attempting to describe.

In Japanese, “popular Buddhism” and “folk Buddhism” are roughly analogous to the scholarly categories of *minkan shinkō* 民間信仰 and *minzoku shūkyō* 民俗宗教. The trend in Japanese scholarship in recent decades has been to eschew the former in favor of the latter; the implications of this preference are the abandonment of a model, suggested by the term *minkan shinkō*, of a particularistic view of Japanese religion that posits an underlying unity in folk practice—a view once promoted by such luminaries as Yanagita Kunio, the father of

Japanese folklore studies, and Hori Ichirō, a major figure from a later period in the study of Japanese religions.² The term *minzoku shūkyō*, on the other hand, suggests the adoption of a closely contextual approach rooted in local customs and practices. However, with its connotations of *minzokugaku* 民俗学 (folklore studies), *minzoku shūkyō* is no doubt an inappropriate conceptual tool for the study of medieval Japanese prose literature, seeing as how many such works are known to have circulated at the highest levels of society and, in some cases, to have been composed by members of the clergy. The wide internal range of these texts, displaying as they often do a high degree of erudition and familiarity with both the sacred and secular “classics,” extends beyond the specificity of folk practice and belief implied by the term *minzoku shūkyō*, and thus also, by extension, “popular Buddhism.”

The term “vernacular,” on the other hand, suggests a kind of translation into local language, a transformation of the foreign into the familiar for purposes of communication.³ Like “popular religion,” it clearly includes Buddhism as it was preached and experienced on the street, in the marketplace, and at busy crossroads and bridges, but it also includes temple preaching to lay and monastic audiences (*sekkyō* 説経/*shōdō* 唱導), as well as some religious ceremonies conducted at court and private residences: wherever, that is, Buddhism was represented in a way that conformed to local interests and local forms. In this sense, we can distinguish vernacular Buddhism from “common Buddhism,” which typically refers to Buddhist practices and beliefs that are commonly shared throughout society, among elites, commoners, monastics, and laity alike. As Ian Reader and George Tanabe have described it, the “common” in “common religion” denotes “something that belongs to the whole community and can be used by anyone in the community, refined or coarse. It refers to a set of sentiments, behavior, practices, beliefs, customs, and the like that is shared by the vast number of people and is common to all classes and groups in society, including the elites (aristocratic, economic, religious) and ordinary people.”⁴ “Vernacular Buddhism” of course partakes of the common in this sense as well, but with an additional emphasis on representation and communication. This is a language of Buddhism that is localized; it is both reflective of and formative for Japanese culture in general. The term “vernacular Buddhism” furthermore implies a kind of storehouse of Buddhist concepts, figures, and images available for use to a wide variety of authors, artists, and performers across the centuries.

For these reasons, we have concluded that the seven essays in this special issue,

2. On the theoretical orientation of these terms, particularly as they apply to the study of contemporary Japanese religion, see SHINNŌ (1993).

3. See also VON GLAHN’s discussion of the term “vernacular religion” (2004, 12–14).

4. READER and TANABE (1998, 29); see also the larger terminological discussion (23–32).

focusing as they do on principally literary and visual forms, are best described as exploring aspects of vernacular (rather than popular, folk, or common) religious culture. When we consider the roots of Buddhist literature and performance in Japan, we recall that the origin of much of the didactic tale literature of the late Heian period was the “reading out” in Japanese (*kanbun kundoku* 漢文訓読) of texts written in Chinese *kanbun*, for the benefit of assembled audiences. It is precisely this kind of localization, further enhanced as legends and miracle tales were developed according to the conventions of Japanese *monogatari* prose literature and *waka* poetry, that we find in the works under consideration in this volume.

The Present Volume

The seven essays included here are remarkable for their depth and diversity. In their own unique ways, they all challenge our pre-existing notions of Buddhist culture in medieval Japan. First, Charlotte Eubanks explores Buddhist *setsuwa* about Heian-era sutra reciters who find that they have a mental block that prevents them from remembering a particular line, passage, or page of text. In her development of this theme of “faulty memory” in *Lotus Sutra* specialists, she demonstrates the complex interrelation between the textual, the oral, and the visual. Eubanks suggests that there is an important correspondence between the physical artifact of the sutra and an internal text in the heart-mind of the reader. She draws our attention to the tradition of lavishly decorated sutras and the creative uses of word-as-image in her exposition. As the karmic causes of the affliction of the monks are revealed, we are reminded of the importance of embodiment in Buddhist doctrine and practice.

Next, in her article on the *otogizōshi Tsukumogami ki*, Noriko Reider traces the development of belief in the transformation of discarded tools, utensils, and other items into vengeful ghosts. Fascinatingly, this Muromachi-period text uses legends and popular beliefs from earlier periods to argue for the superiority of the Shingon sect. Reider demonstrates that as much as this text was influenced by earlier traditions about “tool specters,” it also came to reframe and redefine them through an esoteric (*mikkyō* 密教) discourse on the enlightenment of inanimate objects. Both in the writing of the tale and in the illustrations, we witness a rich intertextuality, with allusions to Chinese metaphysics, Japanese monster stories, and of course Shingon Buddhist doctrine.

Takeshi Watanabe also introduces a text with a strong sectarian element. The *otogizōshi Shuhanron* is an exquisitely illustrated sixteenth-century work set against a background of violent inter-sectarian strife in the capital. Watanabe argues that this work, which does not mention the internecine battles that ravaged late Muromachi-period Kyoto, is at once an argument for the “middle way”

of moderation suggested by Tendai doctrine, and a conciliatory gesture toward the rival Pure Land (Ikkōshū 一向宗) and Nichiren (Hokkeshū 法華宗) sects. The representatives of all three positions receive sympathetic treatment in the scroll. Watanabe draws upon the *Shuhanron emaki*'s detailed visual representations to shed light on the gustatory and libationary practices of the late medieval period, while reflecting on the meaning of such excesses in a time of recurrent famine.

The *otogizōshi Hachikazuki* is the tale of a miserable orphan who, abused by her stepmother and ridiculed by those around her, is in the end blessed with great good fortune. In her essay on *Hachikazuki* in this volume, Monika Dix emphasizes the role of Kannon in the story of the heroine's trials and miraculous transformation. The unremovable bowl placed upon the child's head by her mother would seem to be an affliction, but as Dix argues, we come to see it as both a symbol of and an instrument of the bodhisattva's grace. Through comparison with other similar tales and an analysis of Buddhist themes in *Hachikazuki*, Dix demonstrates that as a *mōshigo* 申し子, or a child bestowed in response to a prayer to Kannon, the heroine is in fact a kind of a divine figure in human form, although she and the people around her remain unaware of this until the story's dénouement.

The next article, by Elizabeth Oyler, takes up a colorfully illustrated *nara ehon*-edition of the *kōwakamai Shizuka*. It is a story of the eponymous "dancing girl" (*shirabyōshi* 白拍子) who, legend has it, was the lover of the twelfth-century warrior Minamoto no Yoshitsune. Shizuka survived Yoshitsune after he was banished and hunted down by his brother, Yoritomo, and bore his doomed son. Oyler argues that in this work, Shizuka is presented as a fearless woman steeped in Buddhist learning and possessing deep erudition in the literary arts—a departure from many earlier versions of her story that largely portrayed her as a victim. Her sophistication in both religious and poetic discourse stands as a foil to her identity as a sexualized female entertainer, which is also much emphasized in this telling of her tale. Yoritomo treats Shizuka with contempt and cruelty, but in the end, she achieves a moral victory and finds vindication through her unshakable faith. Her fortitude, and that of her mother, a nun named Iso no Zenji, is a central motif in this particular version of the story. In this essay, Oyler shows us how stories that are retold in different generic formats can engender surprising transformations. She also explores the ways in which visual representations can contradict, reinforce, and elaborate upon textual traditions.

Haruko Wakabayashi also employs a range of genres in her examination of the legend of Ono no Takamura as told in the second scroll of the late-medieval *Chikurinji engi*. Takamura was a prominent ninth-century courtier who in later centuries became closely connected to the literature of the "hell tour," and was an important figure in the establishment of certain temples in and around the capital as portals to the netherworld. Reference to a broad range of visual and textual

materials allows Wakabayashi to place this recapitulation of Takamura's legend in a specific moment in the medieval Japanese development of the iconography and topography of the underworld. Identifying the *Chikurinji engi* scrolls' historical context through careful comparison with textual descriptions of hell, earlier legends of Takamura, and paintings and sculptures of the Ten Kings of Hell, she is able to clarify the likely date of the scrolls' composition. This article shows us the ways in which medieval texts were able to accommodate inconsistencies arising from disparate influences without a sense of contradiction. It also demonstrates the sometimes close relationship between ritual practices and the production of images and texts.

Finally, in his article on the "Island of Women," a fictitious female preserve that played an important role in the Japanese literary and visual imagination, Max Moerman draws upon diverse sources from the *jātaka* (tales of the former lives of the Buddha) of ancient India to sixteenth-century European maps. In Japan, the Island of Women is first documented as an important location on Buddhist maps of the early medieval period, but it later became a venue for *otogizōshi* adventure tales, and a setting for ribald sexual parody in Edo-period illustrated books. In Moerman's rich exploration of "cartography as fiction," we see the complexity of stories created through the layering and re-layering of different narrative strata. Moerman's article reveals Japan's relationship to the rest of the world—especially India and China, but also Europe and (other) imaginary places. He demonstrates the global influences that were active in late medieval Japan, and reminds us of the deep historical repository of Buddhist and Chinese themes that were forever available for redeployment in different contexts.

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