

## Buddhism and Society in the Medieval Estate System

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*Beginning with beliefs and practices tied to the agricultural cycle, medieval Japanese society was pervaded by Buddhist influences. Proceeding on the assumption that thaumaturgy and polytheism characterized medieval Japanese religion, this article delineates the various intersections of society and religion in medieval Japan, including religion in the village, family temples of warrior lords, and religious life in urban areas. In conclusion, the author characterizes medieval wandering ascetics and their stance of independence from the established social order as fundamental to medieval Japanese religion and to the Japanese intellectual tradition.*

### *Agriculture and Thaumaturgy*

#### SOCIETY UNDER THE ESTATE SYSTEM

THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN BUDDHISM and society was apparent in nearly every aspect of medieval life. Medieval society was complex, featuring a variety of social structures with intricate relationships of rule, systems of transit, and communality. Among these relationships were estate (*shōen* 莊園) rule by aristocratic and religious overlords; various forms of governmental and private control over the nominally public provincial lands called *kokugaryō* 国衙領; the rule of villages and peasants by local resident lords (*zaichi ryōshu* 在地領主); communal activities by the peasantry in villages; relations among the residents of Nara, Kyoto, and other urban areas; and relations among merchants and

\* This article was translated from the article "Shōensei shakai to Bukkyō" 莊園制社会と仏教, reprinted in *Kenmitsu taisei ron* 顕密体制論, Kuroda Toshio *chosakushū* 黒田俊雄著作集 2 (Kyoto: Hōzōkan, 1994, pp. 3-44).

craftsmen, especially in the cities.

This complex, pluralistic structure—the result of the increasing feudalization of Japan—formed a social system whose most salient characteristic was landed estates (*shōensei shakai* 莊園制社会). Of course, over the long medieval era the *shōen* system gradually changed and ultimately collapsed—*shōen* society was neither fixed nor monolithic. The period characterized by the *shōen* system exhibited several developmental stages, accompanied by changes that were generally quite gradual but which occasionally took place with great suddenness.

#### THAUMATURGY AND POLYTHEISM

Agricultural production was the primary basis of medieval *shōen* society, though productive activities supporting the *shōen* went well beyond agriculture, encompassing crafts and industries along with fishing and forestry. Also highly significant to *shōen* society were systems of commerce, transportation, and distribution. Still, the most important activity was agriculture. The cultivation of paddy land, especially, not only utilized the labor of peasants but also impinged on the lives of merchants, craftsmen, and fishermen. Even warriors and village priests participated in agriculture directly or indirectly. In order to understand the foundations of medieval Buddhism, therefore, it is essential to take into account the religious practices related to agriculture and the religious concepts defined by agricultural production.

Thaumaturgic thinking and a polytheistic outlook pervaded premodern agricultural life. Much as we in modern times depend on scientific technology, people in premodern times relied on magical ceremonies for an abundant harvest. They looked for a deific character and function in various natural and artificial entities and phenomena—for example, in the sun, moon, mountains, rivers, vegetation, trees, wind, and thunder; in the life cycle; in the power and tradition of the lord; and in fate and the like. Usually this is considered animism, in which deities are believed to reside in natural objects, or polytheism, in which numerous deities control various spaces. Although technology was, of course, a factor in premodern agriculture, it was thoroughly entwined with and overshadowed by thaumaturgy and polytheism. Medieval Japanese *shōen* society was no exception to this pattern.

Though there was great regional variety and complexity in medieval agricultural production and village conditions, the statements above held true everywhere. Compared to their counterparts in ancient times, medieval peasants enjoyed increased productivity through technological advances gained via experience and ingenuity. In that sense

ignorance declined in the medieval period. In the end, however, peasants remained in the thrall of thaumaturgy and polytheism. While in the ancient period peasants had been subordinate to wealthy families and thus lacked independence, in medieval times most agriculture was independently managed and peasants participated according to their own decisions and effort, if only on a small scale. It was precisely this independence and its vulnerability that attracted the average peasant to magic and polytheism. This is not to say, however, that medieval lords and peasants simply stagnated in primitive polytheism. Eventually they transcended these limitations and their grasp of spiritual matters became much more sophisticated.

#### BENEVOLENT AND MALEVOLENT DEITIES

Many annual religious observances in medieval times were related to the agricultural cycle, including rites of the new year, rice planting dances, supplications for rain, formulae for repelling insects and chasing birds from rice seedling beds, the wind festival, the fall harvest festival, and the like. Anthropologists have observed vestiges of these ceremonies in great number even now; they appear repeatedly in medieval documents and chronicles, and in literary and artistic works. These ceremonies, moreover, were not simply a form of thaumaturgic etiquette: it was believed that a deity or buddha actually heard the prayers of the supplicants. Buddhas and bodhisattvas, including Yakushi, Dainichi, Amida, Jizō, and Kannon, were thought to take the form of ancestral spirits and tutelary deities, and thus were worshiped as protective deities.

Not all deities were benevolent. Some inspired awe, on occasion becoming angry, going on rampages, and tormenting people. There were also demons who precipitated calamities and made the peasants' lives unbearable. In addition to dog gods, snake gods, foxes, demons, and other folk deities, there were also beings like the long-nosed Tengu that were widely popularized in Buddhism and in literature. The primary purpose of religious ceremonies and supplications was to assuage the deities' anger, to banish evil spirits, and to pray to the buddhas and deities for protection.

In spite of the large number of both new and old Buddhist sects in the medieval period, this inclusive belief in deities meant that earlier spirit worship continued to exert a strong influence. If the common expression "deities of heaven and earth" (*jingi* 神祇) included all deities—not only protective ones like ancestral spirits but evil spirits as well—then thaumaturgic beliefs and polytheism made deity veneration possible in all aspects of life, especially agriculture. It is incorrect,

therefore, to construe medieval veneration of deities (*jingi sūhai* 神祇崇拜) as Shinto (much less as modern State Shinto) in the narrow sense of a religious or political belief system, or as a continuation of primitive, ancient religious expressions.

#### POLYTHEISM IN NEW AND OLD BUDDHISM

The polytheism described above was found not only in the primitive emotional convictions of the local resident lords and peasants but, in various forms, in all of the medieval Buddhist sects and doctrines as well. This phenomenon was particularly clear in the sects of so-called Old Buddhism, dating from pre-Heian and early Heian times. These sects envisioned a world encompassing not only various buddhas and bodhisattvas but also benevolent spirits, heavenly deities, evil spirits, and demons. This in turn gave rise to each sect's metaphysics. Thus mandala, which in older forms of Buddhism were physical expressions of philosophy, were in the medieval era widely reproduced as objects of worship. Even the emphasis in some sects on faith in specific buddhas and bodhisattvas, such as Yakushi, Miroku, Monju, and Jizō, was premised on polytheistic beliefs. This polytheistic character becomes even more pronounced if we take into consideration the kami cults and the various schools of Shinto teachings (*shintō setsu* 神道説).

Such sects of Kamakura New Buddhism as the Zen and Lotus schools, though possessed of their respective doctrinal characteristics, showed the same polytheistic character. Of special interest were the *senju nenbutsu* 専修念仏 (exclusive *nenbutsu*) movements, promulgated by Hōnen and Shinran. These movements postulated a belief in or recognition of a single buddha, Amida, and would thus appear not to be polytheistic. They did not, however, actually *deny* the existence of the various deities and buddhas; these beings were acknowledged, but rejected in favor of Amida in consideration of people's limited capacities in the Final Age of the Dharma (*mappō* 末法). Hōnen's ideas of selection and exclusiveness thus presupposed a polytheistic outlook. Although at its extremes the *senju nenbutsu* teaching resembled monotheism (in, for example, its recognition of a single benevolent or absolute divinity and its rejection of other supernatural beings as false), it was not monotheistic, much less theistic in the modern sense, because of this admission that other deities exist. The medieval *senju nenbutsu* adherents engaged in intemperate actions like slandering deities, bodhisattvas, and buddhas (other than Amida) precisely because they believed in them. Their actions were still part of a polytheistic worldview. Thus, even though tendencies toward monotheism can be detected in all schools of medieval Buddhism in that they tended to concentrate belief in a single buddha, they all had a common polytheistic basis.

## THAUMATURGIC AND POLYTHEISTIC DOCTRINES

The true character of medieval Buddhism was not limited to magical and polytheistic concepts. Rather, it was within the state of tension caused by Buddhism's active and passive responses to such ideas that the doctrines and beliefs of the various sects existed. The responses, though of great variety, can be divided into two diametrically opposed types. One is an attitude entirely approving of thaumaturgy and magical formulae, of the multiple buddhas and heavenly deities in the Buddhist classics, and of magic and deities and buddhas in popular custom. This attitude was actively incorporated into doctrine, out of a belief in the immanent power of magic. Examples include various formulae to cure illness, pray for rain, exorcise demons, appeal for the defeat of one's enemy, forgive wrongdoings, and the like. It can also be seen in the prominence of Shinto thought in the doctrine of the Tendai and Shingon sects, and in the precept revivals in the Nara schools. Regardless of what the underlying doctrines might have been, in practical terms these tendencies expressed themselves in a widespread belief in the direct, immanent efficacy of magic and in its ability to coerce people through its mysterious power; in order to increase these effects all manner of buddhas, deities, demons, and spells were summoned up from the Buddhist scriptures and elsewhere.

The other, opposite tendency was to refuse to embrace and organize various buddhas, deities, and magical elements into belief systems. One example of this approach was that of the exclusive *nenbutsu*, mentioned above. In his exploration of the *muge no ichidō* 無碍の一道 (single path with no obstruction), Shinran said, "To the person of faith, the deities of heaven and the spirits of earth bow down in reverence; demons and heretics cannot obstruct their way." Though showing a polytheistic outlook, such an approach rejects thaumaturgic tendencies. At the same time, however, Shinran offered a concession, saying, "The practitioner of the *nenbutsu* is equal to Miroku," thus satisfying the desire for concrete benefit in this world. There are many differences even among the exclusive *nenbutsu* sects, and greater differences with the Zen and Nichiren sects, the latter of which concentrated heavily upon recitation of the *Lotus Sutra*. All forms of Kamakura New Buddhism, however, have in common the tendency to resist thaumaturgy.

## THE BASIS FOR THE RISE OF HERESIES

Thus, although thaumaturgy and polytheism were not inimical to the medieval outlook, as is sometimes thought, but were deeply rooted in the society, medieval Buddhism was rife with tension and dissent

regarding thaumaturgy and polytheism and with efforts to sublimate them. It was out of this dynamic that heretic and heterodox movements emerged. Such movements took various approaches, but a common one was to acknowledge the immediate power of magic; examples include the Tachikawa school of Shingon Buddhism and the Secret Teachings movement (*hiji bōmon* 秘事法門) in Shin Buddhism. Although the origins and lineages of these heretical doctrines can be traced to other schools and sects, it was medieval society's acceptance of thaumaturgic thought and formulae that provided the environment spawning such heresies. This does not, of course, completely explain the problem of heterodoxy; neither can it be attributed simply to the indiscriminate syncretizing of various sects' doctrines or to doctrinal misinterpretations. Insofar as popular religion demanded immediate, this-worldly results, the more that religious doctrine remained on a high, abstract plane the more that heretical and heterodox thought emerged to fill the resulting gap.

#### *Village Worship Halls and Religious Associations*

##### THE MEDIEVAL VILLAGE COMMUNAL ORGANIZATION

We have seen how in the medieval period the magical rites associated with polytheism formed an important element of the agricultural process. As agricultural production depended not only on the efforts of the individual but on communal village ties, agricultural rituals were generally performed as village rituals. Thus the religious lives of the peasants were delineated and controlled by the village community. For this reason the characteristic form of the Japanese medieval village was inevitably reflected in the religious organizations of peasants.

Before setting forth a general model of the medieval village, a cautionary note is in order. Depending on locale and time, the medieval village took many forms; furthermore, in all villages class and status divisions were comparatively complex. In early medieval times, and in less-developed regions of the country, the medieval village was characterized in general by the direct, comprehensive rule of local lords, with the lord, his family, and his retainers dominating both independent and dependent peasants. The dominant village pattern in such areas comprised scattered communities of a few houses; patriarchal rule was strong. Communal ties between the residents existed within the context of rule by local lords, and village communal organization was relatively weak. As time went on, especially in the more developed regions, wealthy peasant landholders established, and subsequently controlled, communal village organizations that incorporated the

other independent peasant classes.

Just as the layers of class and status were complex among the peasantry, so the self-governing village organizations (*sō* 惣) were not equal unions of all village residents. Nevertheless, there was in general a marked tendency for the peasants to band together in these communal organizations, so that although the local resident lords remained in power, direct, centralized control by them waned and their patriarchal rule over the dependent peasants eased. Residents tended to live in concentrated village communities while owning rights to plots of land scattered across several *shōen*.

The medieval village was of many types—the two types mentioned above (those controlled by resident lords and those led by communal organizations) and various intermediate forms—but taken together they can be characterized as follows. In any village there was a communal organization controlled either by the resident lord's family or by wealthy peasants. Village residents were thus organized in a hierarchical class structure. Generally it was the upper class of residents who held cultivation rights to land and enjoyed such privileges as membership in the various guilds (*za* 座). In a later section I will discuss the role of the resident lords; here I would first like to consider the village as a communal entity.

#### THE ESTABLISHMENT OF THE VILLAGE WORSHIP HALL

In the medieval village Buddhism was established on the pre-existing foundation of polytheism, reflected in a widespread belief in miracles, demons, and the like. Small village shrines and torii were erected on hillsides, in shady glens, and under ancient trees. In conjunction with these, Buddhist features like wayside chapels, stone buddhas, and hermitages appeared in the village landscape. Just as local deities and village tutelary shrines came into existence when rituals of deity veneration were linked with the village community, so too Buddhist chapels and hermitages became the locus of village communal activities and assumed the function of what might be called village worship halls (*sondō* 村堂).

As centers of village life, village worship halls served primarily as gathering places for villagers, more than as temples run by clerics. Their origins were various: some were originally built by local resident lords on sites believed to be sacred ground; some were founded by the lords as family temples; some were constructed by wandering recluses or members of religious confraternities as hermitages or religious practice halls (*dōjō* 道場); and some were established by the village communal organizations as hermitages for traveling monks asked to

reside there. Regardless of their origins, the reason they became village worship halls serving a communal village function was because communality had come to characterize the village. All the more reason, then, for such village worship halls to proliferate in the late medieval period, especially from the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries (though there were some in the Kinai area around Kyoto even at the beginning of the medieval era). The degree to which these halls functioned in the life of a village was a direct reflection of the extent of communal development in that village.

#### THE FUNCTION OF THE VILLAGE WORSHIP HALL

In these worship halls villagers participated actively in Buddhist ceremonies and also in the administration and management of village property. They held clearly defined rights as members, and established conventions pertaining to them. Usually the proceeds of a designated villager's paddy or forest land were used for the maintenance of the halls, although as the communal sense of unity solidified there were examples of villagers competing with one another to donate paddy land, however small, for that purpose. Particularly in the Kinai provinces around Kyoto such land donations surged in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. Village labor and monetary contributions were marshaled for incidental ceremonies, for the maintenance and rebuilding of the hall, for the casting of bells, and the like.

Regular Buddhist observances were carried out at the worship hall with villagers as the main participants. Usually a religious association or guild organized for this purpose would take charge of the ceremony. Some of the guilds became quite powerful, with permanent rights and privileges pertaining to the management of the worship hall. In some cases large guild organizations developed, with new and subordinate guilds associated with the original ones. Unlike village shrines, which typically did not have a permanent cleric in attendance, village worship halls and hermitages were usually staffed by a priest. Thus responsibility for their administration and maintenance did not fall entirely upon the villagers, as was the case with village shrines, whose guilds (*miyaza* 宮座) performed such tasks. Nonetheless, it is quite appropriate to refer to "temple guilds" (*jiza* 寺座) in the same sense as shrine guilds (*miyaza*). Just like the shrine guild and the village communal organization with their hierarchical memberships, temple guilds reflected the multilevel character of the village community, and were usually established by wealthy peasants holding special privileges. Such guilds became the core of the village community, the most important organs of self-government.



## RELIGIOUS CONFRATERNITIES AND ASSOCIATIONS

There were also bodies, called religious confraternities (*kōshu* 講衆) or associations (*kesshu* 結衆), that were organized around particular religious cults (including those of Kannon and Jizō), meditative practices, *nenbutsu*, and the like. These groups, while not taking on the core functions of the village community as did the shrine and temple guilds, nevertheless carried out certain community functions. They had roles to play in annual observances and in occasional ceremonies like funeral and memorial services. These groups were, strictly speaking, private in nature with jointly held property that was internally administered. They were, however, integral to the village community to the extent that they performed special functions of which individual villagers were incapable.

## THE ROLE OF THE BUDDHIST CLERGY IN VILLAGES

In the medieval village the temple priest, though a cleric, was thoroughly incorporated into village life. Priests in mountain villages often worked a few plots of land themselves; clerics commonly bought and sold property. Likewise, medieval tales tell of priests with families who differed little from the laity in the secular lives they led. Similarly, though today there are no physical traces of it, there were some medieval *shōen* villages with temples boasting numerous pagodas, halls, and subtemples. The clerics attached to even moderately prosperous temples of this type are recorded in *shōen* documents as holding rights to paddy land at about the level of wealthy peasants.

Be that as it may, priests were, after all, clerics, so no matter how familiar a feature they might have been their role in the village was by definition a special one. In the early medieval village of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, it is not clear to what extent the priest participated in the ordinary functions of village life. In the latter half of the medieval period—that is, from the fourteenth or fifteenth centuries—many cases can be cited of priests who functioned as regular members of the village community even as they provided religious services. Moreover, to the extent that priests had literacy and learning, which ordinary villagers lacked, their role was significant. Thus there are many examples of priests' names appearing as the scribe on guild regulations and village chronicles. Finally, by relating stories (*setsuwa* 説話) of other provinces or countries and by conveying novel arts and objects to villagers, priests acted as vital purveyors of culture to the otherwise closed world of the village.

## VILLAGE COMMUNAL ORGANIZATIONS AND RELIGION

As was noted earlier, rural temples in medieval times did not all start out as village worship halls and hermitages with close ties to the community. Such establishments only appeared after the emergence of village community organizations. Even in the late medieval period there were numerous temples that, as elite landowning establishments, were unrelated to and even at odds with the peasantry. Some, although supported by the religious faith of the peasants, were without close ties to the village community (and were even ostracized by it) because they had failed to adapt to the spiritual environment of the area. The doctrinal expansion of sects and the continuity of individual and group cults were inevitably dependent on the relationship of the temple to the village community.

The sects of so-called Kamakura New Buddhism took root in villages during the fourteenth century, just as self-governing movements were becoming active there. Relations between the two proceeded in a somewhat meandering fashion, but in the process of contact the various sects' beliefs and structures were by necessity shaped less by the teachings of the sect's founder than by the realities of the village community. For example, the various forms of the Jōdo Shin sect of Buddhism, far from opposing contemporary secular notions, emphasized the need to adhere to local ways. This in turn gave rise to practices that came to be recognized as heretical, such as establishing the two equinox periods as a time for *nenbutsu* retreats, and making funerals and veneration of the dead the core of religious practice.<sup>1</sup> It was also around this time that the issue arose of whether or not to worship the deities, and that homiletic handbooks were produced to clarify these issues.

Village religious organizations were behind the rapid development of the *Ikkō ikki* 一向一揆 movement in the late medieval period. Rennyo saw "the priest, the elder, the headman" of the village organization as pivotal figures in village proselytization. In the spread of the Lotus movement, some villages became exclusively Lotus. Although we should not uniformly equate such sectarian organizations with village communal organizations, and although we must question exactly how congenial the teachings of the sects were to the various classes of peasants, it is nevertheless worthy of note that these sects showed great interest in the communal organizations and in their power to control and regulate, and demonstrated great skill in using them for

<sup>1</sup> In the fourteenth century, Kakunyo criticized these as heterodox acts because they attempt to generate merit for deceased relatives, deviating from the idea that Amida Buddha is the source of all merit.

the purpose of proselytization.

The hierarchical structure of the medieval village community is significant in this consideration of village religion. To the extent that control of the communal organization was held by privileged wealthy peasants, there was always the danger that religion would be restricted by the organization's regulations, and would be subject to class oppression in the organization's name. Thus the class character of the medieval village community was the greatest limiting factor on the religious organizations. Led by the wealthier members of the community, they were not purely peasant organizations, though they did possess certain peasant features. Moreover, they were vulnerable to the interests of their local warrior and peasant leaders, and were utilized in late sixteenth-century battles among the domainal lords.

Although village temples and hermitages were not quite the same as the village worship halls, in the late medieval period they too had become the locus of the religious leagues (*shūkyō ikki* 宗教一揆) and showed many of the same tendencies. That is, they not only fulfilled many of the same community functions as the village worship halls, but at the same time they also kept detailed sutra-chanting records and offered prayers for domainal lords and other leading warriors. By casting their lot with warrior leaders, they determined the fate of the medieval village community in many cases. Prohibition placards, which domainal lords granted villages as rewards for prayers of support, may have guaranteed the peace of the village to some extent, but they allowed the lords to gain control of the community and conscript laborers and foot soldiers.

### *Resident Lords and Temples*

#### THE RELIGION OF LOCAL RESIDENT LORDS

Medieval warriors differed from those of the early modern age most fundamentally in that they were local lords residing in villages (*zaichi ryōshu*). The term *ryōshu* 領主 (lord) did not signify simply the possession of land: the word itself originally referred to one who controlled peasants and land locally, through the exercise of physical power. There were many levels of such warriors, ranging from great local families whose holdings extended across provinces or districts down to poor warriors who only held a few plots of land. The most typical was the *jitō* 地頭 (resident magistrate), who, in the early medieval period, controlled the village through his family and retainers. *Jitō* usually traced their origins to the eleventh- or twelfth-century village

founders, and were sometimes called “founding resident lords” (*konpon ryōshu* 根本領主) or “developer resident lords” (*kaihatsu ryōshu* 開発領主). In other words, they did not simply reside in the area but were long indigenous to the village and closely identified with its origins. With the vicissitudes of time many such warriors acquired new lands through various obligations and sometimes even moved to their new holdings, thus diminishing their connection to the village. Nevertheless, “warriors of the land” (*kokujin* 国人 and *jizamurai* 地侍), the most typical late medieval warrior, continued to live in the village supported by their own arable. Thus the local, village character of the warrior was not completely lost until the beginning of the early modern period, when warriors were removed from their lands and placed in domainal castles.

As one can easily deduce from this, medieval warriors were not substantively different from peasants insofar as their religious sensibilities were shaped by thaumaturgic thought and polytheism. They too believed in the efficacy of magical ceremonies to produce a good harvest; they too worshiped and revered the buddhas and deities. The differences that did exist in their religious demands were related to their concerns as members of the resident lord class, with duties to levy taxes on peasants and collect yearly dues and fees, and, as warriors, to expose themselves to danger in battles and raids.

#### WARRIOR FAMILY TEMPLES

Much as the peasant community placed various demands on tutelary deities and the village worship hall, warriors put their faith in their ancestral deities and family temples (*ujidera* 氏寺). As a rule, warriors of the early medieval period formed stable bands governed by patriarchal, familial ties (the so-called *sōryō* 惣領 system). Around the fourteenth century these warrior bands began to dissolve, and henceforth province-wide rule by domainal lords and prominent local families gradually became the norm. Ordinary warriors formed territorial alliances in bands and leagues. At about the same time, however, the *sōryō* system was widely reinstated in a relatively relaxed form as consanguineous leagues. Individual warriors, from domainal lords to village residents, formed their own hierarchical bonds. Thus familial warrior bands of one sort or another characterized the entire medieval age, as did the cult of the tutelary deity (*ujigami* 氏神) as the religious linchpin of these familial bands or clans. The *ujigami* was the ancestral deity of the clan and the protective deity of its lands; accordingly, it was the deity that ensured the continuation of the clan’s existence as a unified, landholding entity. Family temples had approximately the

same function as these tutelary deities, and were widely erected throughout the land.

Aristocrats had built *ujidera* starting in the Heian period; these included Kōfuku-ji of the Fujiwara family, Jingo-ji of the Wake, Hokkai-ji of the Hino, and the Rokushō-ji (the six *ujidera* of the imperial family in Kyoto). It was not until the latter half of the Kamakura period, however, that warriors in the provinces began to build such temples; before this there were of course warriors who embraced Buddhism, but their expressions of faith did not include erecting *ujidera*.

The warrior embrace of Buddhism is often dated to the twelfth-century wars between the Taira and the Minamoto clans. If not to the extent purported in legend, it is nevertheless true that these conflicts provided an occasion for the warriors to realize the impermanence of this world and the seriousness of their own wrongdoings. But there was also a social dimension to this realization: some took the tonsure in shock over the anomaly between their ambition as resident lords and the disdain they suffered as petty officials from the country. For them the life of a monk meant putting aside lordly ambitions to become wandering mendicants. Separated from their band, secluded in the mountains, they gave themselves over to an itinerant existence.

Strictly speaking, taking the Buddhist vows meant relinquishing the family headship and going into seclusion. In time, however, it became a form of retirement—warriors and the widows of warriors, after passing the office of family head to their heirs, did not depart from home but lived semi-secular lives as novice clerics. Building memorial chapels in their family residences, they lived out their days consoling the spirits of ancestors or spouse. Such memorial chapels were one very important prototype of warrior *ujidera*.

The establishment of warrior family temples, therefore, provided retired warrior-monks with a means of maintaining their secular status as resident lords, though in a different form. Their establishment was also an indication of the rise in the warriors' social and cultural position insofar as it showed an improved understanding of Buddhist doctrine beyond simple veneration of deities. Usually, however, family temple rules and regulations emphasized praying for the enlightenment of the ancestors and for the prosperity and success of the clan and its descendants. In that sense, temple worship did not differ much from the older cult of tutelary deities. As can be seen from the fact that the establishment of *ujidera* increased during the fourteenth century, a period in which the family headship system (*sōryōsei*) was somewhat unsettled, their primary purpose was to promote the unity of the warrior clan.

## BENEFACTORS AND THE ESTABLISHMENT OF SECTS

When warrior family temples were established, a local monk would be invited to become the resident priest and serve as founder of the temple. Sometimes an eminent monk-teacher of the local priest would be named as nominal founder. The sectarian affiliation of most family temples tended to be Pure Land or Zen. Depending on the period and the region, the Lotus and Ji sects were also well represented. Family temples were not only important loci for the provincial development of the new Buddhist sects but also sites of transmission of culture from the capital to the provinces.

In the final analysis, however, family temples were dependent on the house of the warrior who established the temple. The warrior was its chief benefactor, and sometimes even named himself the temple's founder. In most cases the temple's lands and buildings were contributed or subsidized by the warrior-benefactor, who also had the right to administer and dispose of the temple's property. Since the *ujidera* functioned primarily as the warrior clan's memorial temple, its priest was charged with praying for the continuance and prosperity of the clan. He may also have proselytized among peasants of the area, but socially and economically he was under the patronage of the warrior family. Indeed, it was not unusual for the temple priest himself to be a member of the warrior-benefactor's clan.

## THE ROLE OF FAMILY TEMPLES

Regardless of their sectarian affiliation, family temples were Buddhist entities subsumed within the *sōryō* system or resident lord system. They not only performed Buddhist ceremonies for their warrior clans but also ministered to the local peasants (although, as parts of the *shōen* system, the temples at the same time exercised control over the peasantry under the guise of guidance and spiritual protection). For this reason, the type of village community worship halls discussed in the previous section were less common in locales with *ujidera*. Warrior family temples fulfilled the function of the worship halls, and were perceived as religious institutions simultaneously embodying the traditional authority of the resident lord.

The central function of family temples was the performance of *kitō* 祈禱, highly ritualized prayers for generally worldly benefits. This became an important contributing factor to the increased ritualization of the Kamakura Buddhist sects, to which members of the warrior class converted. The original spirit of New Buddhism, which emphasized renunciation of the world and the search for truth in austerity, regressed as the movement's dependence on the *shōen* authorities

grew. In their attempts to answer the lords' thaumaturgic needs through the performance of *kitō*, certain New Buddhist sects absorbed elements of deity veneration and took on a more esoteric mien.

Family temples could lead a somewhat unstable existence. Their sectarian affiliations could change on the whim of the warrior-benefactor. If a warrior house suffered the fate of collapse or extinction, its family temple might close entirely or be revived as a local temple under the control of village residents. In some cases such temples were taken over as *ujidera* by other warriors. As long as feudal society continued, however, the family temple endured in form, and could be found even in early modern times in the form of memorial temples (*bodaiji* 菩提寺) and supplication temples (*kiganji* 祈願寺).

#### RELIGION AND *SHŌEN* OVERLORD AUTHORITY

The *shōen* overlord (*shōen ryōshu* 莊園領主) may be distinguished from the local resident lord (*zaichi ryōshu*) in that the former was of extremely high status and authority, being a member of one of the elite groups or factions that together ruled Japan (*kenmon seika* 權門勢家). Usually the *shōen* overlords resided in cities (Kyoto or Nara) and collectively exerted influence in traditional spheres of authority including government, religion, and culture. They held landed estates throughout the country, and were served by the *shōen* residents. The *shōen* overlord held the highest authority on an estate not by virtue of controlling the area personally and ruling its residents directly through armed force, as was the case with the resident lords, but rather by virtue of his high political position and great influence. Thus it was their *perceived* authority that was of greatest significance. Control of estates did not, of course, rest solely on perceived authority, for armed force was sometimes necessary to control peasant residents, and it was for that purpose that members of the *zaichi ryōshu* class were appointed *shōen* officials. Control could also be exerted by calling on forces of the imperial governor or deputies of the provincial warrior ruler. In the end, the *shōen* overlord ruled over the residents, including warriors, peasants, merchants, and the like, in the role of higher authority.

In medieval times, all authorities to some extent embodied a religious quality. The *shōen* overlord's authority was no exception. The collective political authority of the aristocracy was backed by Buddhist law (*buppō* 仏法), which spiritually protected the ruler's law (*ōbō* 王法). In the imperial house there were imperial prayer temples, and great temples and shrines were designated protectors of the state. Likewise in aristocratic houses there were tutelary deities and family temples. Moreover, the great temples and shrines themselves served as *shōen*

overlords, and in such cases it was especially difficult to separate the lord's authority from religious authority. Such great temples were all of the Old Buddhist exoteric-esoteric (*kenmitsu* 顯密) sects. Thus all *shōen* were related in some way to the *kenmitsu* sects, directly or through an aristocratic *shōen* lord. The exceptions to this rule were the *shōen* under Rinzai Zen temples (particularly the central Gozan group under shogunal protection), which in the latter half of the medieval period were added to the ranks of *shōen* overlords.

#### TEMPLE ESTATES

In general, authority over *shōen* was structured in a layered manner, divided between elites holding central proprietary (*honke* 本家) rights and overlord (*ryōke* 領家) rights. Very commonly, if the imperial family held the central proprietary rights, then the overlord rights were held by great temples like Enryaku-ji on Mt. Hiei, Tō-ji in Kyoto, Kongōbu-ji on Mt. Kōya, or imperial memorial sites and supplication temples like the six Rikushō-ji temples in Kyoto. In cases where the Fujiwara regents held the central proprietary rights, overlord rights frequently went to family temples like Kōfuku-ji in Nara or Hōjō-ji in Kyoto. Ultimate rights to the control of an estate's management and administration, known as the *shōmuken* 莊務権, might be lodged in either the central proprietor or the overlord. When temples held such rights, their control of the *shōen* was more rigorous than that of aristocrats. The term "temple *shōen*" refers to any *shōen* over which authority was exerted in some form by a temple, but the most typical was the *shōen* where the temple held the management and administrative rights.

In the case of temple *shōen*, the resident officials who directly administered *shōen* affairs were appointed by temple priests. The *shōen* arable was designated to cover the expenses of this or that Buddhist ceremony. Landlord rights to it were parceled out and designated for the priests' income. Special materials needed for temple observances were exacted from the peasants as a tax; also plots of land for that purpose were standardized and organized. Thus the entire *shōen* was dedicated to the business of the Buddha, peasants were subordinate to the temple, and peasants' corvee was considered service to the Buddha. By the same token, any opposition to the overlord was seen as inviting the Buddha's retribution. The top layer of peasants, moreover, were given special statuses and titles (*yoriodo* 寄人, *kugonin* 供御人, *jinin* 寺人, *jinnin* 神人) indicating service to the deities and buddhas. Thus the peasants, the very center of the village community, were incorporated into the resident lord's control structure through the medium of religion.



While religious authority was exercised institutionally and on a daily basis, it was invoked more directly in emergency situations, such as when peasants rose in opposition to the *shōen* authorities. The temple priest or shrine attendant might appear before the gullible peasants bearing the features of a demon, fingering rosary beads, and uttering curses. This could be accompanied by violent, threatening behavior on the part of the priests of the main temple. On occasion even the death penalty was carried out in the name of the Buddha.

#### BRANCH TEMPLES AND SHRINES

The peasantry's polytheistic and thaumaturgic beliefs were thus quite convenient for the *shōen* rulers; they were also convenient for the *shōen* overlords of the Old Buddhist schools in their regulation of cults and sects. Even before the estates existed peasants enshrined numerous deities and buddhas in the village. Under resident lord rule as well they would build chapels for worship or for the memorialization of sudden good omens, quite independently of the overlord. Particularly venerated were deities and buddhas associated with miraculous visions and oracles, in which the supernatural beings claimed—in plausible-sounding legends—to be manifestations of the buddha or bodhisattva of the estate's governing temple. Particularly appealing were the buddhas and protective deities of such *shōen*-owning temples and shrines as Hachiman, Kasuga, and Hie. Priests from overlord temples tended to be assigned to small temples on temple estates, so that a linkage between the former and the latter was established in both religious and human terms. In this way hermitages and worship halls on the *shōen* were incorporated into the overlord temple's sphere of influence and eventually assumed the status of branch temples. Likewise, the *ujidera* provided a means to control rebellious resident lords to some extent through the influence of religion. To the religious overlord, branch temples or shrines were extremely important instruments of rule, and were seen, together with their affiliated lands, as a form of property or wealth (and are even registered as such on medieval *shōen* land rosters).

This control that the great temples exercised through their branch temples applied not only to temple estates, but also, to a certain extent, to the estates of the aristocracy. Aristocratic families, as discussed above, had close ties to the major temples of the *kenmitsu* sects, and even granted the right to certain taxes to the temples on their estates. Thus every *shōen* village throughout the country was enmeshed in an intricate network of main and branch temples and shrines. The existence of this network was a central element in the exercise of

authority by the great religious institutions. Separate from all this, however, were the temples and religious meeting halls of Pure Land, Zen, and the other new sects of Buddhism which, unsurprisingly, were persistently banned from the temple estates.

#### THE RELIGIOUS RATIONALE FOR ESTATE RULE

Given such circumstances, the *honji suijaku* 本地垂迹 theory that buddhas manifest themselves in the form of kami was most expedient for estate rulers, since it linked indigenous natural beliefs with the teachings of Buddhism. Leaving aside doctrinal considerations for the moment, we should note that historically speaking the development of *honji suijaku* thought in Japan coincided with the establishment of the *shōen* system in the tenth through twelfth centuries. This indicates that its practical application was in response to the social and political necessity of legitimizing *shōen* rule.

In the context of *honji suijaku* thought it was an easy step from the peasants' and warriors' simple belief in and fear of the local deities to their awe of and prostration before the *shōen* overlord's authority. Branch temple priests on the estates created legendary accounts (*engi* 縁起) of temples and shrines that combined the mystery of the main temple's doctrine with the historical traditions of the *shōen*; the message conveyed was that the simple, original religious leanings of the peasants and resident lords were the same in nature as reverence toward overlord authority, and that there was a historical and doctrinal justification for peasant service to the lord. This was, objectively and historically speaking, the social role served by such teachings, even though they may have been propounded in a spirit of goodwill and pious faith by priests, peasants, and warriors. This is not to say, however, that rural warriors thirsty for power and peasants unable to endure the harsh reality of their lives in all cases remained bound to these doctrines.

To the extent that *honji suijaku* thought was tied to *shōen* rule, it functioned like a spell offering religious support to the ruling order. Those distressed over social disjunctions or opposed to the ruling establishment sought a way of thinking that would offer release from this spell. Abandoning magical activities, they focused on specific religious practices and faith in a single buddha; this allowed them to overcome the simple polytheistic beliefs that inspired awe in the *shōen* system and to escape the efforts of the overlord sects to reinforce their authority through the promotion of ritualism and thaumaturgic thought. The exclusive *nenbutsu* of Hōnen and Shinran, Dōgen's "sitting only" Zen meditation (*shikan taza* 只管秘坐), and Nichiren's recita-

tion of the *Lotus Sutra* title were each distinct practices, but they all shared the singlemindedness and exclusivity characteristic of Kamakura New Buddhism. All offered “a single path with no obstruction” (*muge no ichidō*). From early in the medieval period New Buddhism was rapidly embraced by the lower orders of society, including the warriors, and religious movements rose up in opposition to traditional authorities. When this religious background is taken into account, the rise of similar movements in society at large seems inevitable.

The doctrinal response of the Old Buddhist sects to the efflorescence of New Buddhism was to condemn their “singleminded and exclusive” approach as exclusionary and narrow-minded and aggressively to promote *honji suijaku* thought. The *nenbutsu* movements and Zen in particular were criticized for “nonworship of the deities” (*jingi fuhai* 神祇不拝). Internally, the older Buddhist sects put proportionately more emphasis on Shinto thought and also widely adopted the *nenbutsu* as a thaumaturgic practice.

All of this occurred against the backdrop of a long tradition in Japan of polytheistic teachings in the kami cults and cross-sectarian studies in Buddhism. Dissent and sectarian differences were generally tolerated. New syncretic doctrines sprung up in great number, and the distinction between orthodoxy and heterodoxy was often unclear. In such a climate a fundamental opposition to the social structures of the *shōen* system could easily arise.

#### BRANCH TEMPLES AND THE DECLINE OF ESTATE SYSTEM RULE

The political and social influence of *shōen* overlords waned in the late medieval period, rendering elite rationales for rule inoperative. At hermitages and branch temples on estates, village communal activity flourished. As the resident lords' control of the villages strengthened, the *shōen* temples' retention of thaumaturgic and polytheistic beliefs made it easy for them to act as vehicles for the simple, immediate demands of warriors and peasants. Even temples of the same sect sometimes took on different roles, some serving warrior families or functioning as supplication temples for continued warrior prosperity, and others serving as worship halls where village ceremonies were performed. Regardless of their sectarian affiliations or status as branch temples, they served to support the polytheism and thaumaturgy that were fundamental to medieval religion. Thus it was not a difficult step for warriors and peasants to change to other sects that supported their demands more actively. Thus the stage was set for the *Ikkō ikki* and the Lotus movement.

*Cities and Temples*

## KENMON CITIES

The medieval Japanese city had a singular place in *shōen* society. “Singular” in this case does not mean heterogeneous and thus extraneous—cities were the central nodes of the entire *shōen* social system. The only real cities of this period were Kyoto, Nara, and Kamakura, each with its own characteristics. They did not fit any of the premodern urban models: capital of an ancient autocratic state, castle town of a feudal lord, free city of merchants, or temple city at the gates of a large religious institution. Though all three had certain characteristics of these paradigms, none could be primarily defined as such. They did, however, share one salient characteristic: they were the site of residence of the various elites (*kenmon* 権門), the authorities and rulers at the top of the *shōen* system. Kyoto, of course, was the home of the aristocratic elites, while some of the great religious establishments were in Nara. Kamakura was the base of the warrior elites in the first half of the medieval period. In the political system of the day there were no higher authorities than these. Thus these cities, home to the elites, can be called *kenmon* cities.

By extension, these cities were also centers of government; gathering points for the various great houses and their branch families, retainers, and subordinates; ultimate collection points for *shōen* taxes; distribution centers; nodes of transport and communication; and cultural centers for the various classes. In the medieval period, the ultimate locus of economic and cultural productivity and creative vitality was the village; cities, however, were the points of cultural and economic concentration and exchange. Therefore, although cities were in a sense parasitic, they exerted authority as the centers of the entire system.

The influence of the cities on the development of medieval Buddhism was manifold, but it should first be noted that cities in and of themselves had a religious significance. As such terms for capital like “imperial stronghold,” “imperial capital,” and “imperial residence” suggest, they were considered sacred places. Great monasteries like Enryaku-ji and Tō-ji were designated as protectors of the imperial capital, and formulated ideologies that conveyed this overwhelming authority. Nara, home of two of the greatest temples, Tōdai-ji and Kōfuku-ji, was called the “southern capital” to set it on a par with Kyoto. In Kamakura, as the shogunate became firmly established and then expanded its power, the great temples tied to shogunal power acquired great authority.

Thus most Buddhist temples in the cities were closely linked to some authority. Furthermore, city authorities forbade proselytizing by groups like the early *nenbutsu* movements and Zen, which lacked respect for established political authority. Cities were avoided by Buddhist figures who truly sought to transcend worldly authority. On the other hand, it was precisely because of the great ideological significance of the cities that the Lotus sect leaders Nichiren and Nichizō operated primarily in Kamakura and Kyoto in their efforts to promulgate the true dharma to the authorities.

#### CITY PEOPLE OF CULTURE AND THE BUDDHIST CLERGY

Medieval cities, as political centers and home of the elites, were populated by two main categories of people: the lineage groups comprising the elites, and the organized groups of people of various statuses who rendered them service or were subordinate to them. The former included members of the imperial family, the regent's family, retired emperors and aristocrats, the shogunal house, and mid- to low-ranking aristocrats and officials who served the elites as scribes and functionaries. The latter included merchants and craftsmen originally affiliated with various government bureaus and subsequently placed under the control of specific elites. Also included in this group were warriors outside of the shogunal house, their retainers and servants from the provinces, and the lowest-ranking subordinates like strong men, ox herders, and menial servants. The status of these subordinates differed, but all were tied in some way to the lineage organizations of one or another elite entity, whether aristocratic, religious, or military.

The main characteristic of city dwellers was the fact that they lacked class solidarity or ties based on geography or kinship, and simply lived as individuals in close physical proximity. The *kenmom* cities lacked the communal organizations characteristic of agricultural villages, and did not yet possess strong neighborhood units of self-governance. And of course they were not city-states, as were found in ancient Greece and Rome. Individuals were in a hierarchical relationship of subordination insofar as they served the elites; moreover, the relationship was not always a stable one, particularly in the case of those serving under the temple and aristocratic elites. Middle- and low-ranking aristocrats and officials supported by *shōen* tax proceeds vacillated between prosperity and poverty and, though relatively free of social bonds, were constantly threatened by their relative isolation.

A good portion of city residents were in service to shrines and temples, but some were priests with no particular institutional affiliations.

This prominent clerical presence was to be expected in a city like Nara, dominated as it was by the two major temples, Tōdai-ji and Kōfuku-ji, along with their affiliated families, branch temples and shrines. The same can be said for Kyoto, where for centuries major temples like Tō-ji had been imperially designated spiritual protectors of the state, and where the imperial and regent houses had their family temples, like the six Rikushō-ji. There were also temples that had developed out of memorial chapels, along with great monasteries. These temples had offices that administered their institutional affairs, and had at their command numerous functionaries both high and low. Thus they differed in no way from the secular elites in their organization of power. Temples away from Kyoto, like Enryaku-ji, established branches in the city or its environs where retired aristocrat-monks lived, served by low-ranking functionaries.

In Kamakura, too, temples of the *kenmitsu* sects were built with shogunal patronage, but under the auspices of the Hōjō regents there was also construction of *nenbutsu*, Zen, and Ritsu temples. Particularly from the time of Hōjō Tokiyori (1227–1263) the shogunate made great efforts to invite Zen priests, and the result was the Kamakura line of major Zen temples (Kamakura *gozan* 五山).

Temples and clerics associated with powerful families made up an important part of the cities' religious establishments. But in addition to them there lived in the cities many religious recluses or holy men leading more worldly lives. Many laymen in old age or amid declining fortunes took novice's vows and retired partially from the world. In all, there were a substantial number of city residents clad in monk's robes.

Middle- and low-ranking aristocrats, government officials, and warriors, together with monks and holy men, comprised the urban cultured class. In order to serve the political elites, work at the imperial court, or study Buddhism, some degree of learning was necessary. High-ranking aristocrats supported scholars, artists, and performers out of personal interest; likewise, the court, aristocratic mansions, and temples became the setting for scholarly lectures and debates and for artistic and literary performances. Thus it was mid- to low-ranking aristocrats and clergy, distinct from the commoners, who constituted the cultured, learned stratum of city dwellers. They played a complex role in the efflorescence of medieval Buddhism: for the most part they had only studied Buddhism as an academic subject, but some among them were scholar-priests and ascetics highly accomplished in traditional learning and classical aristocratic culture. They enhanced Buddhist doctrines and the rhetoric of learning by creating poetry,

essays, stories, and legendary accounts of temples. Their broad learning together with their social and class background ensured the continuity of sectarian syncretic learning.

This group had a tendency to be introspective and somewhat isolated. In contrast to the straightforward, practical religious attitude characteristic of the simple, rustic peasants, these refined city people could delve deeply into the human condition with subtle intellectual speculation. Some of their efforts went no further than limited, individual introspection, but in other cases they attempted to grasp historical and social contradictions broadly and to formulate truths appropriate for the age. As city dwellers living at the center of medieval society, they were uniquely suited to such speculation. They helped remove the veil from the deep introspection that was part of medieval Buddhism.

#### CITY COMMONERS AND TEMPLES

City commoners also had close ties to Buddhist temples. The *kenmon* cities, as described above, were home to large numbers of the subordinates and affiliates of the elites, as well as to merchants and craftsmen. In addition, there was a continuous stream of visitors to Kyoto from provincial estates transporting *shōen* taxes and supplying labor, not to mention the retainers and servants of warriors in Kyoto. Traveling merchants, beggars, thieves, entertainers, and outcasts also congregated in cities like Kyoto. Major temples that were the equal of the great aristocratic houses, as well as temples connected to such houses, played an important role as patrons in the formation of this class of commoners.

Merchants and craftsmen constituted a substantial portion of the urban commoner class and were typically organized into guilds. Such guilds were usually under the patronage of the great aristocratic houses, but there were also many with religious patrons. In particular, guilds of carpenters and artists specializing in Buddhist images and paintings—people essential to the construction and decoration of the magnificent temples—were under the control of specific Buddhist institutions. And among the various performers' guilds under Shinto shrine patronage were some that also had close ties as ritual performers to Buddhist temples.

Apart from such status relationships and social organizations, temples also played a major role in the economic life and culture of ordinary urban commoners. Some gathered at temples for religious observances, while merchants and entertainers of every type engaged in their trades at temple gates, as did beggars, outcasts, and the handicapped.

As the *shōen* system declined in the late medieval period, temples could no longer exercise influence over commoners as *shōen* overlords. Nevertheless, with the widespread use of currency, they adjusted well to economic change. City temples both large and small accumulated wealth through cash submissions in lieu of *shōen* taxes in kind, collection of the commissariat tax, and, in some cases, moneylending and schemes like financing vessels in the Ming trade. Some clerics proficient in management served as *shōen* officials. Many temples practiced usury, much like the brewers and warehousemen, and repeatedly sustained attacks by peasant leagues demanding debt amnesties in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries.

#### NEIGHBORHOOD WORSHIP HALLS AND VARIOUS RELIGIOUS CULTS

What were the characteristics of Buddhism as practiced by city residents? In Kyoto during the late Heian period the residents were drawn not only to esoteric cults that employed magic and miracles but also to the *nenbutsu*. The latter was, in general, a clamorous and incantatory practice. Even after the beginning of the Kamakura period the situation did not greatly change, and although the exclusive *nenbutsu* practice spread widely, various cults promising profit in this world through repetitive rituals persisted. And, as before, practices like *den-gaku* 田楽 performances and *nenbutsu* street dancing occasionally escalated into an atmosphere of collective frenzy.

Amid all this, however, a new residential pattern was taking shape in the cities. The term *machi* 町 is said to have originated in the name of the neighborhood Kuriyamachi (“kitchen neighborhood”), the area of Kyoto where officials and aristocrats resided in the Heian period. (This area also contained kitchens, inns, storehouses, and shops in service to the imperial palace.) The term *machi* gradually evolved from its original meaning to designate certain major north-south avenues bustling with commercial activity. This development is closely related to the evolution of the lower stratum of city dwellers into independent merchants and craftsmen, although they remained subordinate in social status. Here and there along the most bustling of the avenues were neighborhood worship halls ministering to the faith of the commoners. Temples with ancient lineages like Kōdō (Gyōgan-ji), Rokkakudō (Chōhō-ji), Rokuharamitsu-ji, Senbonshakadō (Daihōon-ji), and Inabayakushidō (Byōdō-ji) took on in this period the character of such worship halls. Kiyomizu-dera in eastern Kyoto and Seiryō-ji in the west, along with Gion and Kitano Shrines, flourished in this role. Even as aristocratic family temples like Hosshō-ji, Hōjō-ji, and Rengeō-in disappeared completely after destruction by fire, lacking as



they did a means of support, neighborhood worship halls when burnt were soon rebuilt through donations from wealthy merchants, collections conducted by wandering holy men, and small contributions by large numbers of people.

Neighborhood temples commonly featured cults to bodhisattvas like Kannon, Jizō, and Yakushi, and were characterized by a focus on this-worldly benefits. These cults were yet another medieval manifestation of the thaumaturgic thought and polytheism that originated in an earlier time, and tended not to reflect the teachings of a specific sect or doctrine. Location in cities, at the center of *shōen* society, was their common characteristic, and indeed a particularly motley assortment of cults abounded in urban areas. Furthermore, cults catered to the city dwellers' longing for prosperity and wealth. Lacking the peasant's direct access to food sources, city people struggled along on their own, fearing the worst and praying for good fortune.

The neighborhood worship hall not only bustled with the activity of devotees and drop-ins, but their members formed religious associations, held memorial services, and contributed land and cash. Out of these associations came distinctive rituals, hymns of praise, and legends of Kannon, Jizō, and other bodhisattvas created by learned people, both clerical and lay, and by wandering holy men. Religious associations also sponsored artistic performances, including *nenbutsu* dancing, linked verse, *dengaku* 田楽, and *sarugaku* 猿楽.

From the late Kamakura period well into the fourteenth century, the religious meeting halls of the Ji sect, the Ikkō sect, and others lent a certain fixed form to the religious experience of the city commoners. In Kyoto these included the meeting halls at Shijō (Konren-ji), Rokujō (Kangikō-ji), Ichiya (Konkō-ji), Shichijō (Konkō-ji), and Reizan (Shōbō-ji). All of these, like the Kōdō and the Rokkakudō mentioned earlier, while reflecting the characteristics of the *kenmon* city, were predicated on the aspirations of the lower stratum of city residents, and thus represented a new order.

#### THE RELIGION OF THE TOWNSPEOPLE

During the latter half of the medieval period the merchants and craftsmen were flourishing independently and defining their own lives, mainly as residents of neighborhoods rather than as subordinates of elites. The old order based on rule by aristocratic families and government officials was fading. This was particularly true after the Ōnin War, when neighborhoods became largely self-administered. The word *machishū* 町衆, or *chōshū*, refers to city residents under the leadership of wealthy, moneylending merchants, like brewers and

warehouse, and connotes residents of neighborhoods rather than subordinates of aristocratic houses, the shogunate, and religious institutions.

At the same time, however, the upper stratum of the city commoners—the brewers and warehousemen—were a major economic pillar of the Muromachi shogunate, and were, moreover, parasitically attached to the *shōen* economy in the period of its decline. Moreover, with the late medieval decline of the Ji sect, which had flourished in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, the wealthy townspeople tended to associate more with the Rinzai Zen sect, the major temples of which were under shogunal protection.

But of all the religious affiliations of city people in the post-Ōnin period, it is the Lotus sect that most deserves our attention. From the late Kamakura period, when Lotus proselytizing began in Kyoto, its ties to the merchant class were marked, and it was upon this foundation of support from the townspeople in neighborhood blocks that the later *Hokke ikki* 法華一揆 (Lotus leagues) developed. The bond between neighborhood residents and the Lotus sect signified a clear break with the *kenmitsu* sects of the great aristocratic houses and temples, and a conversion to the ranks of sects that actually opposed the older forms of Buddhism. It also bespeaks the support of religion by the self-governing neighborhood block. In that setting city commoners functioned not as mere peripheral appendages of the *kenmon* ruling order, but primarily as members of neighborhood communal organizations. Thus urban life and religion coalesced into a new form corresponding to the Ikkō leagues flourishing in villages as the *shōen* system declined.

### *Asceticism and Itinerancy*

#### CLERICS AND RECLUSES

The religious aspects of village and city life have been noted above. But this only covers part of the overall relationship between Buddhism and *shōen* society. The various aspects of Buddhism seen in the cities, important though they were, were no more than partial, geographically specific phenomena. For the standpoint of the system as a whole, it was those who left the world—the recluses—who formed one of the most significant elements in medieval Buddhism. Such individuals can be found throughout the world, from ancient to modern times. To understand fully their contribution to the medieval Japanese intellectual discourse it is necessary to consider them from a number of different viewpoints. Here, however, we will limit the

discussion to their role in medieval society.

In Buddhism the most common term for ordination, *shukke* 出家, refers to ridding oneself of all secular things, including authority, status, property, and family life, and turning to the true dharma. This, however, was not true of Japanese Buddhism in the early medieval era. Under the Ritsuryō system of the ancient imperial state, the Buddhist clergy lived within the establishment, in institutions—temples—founded and authorized by state authority. In this context, Buddhism's highest duty was spiritual protection of the state (*chingo kokka* 鎮護国家). Even after the imperial state waned at the end of the ancient period priests in major monasteries continued to function in a similar manner, tied inextricably to the *kenmon* elites at the core of political power. Far from renouncing the secular world, they formed an important element of the state authority structure. The elite rule of city temples, described in the previous section, was precisely of this character.

In medieval times, then, if one truly wanted to renounce the world and lead a religious life, one had to search for a way apart from the established clergy and temples. Those who did so included a variety of people who may have been either clerics or laypeople: those who had fallen from or fled the ruling stratum of society at the end of the ancient period; those excluded from the established order; those who had rebelled against the establishment; or, on the other hand, common people constrained by the fate of their lowly status yet yearning for a less fettered existence. A new social order was begun, formed of people seeking true renunciation of the world.

#### ITINERANT MONKS

There were two basic types of religious recluses in the medieval period. One left his home village, made a hermitage (*bessho* 別所) in a secluded natural setting, undertook strict ascetic practices, read sutras, and chanted the name of the Buddha. The other engaged in endless wandering. The two were similar insofar as both were moved by an extreme spirit of world-renunciation, and in fact most ascetics lived some of the time in sedentary isolation and some of the time in itinerant sojourns.

These ascetics who wandered or lived in seclusion were known as *hijiri* 聖 (sages or holy men). The etymology of this term is unclear, but from ancient times it was understood to refer to religious miracle-workers with commoner origins. Although medieval *hijiri* did not necessarily fit this definition strictly, it is noteworthy that their contemporaries chose to call them by this term.

Certain aspects of medieval asceticism were a continuation of ancient patterns. Isolation in nature and itinerancy, major aspects of popular religion from the earliest times in Japan, continued in the medieval period in the form of the harsh ascetic practices of seclusion and wandering. Unofficial, self-ordained priests had been a mainstay of popular religion in early Japan, and had lived a vagabond existence, eking out a living by casting spells, performing miracles, and directing construction work for irrigation, roads, and bridges. Their medieval descendants were the wandering *hijiri* who solicited donations for temples and shrines.

Medieval *hijiri*, ascetics, and recluses thus inherited the religion of the lowly classes of pre-ancient times, a tradition that had been obscured during the ancient period by the official form of Buddhism and its *chingo kokka* ritualism. If anything, it was this earlier village-based, local, and plebeian religiosity that reemerged with broad-based support during the medieval period, taking over from the waning culture of the aristocracy to form the religious keynote of medieval society. In other words, the world of the recluse and holy man not only embraced a mystical, meditational, transcendent perspective, but also the popular religious sensibilities that, unchanged in essence, formed the basis of mass thaumaturgic thought. Medieval ascetics thus had a deep and broad tie to mundane society, and their emergence presented a historic opportunity for the establishment of an nonauthoritarian, noninstitutional discourse.

#### TEMPLE SOLICITATION AND THE *YŪZŪ NENBUTSU*

The ascetic holy men secluded themselves in hermitages and mountain valleys near Mt. Hiei, Mt. Kōya, or other sacred sites, or else they wandered throughout the land. To some extent their hermitages and the secluded spots they lived in became gathering places for similar individuals. Holy men known for their literary works usually portrayed their spiritual lives as isolated, introspective, and personal, but in fact the *hijiri* engaged in community living, though only the leaders and more eminent individuals are historically known. Such communities included not only learned ascetics but also individuals who had turned to religion out of dissatisfaction with worldly things, who had renounced the world due to political setbacks, or who had joined the community not out of religious piety but simply as a means of subsistence. Even so, these communities, isolated in natural settings, became sacred precincts apart from worldly affairs.

A major characteristic of these ascetics and holy men was a devotion to the chanting of the *nenbutsu*. This practice had many varia-

tions, including those of the old schools of Tendai and Shingon Buddhism, but the most common types were mass thaumaturgic practices like the *yūzū nenbutsu* 融通念仏 (the all-inclusive or all-permeating *nenbutsu*). Indeed, in the case of the wandering *hijiri* the *yūzū nenbutsu* may be seen as the most representative religious practice. The philosophy underlying this form of *nenbutsu* was the same as that for other, non-*nenbutsu*, practices: the praxis of a single person results in merit for everyone, and the praxis of a multitude offering donations increases the merit all the more. Out of this way of thinking came the practice of soliciting donations, which always accompanied the preaching of itinerant monks. Solicitation of funds was the most effective way to support the construction of Buddhist statues and temples in medieval times, and was therefore essential to the temple economy. It was also a means of subsistence for the wandering priests.

Ascetics and holy men thus profoundly affected the development of medieval Buddhism. The nature of their practice was quite similar to that of the village *nenbutsu* associations and confraternities, and their preaching and solicitation, directed towards the common people, had much in common with the urban and village communal religion centered upon the local worship hall. The relationship of the *hijiri* with the exclusive *nenbutsu*, mentioned above, needs no further discussion; their emphasis on itinerancy, the solicitation of funds, and the recitation of the *yūzū nenbutsu* found its clearest manifestation in the Ji sect, founded by Ippen. The older schools of Buddhism quickly picked up similar practices: the rebuilding of Tōdai-ji, for example, was largely dependent on soliciting monks, and the so-called Kōya *hijiri*, holy men ostensibly from the main monastery of the esoteric Shingon sect, were widely active. The revival of Old Buddhism was thus expedited by the activities of *hijiri*, who enabled the attainment of a new medieval economic base and the absorption of popular religious elements. Particularly noteworthy is the fact that the devotions of the nonauthoritarian, noninstitutional *hijiri* on the sites of the great temples of *kenmon* Buddhism kept the latter alive during the period when, having lost their economic base with the decline of the estates, they were re-forming themselves as medieval Buddhist institutions.

#### ITINERANT ENTERTAINERS AND OUTCASTS

Any consideration of the recluse ascetics and wandering *hijiri* as nonauthoritarian and institutionally disaffected figures should be accompanied by an examination of the entertainers and outcasts who comprised the lowest stratum of the population, and who had always been excluded from the *kenmon*-based social and political order.

There were many types of entertainers and outcasts in the medieval period. These groups were not clearly defined by status, and were not settled in any fixed location. Some were organized in groups at the very bottom of the social order and existed in a relationship of strong subordination to it. Thus they cannot be called true outsiders, but in the sense that they were placed below all other classes and held in contempt they were indeed excluded from society. Still others had no relationship with the elite groups but lived as vagabonds, entertaining and practicing magic where they could.

All these people were commoner-entertainers, but at the same time they were religious figures. It was not so much that entertainment and thaumaturgy were indivisible as that they had yet to be separated, as in the case of more strictly religious figures like sutra and *nenbutsu* reciters, sutra chanters who drummed on begging bowls or beat gongs, religious storytellers, dancing girls, and traveling shrine maidens. Even those who appeared to be primarily entertainers, like blind minstrels and puppeteers, were in their own way preaching the dharma and uttering incantations.

Among the traveling entertainers, too, temple solicitation, preaching, and the *yūzū nenbutsu* were common activities. Their "temple solicitation" was in fact often begging for individual needs, their scriptural citations were inaccurate and slipshod, and their temple *engi* legends and sacred objects were often spurious. Still, these figures' itinerancy was seen, like the *yūzū nenbutsu*, as bringing merit to large numbers of people. Also, some entertainers, like pot and bell ringers, used the *yūzū nenbutsu* as the theme of their shows. Their garb and the items they carried were similar to those of *nenbutsu* holy men, seen in portraits and scroll paintings of such religious figures as Shinran and Ippen.

Thus there were itinerant entertainers and outcasts who were clearly related to the world of the ascetics. It is not surprising that those who rejected the ruling order and those rejected by it had much in common. Of course, one encountered many different levels of doctrinal refinement as one moved from the simple, vulgar entertainers to the religiously disciplined *hijiri*, and from there to the recluses and world-renouncing monks who devoted themselves to lofty speculation and reflection. Yet these figures existed in a continuum and, in reality, were close in many ways. They operated in a common world characterized by a nonauthoritarian, nonestablishment spirit.

#### MARKETS AND SACRED LAND

Wandering holy men and entertainers traveled far and wide around

the country, passing through villages and along highways of every province. They tended to congregate either at sacred places—great temples and shrines like Kumano, Mt. Kōya, Zenkō-ji, Shitennō-ji, Tōdai-ji, Ise Shrine, and Iwashimizu Shrine—or at the marketplaces that arose in the cities and on the estates.

First let us consider the sacred places. In the context of the times it was quite significant that the sites favored by these wanderers were not the great temples and shrines venerated by the state and the powerful families, but sacred places associated with buddhas and bodhisattvas like Amida, Kannon, and Dainichi; with the kami manifestations (*suijaku* 垂迹) related to these deific beings; and with great Japanese religious figures like Prince Shōtoku, En no Gyōja, Gyōki, Kūkai, and Saichō. For these itinerants the ancient official temples were less sacred than the deep mountain grottoes worshiped in folk spirituality, which existed in far greater numbers than today. All of them were seen as otherworldly sites, appropriate for secluded living and worthy of *hijiri* veneration.

In contrast to such holy sites, markets were where the most worldly of business was transacted. Wandering ascetics were drawn to such places for the purpose of soliciting donations—with their crowds of people and busy transactions in rice, cash, and cloth, markets were ideal places to preach and seek alms. But the markets were more than just crowded places of transaction. Markets gradually broke down the self-sufficient, closed economy of *shōen* villages and provided the setting for economic activities unrestricted by the social status system of estates. Despite their role in introducing such heterogeneous elements into *shōen* society, they flourished as a result of the contradictions inherent in a system that created great demands for distribution and transportation by centering its economy in the cities and its means of production on the estates.

Thus wandering ascetics and entertainers frequented markets for reasons that went beyond the subjective concerns of solicitation and performance. The sort of freedom that was found in urban communities in later times did not yet exist, but markets had broken free of the original status bonds of feudal or *shōen* society—namely, service and taxation. Devotees of the reclusive, wandering life were attracted to markets as nonestablishment, nonauthoritarian places where liberty existed, if only latently.

Finally, the travel routes from sacred site to market were, ironically, the institutionally established arteries tied to the *shōen* system. They became the routes of travel for those disaffected with and excluded from the social order, from ascetic sages to wandering entertainers.

## SOCIAL CRITICISM AND ATTITUDES TOWARD NATURE

If reclusion was basically exclusion from or disaffection with the ruling order and if it included rebellious elements, then it was only natural that most recluses regarded society critically. Many literary works and sermons of the medieval period reflect the starkly critical attitudes of the recluses toward the social realities of their time. The miscellaneous jottings and poetry of Kamo no Chōmei, Saigyō, Yoshida Kenkō and others, as well as stories relating the lives of such figures, are outstanding examples of this. Among the founding monks of the new Buddhist sects from Hōnen on were many with experience as wandering ascetics and with the socially critical outlook that accompanied it. Social commentary was not the main purpose of religious recluses, so overt criticism and opprobrium were almost nonexistent in their writings, but their critical stance allowed them to ferret out the truth of this world with philosophical and artistic brilliance.

Recluses who renounced the world immersed themselves in nature, singing its praises. In medieval literature contemplation of nature and a highly developed sensitivity toward the natural world were considered essential. This was not a product simply of the compelling attraction of nature but also of the decision first to discard the secular world. In the emptiness of nature, it was said, one sought indestructible truth and beauty. Through this attitude medieval ascetics were able to situate the Buddhist philosophy of transmigration in a distinctly Japanese perception of the transiency of life.

## THE DECLINE OF ASCETIC SPIRITUALITY

In the latter half of the medieval period a striking change occurred in the world of the recluses. It was manifested in various forms, one of which was the employment of the ascetics. Some followers of the Ji sect, probably the most representative of the reclusive movement, became artists who worked in close proximity with aristocrats and warrior lords. Various art forms that originated in the aesthetics of the recluses and in traditions of wandering entertainment became, ironically, a form of service to the authorities. The very spirit of unworldliness thus became an element in the pleasure-seeking of those in power. Among such recluses in service to the authorities were the groups known as *dōbō* 同朋 and *goka* 御伽.

Parallel to this phenomenon of recluses ceasing to be true recluses were other, related trends. The various sects of New Buddhism that were originally spread by wandering sages in the spirit of "neither cleric nor layman," and that had advocated simple praise of "the true dharma," now became institutionalized, forming lay congregations



and sects. At the same time, outcaste-entertainers who had once lived a vagabond existence showed signs of becoming settled. Some of them set up home on riverbanks or on surplus land (*kōsho* 巷所) in cities,<sup>2</sup> forming a subclass of urban residents; others settled in villages, acquiring a bit of land and shelter, and took charge of special religious art forms and craft industries for the village communal organization.

The aura of mystery also waned in the religious outposts and secluded spots where recluses lived in communities. Among wandering sages, those skilled in soliciting donations became adept at finance and took up residence on estates as managers. Those in the tradition of rebellion became warrior-monks or formed communities of roughneck malcontents. Warlords attempting to consolidate feudal rule over their domains refused to honor even the most holy of sacred locations.

These developments were concurrent with trends in social history that led to strong feudal authority. Thus came to an end the medieval social order, which had contained social disaffection and exclusion through the safety valve of reclusion. Henceforth, anti-establishment religious movements took the form of collective, highly organized groups like the *Ikkō ikki* and Lotus leagues.

This is not to say that reclusion completely disappeared. Even in an age when feudal authorities prohibited collective religious movements in every corner of society, reclusion and the spirit of itinerancy was maintained in the austerity of Sen no Rikyū, in the elegance of Bashō, in the simple lives of Ryōkan or Issa, and in the sculpture of Enkū, all of which have great appeal even today. The spirit of reclusion was inseparable from medieval Buddhism, and can be counted among the main sources of the Japanese intellectual tradition.

<sup>2</sup> *Kōsho* were sections of the very wide ancient roads that had fallen into disuse as roads narrowed in the medieval period; in early medieval times some were used by squatters and some were later taken over by overlords for agriculture.