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Rights, centers, and peripheries: experimental moves in Japanese Buddhism

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Abstract

In this paper I examine how the Japanese True Pure Land Buddhist school (Jōdo Shinshū or Shin Buddhism) has attempted to come to terms with the position of temple wife (*bōmori*), which has historically been a local position based solely on marriage ties to the resident priest of a temple, in a way that accommodates the modern principles of individual rights and freedom of religion. The central Jōdo Shinshū institutions of the Ōtani-ha and Honganji-ha have responded to demands to recognize the autonomous choice of temple wives to undertake a life of service to the parish temple by formulating an initiation ceremony meant to encourage the temple wife's self-awareness as a religious professional. Utilizing ethnographic fieldwork conducted from 2009 to 2013, I survey the various sites where Buddhism is lived and experimented in contemporary Japan. I highlight the interplay between local and central sources of religious meaning and authenticity.

Keywords: Modernity, Pure Land, Jōdo Shinshū, Temple wives, Karma, Nishi Honganji, Japanese Buddhism

The interpretative framework of “experimental religion,” which is the theme of this symposium, is extraordinarily useful for drawing our attention to the ground-level negotiations of the “great traditions” of Buddhism and Hinduism in their lived contexts. It is so useful a hermeneutic device, in fact, that it is tempting to oversimplify the story by bifurcating religious traditions into the stolid, conservative institutions at the top, which stand in dramatic contrast to the creative, dynamic negotiations undertaken by religious individuals at the ground level.

And yet, the model of experimentation that emerged in my own fieldwork was quite the reverse. In the Shin Buddhist (also known as Jōdo Shinshū) tradition that I study, efforts at incorporating modernizing discourses and new technologies into Buddhist practice are predominantly made among leaders of the *central* Buddhist institutions. Often such change begins within national networks of practitioners – laypeople, priests or temple wives – and indeed the leaders of these groups have been some of the most vocal advocates for prioritizing modern principles such as human rights and gender equality. Their activism is then legislated into institutional change, trickling down through the elaborate bureaucracy of Japanese Buddhist institutions, being resisted or embraced in turn by the abbot of the head temple in Kyoto, the teams of administrators who support him at the sect's headquarters, bureaucrats who work in the regional and local offices of the sect, as well as elected members of the national governing bodies. The effects of these

innovations or reforms “on the ground” – at the local place of practice, referred to in Japanese as *genba* – have in my observation been somewhat limited.¹

In this paper I will demonstrate the proclivity in Japanese Temple Buddhism for top-down experimentation by giving an account of how one modern Buddhist sect has attempted to come to terms with the position of temple wife – terms that accommodate the modern principle of individual rights – and to what extent those efforts have concretely affected temple wives themselves. From 2009 to 2013, I spent a total of thirty months in Japan interviewing and conducting participant observation among temple wives in various regions. I was based in Kyoto, where the head temples of the two major denominations of the Jōdo Shinshū, the Ōtani-ha (Higashi Honganji Temple) and the Honganji-ha (Nishi Honganji Temple), are both located. At these two sectarian headquarters I met upwards of sixty women as they attended national conferences of temple wives or training retreats for new temple wives; I would subsequently visit many of these women at their home temples in areas, both rural and urban, which were far-flung from Kyoto. In this way I was able to collect narratives from women both at the center and the periphery of the religious institution. It is only by attending to the dialectical interaction between center and periphery that we can understand how Buddhist institutions, practices and religious vocabularies are deployed in response to changing times.

Family temples, temple wives and the problem of individual rights

It is by now fairly well known that priests in Japan no longer observe vows of celibacy; most priests marry and have children, who live together with them in the temple. Temples are usually passed down, ideally at least, according to the principle of male primogeniture. What this means is that in nearly every temple that one finds a priest in Japan, one can also find the priest’s wife, whose life is no less immersed in and dedicated to the operation of the temple than that of her husband.

Priests in the Jōdo Shinshū, also known as Shin Buddhism, have embraced lay practices such as meat eating and marriage ever since the founder Shinran (1173–1263) declared that such a lifestyle was most appropriate for religious practitioners in what he believed was the degenerate age of the dharma.² Although temple wives are largely absent from historical documents, we can read between the lines and assume that these clerics have always been accompanied by their female partners, who in this tradition are known as *bōmori* or “temple guardians”.

Throughout the centuries of Shin Buddhist history, the wives of Shin temple priests performed a myriad of untold services to the temple and its congregation. Among these were raising the next generation of temple priests and temple wives (i.e., their sons and daughters), managing contributions to the temple, receiving parishioners with tea and conversation, servicing the temple’s altar with flowers and rice, and assisting with the execution of memorial services and yearly rituals. All of this they did without receiving official consideration of their choice to do so, and without any training or credentials from a central Buddhist authority. Until the 20th century, a *bōmori*’s preparation and identity as a temple person were entirely local, grounded in her physical residence in the temple, and her married relationship to the temple’s priest.

After World War II, the religious and ideological landscape in Japan was transformed, due in part to the new national constitution, which enshrined the unconditional right

to “freedom of religion” (*shinkyō no jiyū*) for all individuals. In addition, the increasing salience of human rights discourse globally – the United Nations’ Universal Declaration of Human Rights is frequently referred to by activist groups in Japan – bolstered the claims of reform-minded activists and sectarian leaders, particularly in the Jōdo Shinshū.³ Perusing the publications of the Otani-ha and Honganji-ha (the two major denominations of the Jōdo Shinshū) over the second half of the 20th century, one can clearly observe an increase in sensitivity to the individual rights of practitioners, and the importance of personal, individualized faith over the early modern model of religious affiliation centered on the family. The principles of individual freedom and egalitarianism – and the relatively novel concept that religion was a private, subjective matter that was to be freely chosen by each individual – had by the 1960s and 1970s become well-established in the world of administrators and leaders of the Shin Buddhist institutions.

This new sensibility – which one might call a modern imperative – presented problems for the traditional understanding of the position of the temple wife. Now Buddhist institutions were being pressed to recognize the “autonomous choice” (*shutaiteki sentaku*) of priests’ wives to undertake a life of service to its parish temples. As part of their response, both of the major Jōdo Shinshū sects formulated a *bōmori* registration system and initiation ceremonies. The Ōtani-ha responded to a surge of feminist activism arising from its national temple wife network in the 1990s by reviving a previously dormant ritual called the *bōmori* initiation ceremony (*bōmori shuninshiki*), whose purpose was to recognize the contributions and individual faith of temple wives (Starling 2017). The Honganji-ha created a similar ritual – in theory, at least – as soon as its postwar sectarian constitution went in to effect, although the ritual’s administration was very limited for the first few decades. According to a 1977 article in Honganji-ha’s newspaper *Shūhō*, the new ritual’s purpose was for wives “to declare before the Buddha [i.e., the image of Amida] their intention to dedicate themselves to the duties of a *bōmori*” (*bōmori toshite no honbun o tsukusu shi wo butsuzen ni keiyaku suru gishiki*).

Ritual innovation at Nishi Honganji

A description of a 2011 administration of the Honganji-ha *bōmori* ceremony I attended will give the reader a more concrete image of the ritual. On a morning in early spring, 41 women, ranging in age from 30 to 70, gathered inside of the Amida Hall of Nishi Honganji in Kyoto. They sat on their knees in the formal style in tidy rows, wearing lay clothing along with their newly issued temple wife clerical collars. As they ran through a rehearsal, many fumbled with their prayer beads, self-consciously bowing to the Buddhist image from the proper depth of their waists as a teacher from the sect’s Ritual Department had recently instructed them to do. They had just completed a 24-h workshop at the conference facility next to Nishi Honganji. They had come alone, unattended by friends or family members, and the only witnesses of the ceremony were the conference staff, myself, a reporter for the sect’s newspaper (the biweekly journal gets sent to the 12,000 parish temples affiliated with the sect), and a handful of lay pilgrims and tourists who happened to wander in to worship the image of Amida Buddha.

As the ceremony proper began, the Urakata, a stately figure who is the wife of Nishi Honganji’s abbot, entered the Amida Hall dressed immaculately in the manner of a

prime minister's wife. She was followed by a retinue of high-ranking priests in colorful robes. She lit some incense before the image of Amida, joined her hands and bowed expertly to the Buddha before retiring to her seat in a special gallery to the side of the altar.

The initiates rose to sing a musical arrangement of Buddhist hymns; next, one initiate walked to the front to accept on behalf of all the participants her certificate from the sect's administrative chief; another initiate took her place and held a microphone to lead the group in the recitation of a vow, which stated that the initiates intended to work tirelessly as temple wives to serve the Pure Land Buddhist teachings. Finally, the Urakata gave a brief address, reminding the women that they were crucial to Jōdo Shinshū temples' ability to thrive in contemporary society.

The ceremony closed with the singing of the *Ondokusan*, a gently haunting song of gratitude adapted from verses written by Shinran, the 13th-century founder of the Jōdo Shinshū. After taking a commemorative group photograph along with their teachers in front of Amida Hall, the women retired to the conference center to reflect on the previous twenty-four hours of training and initiation in a round-circle discussion.

This is a Buddhist ritual comprised of old technologies and old actors, but conducted with a novel purpose. It resembles to some extent the initiation given to new monks at the *tokudo* or initial ordination ceremony; on the other hand it also bears resemblance to the refuge ceremony conferred upon laypeople for a fee of 10,000 yen (about \$80). This kind of "halfway in between" ceremony is perhaps most appropriate for marking the *bōmori's* change in status, since she as a domestic religious professional is ranked somewhere between a priest and a layperson. The training that accompanies the ritual is also somewhere in between: wives' one day of "training" (*kenshū*) consists of a 1-hour sermon on the Jōdo Shinshū teachings; an hour-long tea ceremony demonstration; an hour-long lecture on the arrangement, upkeep, and etiquette surrounding the temple's altar; and finally a 40-min lecture on the *Kikan undō*, the Honganji-ha's postwar institutional reform movement, followed by small group discussions of their experiences at the temple. This rite of initiation and the professional enrichment that accompanies it are not intended to confer religious status, but to commemorate and support the "autonomous choice" of a woman to become a religious professional in the Shin Buddhist tradition.

So what are we to make of this instance of ritual innovation? We might describe it as an example of "Buddhist Modernism" or "Modern Buddhism." Much as in the descriptions of Buddhist modernism given by David McMahan (2012) and Donald Lopez (2002), Buddhist elites or activist members of the middle class have moved to respond to the prevailing global discourse of human rights, gender equality, and individual freedoms by formulating a new ritual stitched together from traditional Shin Buddhist threads. The feminists applauded the new ritual as a welcome first step, and the central sectarian institution no longer seemed quite so "feudal" as to assume that women would automatically adopt the faith and religious vocation of their husbands, whether they were recognized or not.

But what relevance does the event have to a temple wife's experience on the ground? To understand whether we can describe this ceremony as "experimental religion" in the sense in which that term is being used across this symposium, we must find out if it has anything at all to do with the local strategies by which religious specialists and

lay persons construct meaning in their everyday lives. In the following sections, I describe interviews with participants who explain the meaning of the ceremony to them personally and to the parishioners back at their home temples. By surveying the various sites where Buddhism is lived and experimented in contemporary Japan, the interplay (and sometimes disconnect) between local and central sources of religious meaning and authenticity will become apparent.

Family and the karmic ties that bind temple wives

At the local site of practice of Japanese Buddhism – the immediate social world where temple wives negotiate authority and identity in their localized interactions with the Buddhist tradition – family continues to be the dominant context in which Buddhist selves are produced. Shin Buddhism's lay followers and clerical families, whose connection to Buddhism has been defined for generations by ancestral affiliation, continue to be drawn and anchored to the religion (and their religious career, as in the case of the *bōmori* and priest) by family ties rather than by individual choice. Because the priesthood (and temple wifehood) is a family enterprise in contemporary Japan (Starling 2015), the experiences of temple residents resemble those of Dorinne Kondo's informants in her 1990 study of Japanese individuals involved in family trades:

For people engaged in family enterprise, *ie* [household] and *uchi* [family as a circle of attachment] create and constrain, providing the arena in which to enact compelling dramas of guilt, pride, happiness, jealousy, competition, frustration, scorn, despair, and resignation. As long as this is so, *ie* and *uchi* will be constitutive of my informants' realities, a site of the play of the simultaneously creative and coercive effects of meaning. The *ie* and *uchi* are sites, in short, for the disciplinary production of selves. (Kondo 1990, p. 160).

At the level of the family (and work groups modeled on families), Kondo has shown that achieving mature Japanese adulthood hinges upon demonstrating the willingness and ability to submit one's selfish desires to the greater good of the group.⁴ Indeed, it is difficult to imagine a culture where hierarchical modes of complementarity – rather than an underlying assumption of the primacy of individual rights – are more at play in shaping individual selves.⁵

In other words, the context for constructing selfhood in Japan is still at base the “*uchi*,” one's circle of social attachment and obligation. For people who construe the world through the Buddhist lenses of karma, as most of my informants do, family connections are seen as the shape that the karmic conditions (*innen*) that bind them to Buddhism are most apt to take. In this section, I examine the two interrelated forces that structure the production of my informants' Buddhist identities: family and karma.

In prescriptive texts for *bōmori* dating back to the important 15th-century figure Rennyō (1411–1499), the sense that being a *bōmori* is a karmically privileged and pre-determined existence is quite clear. From a premodern doctrinal standpoint, therefore, it is not truly an autonomously chosen position, as the more modern language of the postwar Honganji-ha and Ōtani-ha's institutional documents would dictate, but rather the result of an unknowable chain of connections to Buddhism resulting from actions carried out in previous lives. In light of these traditional accounts of the temple wife as

a unique, semi-clerical birth for women, I sought in my fieldwork to discover whether the women themselves (at least contemporary ones) shared this sense of karmic destiny with regards to their position at the temple.

The term *en* – whose dictionary definitions include connection, bond, affinity, fate, destiny, opportunity, and chance – has Buddhist origins, but its usage is not limited to those who consciously embrace a Buddhist view of the causal mechanism governing the universe. As Mark Rowe puts it:

The term *en* signifies connections, both concrete and mysterious. To have *en* (*en ga aru*) is to be linked by fate or destiny. To bind *en* (*enmusubi*) is to marry... Regional *en* (*chien*) refers to the connections with those in one's village or hometown, while families are connected by blood bonds (*ketsuen*).... [*Engi* is a Buddhist doctrinal term, meaning dependent origination.]... Bonds, in both the doctrinal and societal sense, are thus both positive (underlying links between everyone and everything) and negative (fetters and attachments that prevent us from true insight or freedom). (2011, p. 46)

The term *en* is frequently heard in discussions among *bōmori*, in relation to both building lasting connections between parishioners and the temple, and to the events that led to their personally coming to live in a temple. Popular Japanese explanations of how *en* plays into the karmic equation often liken *en* to the water that moistens the soil into which one's karmic seeds (previous actions) have been planted. Thus, *en* represents the conditions that help bring one's karma to fruition. In the Shin Buddhist tradition, with its emphasis on the radical nature of other-power (*tariki*), however, one's own past actions are de-emphasized and the mysterious workings of Amida's vow are favored instead in explaining how one arrived at one's destiny.

In the Shin Buddhist world, a commonly heard expression when describing one's life path or current circumstances is, "*go-en o itadaita*," or, "I received this connection/opportunity." Marriage is certainly seen as one such opportunity. For example, a woman who contributed a feature to Nishi Honganji's biweekly *Honganji shinpō* newspaper explained her experience of marrying a temple *jūshoku*, whom she met at her own father's funeral, when she was middle-aged, and going on to become a certified Shinshū priest: "I've truly received a mysterious connection" (*hontō ni fushigina go-en o itadakimashita*) (Hasegawa 2009). Its implication when used in a Shinshū context is that one's life course is the result of unknowable events in past lives, and in particular the mysterious workings of Amida's limitless compassion in providing opportunities to encounter the Pure Land teachings.

Roughly 40% of the Honganji-ha's current *bōmori* were born in a Buddhist temple other than the one they married into, primarily of the same Shinshū sect, but 5.5% are from another sect within Shinshū, and 4% are from another school of Buddhism altogether (Shūsei chōsa hōkoku 2010). A woman who was born in a temple may have expected to become a temple wife since she was young, whether because she liked the temple or because it was the only life she knew. More commonly among the generation of women who are now in their sixties or older, the decision to marry another temple's priest, and the selection of the young man, came as much from their parents as it did from their own desires.

But hasn't the situation in contemporary Japanese Temple Buddhism changed? This is the 21st century, after all, and we are told that Japanese families, especially in urban settings, are changing rapidly. Japanese women now have a say in whom to marry, and

more women are reportedly choosing to resist or delay marriage because they are unable to find a satisfactory partner (Nakano 2011). Even in Buddhist temple families, in which the continuation of the temple is at stake in a successful marriage and the production of a successor, young Japanese are reasonably free to make their own choice of spouse. This does not mean, however, that these individuals see themselves as completely free to chart their own destinies.

At a National Bōmori Convention (*Zenkoku bōmori taikai* 全国坊守大会) I attended in May of 2011, several hundred members of the various district *bōmori* associations converged upon Higashi Honganji by bus, train, or airplane. A representative from each local group stood in front of her peers hoisting a flag imprinted with the group's unique slogan for the event, as participants filed across the grounds and into the Founders Hall. The district association from Tokyo had inscribed their banner with the slogan, "Receiving a fortuitous connection" (*Tama tama no go-en o itadaite*). Intrigued, I sought an interview with women from this group at another event the following month. Two officers, one temple-born and one lay-born, gladly answered my questions in between lectures at a *bōmori* workshop at Higashi Honganji's conference facilities.

Temple-born Woman: Until recently, it was common for women to marry from a temple into a temple.

Lay-born Woman: But just yesterday [here at this conference] out of nine women [in our small group], only one had been born into a temple. Everyone else was a laywoman (*zaike*).

Temple-born Woman: That's where this theme, "*Tama tama no go-en...*" comes from: women who married in from outside a temple. The lifestyle is totally different, and quite possibly they married in without knowing anything about the Jōdo Shinshū. So, when we heard that experience from people, and that was the departure point for, "this is where the encounter with Shinran begins." That's the outline of how we chose that theme.

Lay-born Woman: Usually a woman [marries in] from a lay Shinshū household, but in my case my mother and father were lay followers of the Sōtō school. I went to a Sōtō-affiliated university, and got a regular job. It was really quite random that I made a connection with my husband (*hontō ni tama tama no go-en*). It was quite mysterious (*fushigi*)...

Temple-born Woman: So, it's something you couldn't have chosen for yourself, but you do choose it (*jibun de erandekita wake de wa nai kedo, erabu*)... You did not choose it yourself, but –

Lay-born Woman: -- it's what in front of you (*koko ni aru mono*)

Temple-born Woman: -- so you choose it.

J.S.: And yet you did choose it. That is, you knew that your partner was a priest, and you married him.

Lay-born Woman: But I didn't think, "I want to be a *bōmori*".

Temple-born Woman: Particularly when you are young when you meet your partner, you don't think about it.

Lay-born Woman: I was a bit older, I had been working for a while. And when I randomly (*tama tama*) met my husband, and he said, "I've got this kind of place

[a temple], how would you like to come here [get married].” I thought, that’s the kind of place I could marry into, and I accepted. *From there* I encountered Shinran. That was my departure point. I didn’t intentionally choose it, but in the end I suppose I did choose it.

Temple-born Woman: So in the end, it’s *tama tama* isn’t it?

Although I have translated *tama tama* as “accidental” or “fortuitous,” it may just as easily be rendered “predestined,” as the women who are reconciled to the Shin Buddhist understanding of Amida’s powerful compassion would consider even seemingly “random” events and encounters as part of Amida’s destiny for them (and indeed the sense of karmic predestination resides to more or less explicit degrees in the common Japanese usage of *tama tama*). Though the sense that the circumstances that one encounters in one’s life are mysteriously preordained is strong here, it is also important to note that my informants frame these as opportunities rather than destiny. It is possible to reject, or perhaps resist for a while, the openings for the attainment of faith that Amida provides. In other words, two levels of agency – that of Amida, and that of the woman herself – are seen as operating simultaneously and dialectically to direct one’s life path.

In an overwhelming number of cases, by the time a woman reaches middle age, she comes to embrace her position as a temple professional and has achieved a resolution to take on the responsibility that it entails. This is frequently connected to her personal faith (*shinjin*) – however, it is often the faith that comes second, sometimes after years of working out of a sense of obligation to their in-laws and their parishioners.

For the vast majority of Buddhist clerics in contemporary Japan, the primary context through which their career is inherited and learned is that of the family and local parish community; their religious lineage is for most practical purposes a local one. And in their explanations of the chain of connections that led to their Buddhist vocation, family frequently plays a central role. In the final section I consider how even those temple wives who attend national conferences and initiation ceremonies in Kyoto are shaped and constrained by local forces, a constraint that liberalizing discourses at the national and local levels have done little to relieve.

Identity and authenticity between the center and the place of practice (genba)

In a very real sense, the *bōmori* initiation ceremony and the regulations that require it are nothing more than an added layer of bureaucracy in the religious institution. The Honganji-ha denomination’s postwar constitution included a new central registration system for temple wives, by which each woman was to register with the central sectarian authority (Nishi Honganji) in order to receive a clerical collar (*shikishō*) authenticating her as a *bōmori*. The Honganji-ha’s *bōmori* ceremony (described above) is a part of this registration system, and has been technically required to become an “official” *bōmori* since 1948.

Perhaps more than any other top-down development, however, the temple wife initiation ceremony reveals the large disconnect between the Buddhist sect’s centralized bureaucratic administration and the reality of religious life “on the ground” at local family-run temples. An opinion piece (presumably by a female author) in

Nishi Honganji's newspaper published soon after the first centralized administration of the ceremony in 1977 attests to this. The writer observes, somewhat wryly:

This thing has been on the books since 1964, but they never administered the ceremony in my district – so that means all of us who have always been called “*bōmori-san*” [i.e., who were called “Mrs. *Bōmori*” by their temple's parishioners] were not actually “*bōmori*” [*Bōmori ga bōmori to yobareru yō ni*, 16 (1977)].

The author points out the ironic disconnect between the official, bureaucratic definition of “*bōmori*” (which would require that a woman undergo this ceremony in order to receive her *bōmori* credentials from the sect) and the local, lived definition of a *bōmori*. The *bōmori seki* (registry) located at the sectarian headquarters at Nishi Honganji very much resembles the bureaucratically idealized version of Japanese families that appears in *koseki*, the civil registry required of all Japanese citizens since the Meiji period. As Krogness (2011) has shown, “real” Japanese families do not always fit neatly into the fields of the forms that are kept on file at city hall. Temple families are no different.

The temple wife clerical collar that *bōmori* receive at the ceremony is another rich example of the negotiation of authenticity and identity both at the center and the periphery of the Buddhist institution. From the perspective of the central Jōdo Shinshū Honganji-ha's bylaws, the *bōmori* ceremony at Nishi Honganji is required for the endorsement of the *bōmori*'s clerical collar and the entry of her name into the registry held at temple headquarters. But in fact, the collars can be (and often are) purchased at a Buddhist clothier, and a woman who resides in the temple and is married to the priest is certain to be called *bōmori* and expected to do the work of the *bōmori* regardless of her institutional credentials.

Some comments from the temple wives who attended the 2011 ceremony I described above will illustrate the complex relationship between the local temple where *bōmori* spend their entire careers as temple wives, and the center, where some temple wives are able to visit occasionally for pilgrimage, training retreats, or ordination. After witnessing the initiation ceremony in Amida Hall, I ran into Atsuko, a 45-year-old temple wife who I happened to know from my fieldwork in the south of Japan. A few months previously I had visited her rural, hilltop temple in Kyushu through the introduction of her daughter, who had been living in Kyoto while she attended seminary. We greeted each other warmly, and I asked Atsuko, who radiated an excited glow from the ceremony and several congratulatory exchanges with her peers afterwards, if she felt differently now that she had received the initiation. She explained:

Well, I was really moved by the ceremony, and I was so happy to have this opportunity to meet other temple wives from all over the country. And I also learned a lot from the teachers here. It was good to be able to ask them questions about things.

Like many attendees, Atsuko was eager to test her local knowledge against a centralized standard. We should not presume that her attendance at the ceremony meant that she was in any way a “beginner” in her position, however. Atsuko went on:

Actually, I've already been the *bōmori* of my temple for a while – it's been 8 years since my husband took over as head priest. And before that his mother was not around so I've been doing the *bōmori's* work in practice now for almost 20 years.

I asked her if her parishioners had urged to come here to get the official recognition from the sect. She replied no, that she wasn't sure if any of them even knew she had come. Eager not to leave me with the impression that the whole thing had been meaningless, however, she quickly added: "But I'm really glad I came, anyway. I feel I've gotten a new awareness from this, and I want to try my hardest when I go back to the temple now".

It is clear that in Atsuko's case, the efficacy of this ritual was not of an objective nature. The benefit instead was that it catalyzed her consciousness and sense of responsibility for the temple and the Buddhist tradition as a *bōmori*. This catalytic effect resulted from her inclusion in a community of *bōmori* peers and her access to teachers of doctrine, institutional history, and ritual etiquette, who seemed to her to be authoritative. Extracted from her local context, where family obligations had required her decades ago to take over for her mother-in-law without any ceremony or training, Atsuko felt for the first time recognized as an autonomous religious practitioner. During her visit to Nishi Honganji, more importance was placed on her individual self-awareness at the temple headquarters than is done at her home temple, where obligation to family and parishioners is paramount. In this case, the center is more "liberal" than the periphery.

As I inquired with other women after the event, they voiced similar sentiments. One elderly *bōmori* (who had presumably been at her job for several decades back home) expressed profound relief that there was no exam at the end of the training. Another younger woman noted that before coming here, the only *bōmori* she had met was her own mother-in-law, who had assured her that all *bōmori* were expected to wear a skirt, even when performing manual labor at the temple. (After inquiring with her peers at the conference, she was relieved to find that this was not universally true.) Although it may not have been the primary reason the ceremony was created, the 2-day experience had nonetheless provided these women with a network and an imagined community of practitioners – all primarily local temple professionals – across Japan.

As I circulated through the breakout discussion groups listening to women's impressions and lingering questions that they posed to the staff leaders, one woman's comment grabbed my attention. "This may sound like a silly question," she apologized, "but I was wondering if this ceremony is actually required. I was told it was – we read it in our temple's bylaws [received from the head temple] – and that's why I came." The staff member equivocated. "Well," he said kindly, "In order for you to be registered here at the central headquarters, we ask that you undergo the ceremony, either here or in your district office." (The benefit of being registered is that the sect is then able to provide compensation – like an insurance policy – if a temple wife's husband passes away and she is unable to remain in the temple herself.) To this, a few other women chimed in somewhat unhelpful and often contradictory interpretations of whether the ceremony was required. All seemed to be concerned to answer this question, however, suggesting that the (arguably) compulsory nature of the ceremony was at least in part why they had come.

The *bōmori* initiation ceremony is required, then, in only the narrowest bureaucratic sense. Indeed, I first unearthed the existence of this ceremony in my library research rather than in my conversations with temple families. Once I saw the 1977 feature in the sect's journal *Shūhō* (quoted above), I began asking my informants what they knew about it, but most were unaware of it. I interviewed more than a dozen temple wives and several employees of Nishi Honganji before I spoke to anyone who had even heard of this temple wife initiation. Statistically, more current *bōmori* in the Honganji-ha have taken their initial priestly ordination, or *tokudo*, than have undergone the *bōmori* ceremony itself.⁶ The ceremony's failure to take hold in any kind of universal way among *bōmori*, and the fact that it is not practically required for recognition by parishioners or temple family members, points to the highly localized and familial nature of these women's identities as *bōmori*.

In their everyday experiences as temples wives, these women are located in the lineage of their own mothers-in-law rather than being held to some national standard. This is why a temple wife's clerical collar is effectively endorsed by her identity as her husband's wife and her mother-in-law's successor. Her authenticity as a *bōmori* is further confirmed by her daily fulfilling of her parishioners' expectations for her as temple guardian, hostess, community liaison, counselor, event coordinator, and mother of the successor-priest.

The fact that temple wives feel empowered to buy and wear the *bōmori* clerical collar by virtue of their being the head female professional in residence at the temple points to the impotence of the initiation ritual at the sect's central temple to either confer or withhold status on this very local figure. Those who are able to attend the *bōmori* conference and training retreat can be seen as the "middle class" of temple wives: their temple has some resources to spare, and a liberal enough understanding of social roles to use those resources to send their temple wife to a self-enrichment workshop and initiation ceremony. Atsuko and the other attendees were able to use the resources offered at the center to cope with or resist the local pressures they felt in their position as family-based religious professionals.

Conclusion

In the above pages, I have explored the ways in which the conventional discourses of the modern that currently circulate in Japan have and have not left their imprint on the self-understanding of the *bōmori* whom I knew, particularly regarding the idea of individual rights. The normative Buddhist institutions in Japan, at least in the Jōdo Shinshū, seem to have accepted a modern understanding of moral order, described by Charles Taylor as

starting with individuals and conceiv[ing] society as established for their sake... This individualism signifies a rejection of the previously dominant notion of hierarchy, according to which a human being can be a proper moral agent only when embedded in a larger social whole, whose very nature is to exhibit a hierarchical complementarity. (Taylor 2004, pp. 19–20)

This modern understanding manifests in the discourse of individual rights, which is propounded mainly at the level of the sectarian institutions of Japanese Buddhism, who

through their regulation by the Japanese government and their interactions with religious institutions globally are players on a world stage where the principle of individual rights is regnant. And yet, in the local hereditary groups that dominate the “ground level” of Buddhist practice, modes of “hierarchical complementary” – manifested in and transmitted through family structures – are still stubbornly entrenched.

Increasingly, as documented by Mark Rowe (2011) and John Nelson, Buddhist priests and nuns in Japan are contriving new ways that laypeople can come into contact with Buddhism through individual attraction to certain Buddhist ideas or an expanded repertoire of services and occasions for getting people “through the doors of a temple” (Nelson 2013 p. 68). But if such methods are effective – in other words, if the individual encounters Buddhism in a substantive enough way for him to appropriate the teachings as a compelling imaginary for his life experiences, then it will cease to have been a rational choice at all. In other words, for the Buddhists I interviewed in Japan, not only are individuals’ encounters with Buddhism not rationally and freely chosen, they are in fact quite the opposite: nothing could be less rational or knowable, and that is precisely the point. To the extent that their narratives are Buddhist, they draw on a discourse of connectedness, contingency, and karmic determinism.⁷

The causal worldview of karma and the social given of one’s circle of attachment and obligation (family, temple congregation, etc.) are in Japan intimately interrelated. Though the language of human rights has become available to many of my informants through consumption of global media, their participation in national and global networks, and through their encounters with the sect’s headquarters and its regional bureaucracy, such a discourse operates in a dialectic with their local identity and the standards to which they are held by the day-to-day temple community. When the ritual at Nishi Honganji was experienced as “really moving” to Atsuko, its effect was not only to stimulate her individual consciousness of her role as a religious professional, but also to enlarge the scope of her circle of attachment and obligation from her family and local congregation to encompass also the Buddhist tradition as embodied by her Jōdo Shinshū sect, which has Nishi Honganji as its center.

While in some ways the top-down experimental model found in the Jōdo Shinshū exhibits a bureaucratic disconnect between the center and periphery (hence the wives’ questions, “Is this actually required for us to be *bōmori*?” and “Actually I have been the *bōmori* at my temple for many years now”), it is also an important site of interaction between central temple bureaucracies and the everyday individual practice that takes place in family contexts. For those women who come to see their marriage to a priest as a fortuitous event having led to their becoming religious professionals at a Pure Land temple, family, karma, and the Buddha’s compassion coalesce into a meaningful narrative of embeddedness in a larger social and cosmic whole.

Endnotes

¹In some ways this observation stands in contrast to the findings of John K. Nelson, whose work is also featured in this symposium. In his 2013 book, *Experimental Buddhism*, Nelson found – or rather predicted – that it was only from ground level experimentation by individual priests that innovations were likely to bubble up and transform the shape of Japanese Buddhism on a national scale. While admitted that some institutional headquarters, such as that of the Pure Land School (Jōdoshū), were

attempting to make top-down changes, Nelson noted that this was mainly in response to the unflagging persistence of his experimental informant, Reverend Akita (p. 74). In the majority of cases, Nelson described the bureaucratic centers of institutional Buddhism as being slow to respond to or incorporate the creative strategies of these ground-level innovators (for example, in his discussion of the Sôtōshū and Tendaishū, pp. 58–63). Nelson does not address the national Jōdo Shinshū institution in his book, although some of his individual informants are affiliated with this school.

²See Nattier 1991 for a survey of Indian and Chinese Buddhist theories of the decline of the dharma; on its reception in Japan, see Marra 1988.

³For more detail on the processes of modern institutional change in the Jōdo Shinshū, see Heidegger 2010 and Main 2010.

⁴Kondo 1990, p. 160. Kondo points that the distinction between “*uchi*” (inside one’s circle) and “*soto*” (outside) is in fact the “zero point of discourse” in the Japanese language, upon which one’s very verb conjugations hinge. One literally cannot speak without locating oneself in relation to one’s audience vis a vis the circle of attachment – and accountability – known as the *uchi* (pp. 141–147).

⁵This is certainly not unique to Japan, nor to Buddhism. Studies of Hinduism have highlighted similar processes of structuring selves in submission to duty – to God, caste, and upholding the cosmic order – with models of hierarchical complementarity found in the *Bhagavad Gita* providing a quintessential example. See Harlan 1992. Ethnographies of the last few years have finally begun to reveal the wear and tear of neoliberal policies on the institution of the patrilineal family in Japan (Borovoy 2010, Alexy 2011), but in the temple world the *ie* remains regnant in structuring social relations.

⁶The Honganji-ha’s most recent survey indicates that only 46% percent of current *bōmori* have taken the initiation, while more than 50% have taken *tokudo* (“Shūsei chōsa hōkoku,” Special addendum to *Shūhō* No. 521: 57). To date, some 10,774 women have taken the initiation. This is far fewer than the actual number of women who have served as *bōmori* in that time. 1,755 women have received it at the head temple, and 7,958 at their respective district office. Another 1,061 young women have received the initiation as “successor *bōmori*” (Internal statistics received from the Honganji Kyōka Dendō Kenkyū Sentā, current as of November 27, 2009).

⁷Determinism is perhaps too strong of an adjective – as seen in the examples above, human-divine (in this case, Amida Buddha) agency forms a dialectic.

Competing interests

The authors declare that they have no competing interests.

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