



Thomas Donald Conlan, *From Sovereign to Symbol: An Age of Ritual Determinism in Fourteenth-Century Japan*

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THOMAS DONALD CONLAN is a respected and productive historian of medieval Japan and he has directed his attention to the fourteenth century in this fascinating study. As the scholar whom Conlan approached at the Historiographical Institute of the University of Tokyo in early 2002 to ask about the Daigoji materials there, I recall talking to him about the collection of photographic facsimiles (*shashinchō*) held there and issues of permissions. I was fascinated by the project and would later be asked to conduct an external manuscript review, which I declined to undertake due to other commitments.

I have a special vantage point from which to evaluate *From Sovereign to Symbol*, because I have worked closely with the Daigoji archives and collection and am well-acquainted with Professor Nagamura Makoto who, as a former professor of the Historiographical Institute, is the leader of the research team (*chōsadan*) assembling the authoritative edition of the catalog of Daigoji, photographing the some eight hundred boxes of manuscripts there, and maintaining the Daigoji archival computer systems at Japan Women's University—in addition to serving as Director of Kanazawa Bunko. Oddly, Nagamura's research appears only a few times in the footnotes, and Nagamura's authoritative edition of the Daigoji catalog (NAGAMURA 2000; vols. 1,2,3,6) is neither mentioned nor cited anywhere in the study.

Thomas Conlan's study offers us the first narrative arguing for the centrality of *kenmitsu* Buddhism (with emphasis on Shingon *mikkyō*) at the mid-to-late fourteenth century royal court and shogunate. In the West, in particular, this is important news, because no one has yet given sustained attention to that centrality and, moreover, there has been a tendency to lag behind Japanese scholarship in this regard. We tend to know figures like Kitabatake Chikafusa (author of *Jinnō shōtōki*, supporter of the southern royal court, and Shingon adherent) and the Daigoji monk Kenshun (1299–1357), an ally of the northern court, only for their political intrigue, and have little knowledge of their esoteric Buddhist background, both ritual and ideological. Pioneering work on Shingon Shinto has been conducted particularly by Fabio RAMBELLI (2002), and I have outlined the importance of relic veneration to the early Ashikaga Shogunate (RUPPERT 2000), but no one in the west has drawn together so coherently the range of figures who offered Buddhist rites (*kitō*, esp. *shuhō* [alt. *suhō*]) of the *kenmitsu* institutions to the politi-

cally powerful. Conlan begins by turning to the roots of figures like Chikafusa and Kenshun and explains, in some detail, their family connections to what he describes as the newly formed “administrative nobility,” a concept he draws from Tōji scholar Tomita Masahiro.

Conlan’s use of rarely consulted sources and depiction of the social context (chapters 2 and 3) in constructing his narrative about the competing courts and their allies in the shogunate are particularly impressive. He has offered an important sketch of that context by focusing on the role of regalia in the effort of Kitabatake Chikafusa to legitimate the Southern Court. In particular, his discussion of Kenshun’s efforts to arbitrate royal legitimacy and undertake a kind of displacement of royal ritual prerogative is fascinating, albeit problematic.

Conlan is especially incisive when he is pursuing what I would call “straight history.” His discussions of the “destruction of precedent” (chapter 4) were effective in their depiction of the courts’ efforts to establish their legitimacy. The claim that Chikafusa, in declaring the regalia held by the Northern Court to be forged and demanding their confiscation, “acted on his sense of nominalism, in that he believed that objects, rather than ritual context, determined legitimacy” (122) seems questionable as the Northern Court possession of “regalia” would indicate similar interest in “objects,” but Conlan constructs an exciting narrative about Chikafusa’s efforts. Conlan has also done an excellent job of investigating relevant sources concerning these historical episodes.

Although Conlan’s straight history is well constructed, his main theses unfortunately prove less convincing. The following are the major claims he makes, most of which are either impossible to prove without a more extensive comprehensive history—for example, of the sort offered by Uejima Susumu recently—or dubious. First, he draws special attention to *Gojisō yoi no yurai* in Box 93 of *Daigoji monjo*, which he emphasizes is particularly prized at Daigoji now and, presumably, historically: “[B]ox number 93 in the Daigoji archive contains some of the most secret and treasured documents. This box, made of pawlonia (*kiri* 桐), the most valued of woods, houses the two oldest surviving imperial edicts by a chamberlain.... Next to these records, a copy of the monk Jōkai’s explanation of the meaning of the ‘night service’ of protector monks at the palace is preserved. The monks of Daigoji to this day are reticent about showing the contents of this box, but it has been included in the 177 boxes that have been microfilmed and can be viewed at Tokyo University’s Historiographical Institute” (8). I have access to a photocopy of the said work held in the institute, since I was on staff for a year (2001–2002; Japan Memory Project) at the Historiographical Institute and am working on the history of sacred works (*shōgyō*) collections, and so I was interested to examine the work (*Gojisō yoi no yurai*, *Daigoji monjo* 93.3–1[~2]). I queried current leading scholars of Daigoji archival studies and was told that there is nothing particularly important about the box and its contents, although some noted that the imperial edicts may have had political import at that particular time; and clearly they are of interest to scholars.

For Conlan, Box 93, especially *Gojisō yoi no yurai* (8, 66), is of particular importance because he makes a key claim that it offers up a “cosmogram”—mandalaization—of the area around the capital based on the ritual practices in the *futama*, the room next to the sleeping quarters of the sovereign. As a person fascinated with medieval Shingon and, originally, with a focus primarily on Daigoji and Ono materials, I have great sympathy with this argument, but just alluding to such a work is insufficient. At a minimum, some part of the work must be quoted (and a discussion of its overall purport provided) in order for a specific argument to be made regarding how the relevant cosmogram developed and was conceived. One would then expect additional materials that document the role of *mandalas* in Kenshun’s thinking and actions. This is not done. Later, Conlan emphasizes Monkan’s relic offerings and then Kenshun’s role in the offering of relics to shrines and temples (28, 91, 102, 107) as part of efforts to constitute territory under their control as a “mandala,” but similar offerings had been undertaken following almost every Daijō-e accession from the tenth to the thirteenth century and, later, by the shogunate in the form of the *rishōtō*, established through much of the realm in the mid-fourteenth century. These more limited gifts of Kenshun and Monkan obviously also had spatial implications, so written evidence that Monkan and Kenshun saw their actions in terms of *mandalas* is necessary. *Gojisō yoi no yurai* is a Shingon text, but it never mentions a *mandala*, and I can find no direct reference to Monkan or Kenshun using the term in direct connection with their conceptualization of Japan.¹

In an ideal world, Conlan would have discussed relevant work by UEJIMA Susumu (2010) that originally came out in 2004 (which compared this specific work with several versions held in other temples’ archives, and associates *futama* practice with efforts to protect a newly conceived realm-boundary), but Conlan’s drawing attention to the work within Daigoji was indeed an important first step. In fact, the *mudrā* (invocatory hand gesture) of the four seas (*shikai ryōshō [in]*), which seems to have had realm-boundary associations with symbolic rule by the sovereign of the realm, appears in the work Conlan discusses and in the accessional *sokui* initiation. Uejima does, at one point, refer to a section of an earlier related text on *gojisō* protector-monks by the Daigoji Sanbō’in founder Shōkaku (1057–1129), held in Zuishin’in, that includes a section called *Kyūchū chingo* (protection of the court/capital), and notes that the text identifies sections of the capital with the Womb Mandala and the palace with the Diamond Mandala. Uejima also takes note of a related work discussing the twenty-one shrines and also mentions the reference at the conclusion of the *Gojisō yoi no yurai* in *Daigoji monjo* to an early *sokui* rite and thus he suggests these are related. *Gojisō yoi no yurai* argues for the protection of

1. Conlan repeatedly refers to the conceptualization of mandalas but offers no verification of use of the term. For example, on page 66 the footnote refers to this same manuscript along with an article by NAKAYAMA (2004, 228); however, the page he refers to in the Nakayama article discusses Kenshun and the Futama but makes no mention of a mandala.

the realm (*shugo kokkai*), quotes from the *Shugo kokkaikyō* scripture, offers instructions about the beads and related ritual implements to be used in the nightly rite, lists the shrines to be prayed to (*kanshō*, ritually invited), directly ties the rite to the “wish-fulfilling” jewel rite of the Latter Seven-Day Rite of Shingon, Mount Murō, and the Snake Exorcism Rite, and makes brief mention of the *mudrā* of the four seas. Pulling this all together with a consideration of the works Uejima examines or at the least Uejima’s article would be necessary to make a convincing case.

Second, Conlan asserts that the abbot of Daigoji was the “most exalted and powerful Buddhist figure in Japan” and that Daigoji was the most powerful temple in Japan, constituting the “ritual and fiscal foundation of the Northern Court, which ruled most of Japan from the late fourteenth century onward” (17). It is possible to claim that Kenshun was, for a time, the most powerful monk in Japan, but it would require an extensive argument—including economic records—to argue convincingly that Daigoji, as an institution, was more powerful than, say, Mount Hiei (Enryakuji). I also queried leading Japanese scholars in the field and was told that although Kenshun was very powerful temporarily, any suggestion that Daigoji was the most powerful temple would be an exaggeration. To what extent any court, not just the Northern Court, “ruled” Japan is of course problematic and not dealt with sufficiently here.

Third, Conlan argues that supporters of the Northern Court, including Kenshun, had a “concept of ‘ritual mimesis’” (15) and that:

Kenshun espoused the notion of ritual determinism and he deemphasized the importance of sacred objects. Epitomizing this attitude, in 1346, he discarded a *futama* Kannon, one of the regalia of office, which had purportedly belonged in the palace but had been taken when Go-Daigo fled a decade earlier. In doing so, he demonstrated the insignificance of objects associated with the throne.... Kenshun knew that rituals legitimated objects, and not that the objects themselves possessed power (110–12).

I mention the concepts of ritual mimesis and ritual determinism together because they are the major “theoretical” innovations of this work. The notion of ritual mimesis does, in this case, have a Japanese equivalent, *nyozai no gi* 如在之儀, which Conlan notes has been studied previously by Hori Yutaka. A deeper engagement with the theoretical implications of the use of the term “mimesis” would have been helpful, but its use is provocative and intriguing. Nevertheless, as a scholar of esoteric Buddhism and of medieval Japanese history I find it hard to imagine that any Buddhist monk of Kenshun’s day would have possessed a view of the sort described in the quote above, and I see nothing in Kenshun’s actions or his journal that would suggest such a view. Leaving aside the fraught use of the term “determinism,” I cannot understand why Conlan strains to cast Kenshun in such a position—a kind of dualistic box. The very study that engages this particular set of events most directly—and which Conlan cites (NAKAYAMA 2004)—offers no suggestion that Kenshun devalued regalia or objects in general. He was a Shingon monk; the claim that he would de-legitimize

objects in general is simply not supportable, and the documents can more readily be interpreted as reflecting Kenshun's rivalry with monks like Kōiku, who brought the "regalia" to the retired sovereign Kōgon, along with Kenshun's concern for the views of the retired sovereigns (and the abbot of Tōjiji [=Tōjiin]).² It seems an exaggeration to say that "[i]n rejecting the *futama* Kannon, Kenshun established himself as an arbiter of legitimacy" (112) when he so willingly—according to his own diary—consulted with these figures in the process of considering the issue. Moreover, his effort to clarify the matter was actually requested by Ashikaga Tadayoshi, calling further into question the presumed independence of Kenshun's actions.³ Of all of the ideas in this book, many of which are extremely interesting, the claim that Kenshun was a ritual determinist who emphasized ritual over actions is the one least supported.

Related statements such as "[t]hose that were not well schooled in Shingon could not readily understand the solely metaphoric significance of these statues" (111) are undoubtedly incorrect insofar as Shingon monks (including Kenshun) did not view statues as "solely metaphoric" in their significance. Images themselves were of great import, as is indicated by the influential manual written by Seigen (1162–1231) of Daigoji for the training of Shingon masters, *Shugaku dodai* 修学土代 (Basis for learning [training]), which includes proper knowledge of images as fundamental to Shingon belief and practice.⁴ As for the related claims that changes in ritual becoming "the essence of power" and thereby "transforming the ancient institution of Japan's 'heavenly sovereigns' into symbols of authority" (15), there simply is no evidence that ritual itself changed dramatically in the period—the efforts of figures like Monkan and then Kenshun seem to have simply been those of monks who took advantage of their ritual knowledge to ingratiate themselves with elites and, particularly, to define the respective foci of their ritual lineages as lines splintered concerning all manner of issues, including the accessional initiation called *sokui kanjō*, examined in depth by MATSUMOTO (2005);⁵ to argue that "[r]elying solely on Shingon ritual, Kenshun created a court unfettered by notions of precedent and

2. Conlan mentions that Kenshun consulted with the retired Kōgon emperor and a monk named Shōken, but we should note that Kenshun's journal describes him as consulting with both the *sentō* and the *hōō* (*sentō hōō tō ryō-onkata*), presumably referring to Hanazono and his nephew Kōgon, and that the abbot of Tōjiji went along as well for the consultation (see HASHIMOTO 1992, 154b); the text itself does not directly mention Shōken, who is only noted, perhaps erroneously, in Nakayama's explanation).

3. MORI (1997, 69) has pointed out that Tadayoshi made the request of Kenshun; for unknown reasons, Conlan here fails to mention Tadayoshi as the person requesting the investigation, and the point regarding Tadayoshi is also reflected in the entry heading for Jōwa 2.12.5 in *Dai Nihon shiryō*, part 6, vol. 10 (291).

4. See the text, which is included in *Sahōshū*, at <http://kindai.ndl.go.jp/info:ndljp/pid/819330/52> (*komas* 52~55; accessed 11 October 2013).

5. See Matsumoto's discussion, for example, of the *mudrā* of the four seas, which also appears in the text Conlan considers, but which she identifies specifically with the *sokui* rite and, in one

convinced contemporaries of the Ashikaga right to rule” (130) is an exaggeration. The fact that Kenshun left no written works but his short journal and had no substantial influence on the development on the monastic institution and religious life at Daigoji—figures like Seigen, Gien (1558–1626), and Mansai were much more influential—further suggests that his impact was, in fact, quite small, except for his immediate historical milieu, within which he was an extremely important figure.⁶

Finally, I would just like to take brief note of some transcription errors in the text. Conlan has a tendency to choose non-standard readings of characters (for example, *geza* instead of *genja* or *genza* [45, 80–82], possibly a transcription error),⁷ and often provides inaccurate readings at other points (*shōgyō* is sometimes written here as *seikyō*, for example, 25, note 40, 211; *shūhō* [153, note 27 and throughout] should be *shuhō* or *suhō*; *Genkō shakasho* should be *Genkō shakusho*, 110, 203, 222). With regard to manuscripts consulted, although Conlan undoubtedly looked at the photos of unpublished manuscripts in boxes 93 and 157 of *Daigoji monjo*, there is a clerical error concerning what the notes describe as his viewing of other manuscript texts (Box #237 no. 1, #320 no. 13, #324 nos. 5–7, #360 nos. 1–5, 8, 10, #392 nos. 27–29, #415 no. 7–2, #435 nos. 6–11, 13, 16, and #463 no. 9, cited on page 99 note 143 and page 113 note 214) in 2002 at the Historiographical Institute; the notes must actually mean that only the on-site catalog there was examined, because neither reproductions nor originals are held there. (Nothing after Box #219 has ever been held in photograph form by the institute, as reconfirmed by officials in charge of the collection there.) This inadvertent error does not take away from the overall argu-

example, in the context of the historical split in the 1350s between different lineages at Daigoji, including Kenshun's (MATSUMOTO 2005, 56).

6. We can also note one other significant claim—that Shingon “possessed an institutional integration that Tendai, which was fractured by a bitter rivalry between Enryakuji and Onjōji, did not. Tōji constituted the center of the Shingon world...” (83–84). Although Tōji was unique in Shingon, it is very clear that Shingon was much less centralized than Tendai, which had only a bifurcation between Enryakuji and Onjōji and was within the capital area. The great monasteries of Shingon were more dispersed geographically than those of Tendai, and more numerous—Ninnaji, Tōji, Daigoji, Kongōbuji, and Negoroji, to name those most significant. The pinnacle within Shingon in terms of status was the Dharma Prince (*hosshimō*) who was also the *hōmu* of Japanese Buddhism in the late twelfth and thirteenth centuries, and transcended the Tōji administration. (Thus the Dharma Prince was invariably not named abbot of Tōji; only the disciples of the Ninnaji Dharma Prince were.) OKANO (2009, 67) has taken note of the comparatively dispersed character of Shingon, for example.

7. Conlan appears to have confused the term *genja* (“*geza*”) with the term *kugen*, which typically refers to a kind of land sales certificate in the medieval era (see MASS 1976, 202). Inspection of the *Kamakura ibun* database of the Historiographical Institute based on references to multiple citations of a “public” “*geza*” (公驗者) in the database there (81, note 20) suggested the conflation. Most of the references with the term 公驗者 (33 of 35; 者 here typically a grammatical marker) included 本 as a prefix, thus referring to sales certificates called *hon-kugen*, the “original” land sales certificate held by the seller (see SATŌ 1990, 271, 275).

ment, which is based primarily on the voluminous printed sources. We can only hope that this fascinating study will inspire more scholars to consider the powerful role of Kenshun and his rituals in the highest echelons of Japanese society in the mid-fourteenth century.

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