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Children of Buddha, or Caretakers of Women? Self-Understandings of Ordained Buddhist Women in Contemporary Japan

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Abstract

This paper deals with the self-understandings of ordained Buddhist women (*nisō* 尼僧, *ama* 尼) in contemporary Japan. Their situation is characterized by discrimination and limited access to clerical positions on the one hand and, with the exception of monastic nuns, by their lack of a clearly defined role on the other. Although the training required to attain the status of a fully ordained cleric is firmly regulated by each Buddhist school, ordained women's subsequent way of life is not. They may be married and have their own families. They may be the head priestess of a temple, the wife of a temple priest, or work in a temple. They may live according to Buddhist precepts in private, or have secular jobs. Under these conditions, ordained women have found ways of empowering themselves by interpreting their role in accordance with their social contexts and by re-evaluating conservative conceptions of gender.

Keywords

Buddhist nuns – ordained women – contemporary Buddhism – clerical training – gender conceptions

Introduction

Ordained Buddhist women (*nisō* 尼僧, *ama* 尼) in Japan today are a largely neglected field in research about contemporary religions in Japan. Studies of contemporary Buddhist women often deal with the lives of temple priests' wives (*jizoku* 寺族, *jitei fujin* 寺庭婦人, *bōmori* 坊守) and the discourse about their status (Heidegger 2006; Kawahashi 1995, 2012; Starling 2013a, 2013b; see also Simone Heidegger's paper in this volume). The specific situation of contemporary nuns has so far only been investigated in Paula Arai's ethnography (Arai 1999) of the lives of Sōtō Buddhist nuns in a convent in Nagoya and in Kuroki Masako's case study of the spirituality and life history of a Tendai Buddhist nun (Kuroki 2011).

In contrast, a wide array of research investigates the lives, religious practices and thought of Buddhist nuns in premodern Japan, especially in ancient and medieval times (cf. Katsuura 1999a, 1999b, 2002, 2003; Nishiguchi 1999; Groner 2002; Ushiyama 2002; Ruch 2002; Meeks 2010). Other approaches provide a *longue durée* historical overview of ordained women, from the ancient to the contemporary period: Grace Schireson reconstructs a Zen women's "lineage" from India through China and Korea to Japan and

ultimately contemporary American Zen (Schireson 2009), while Tanaka Takako presents perspectives on nuns' experiences in various historical eras (Tanaka 2005). With regard to early modern Japan, the nun Bunchi 文智 (1619-1697), daughter of emperor Gomizuno-o 後水尾天皇 (1596-1680), has received particular scholarly attention for her artistic work (Fister 2000, 2009) and her religious agenda of propagating a precept-based life (Cogan 2006, 2014). An extremely informative and illustrative insight into the lives and activities of imperial nuns is given in the catalogue to an exhibition on imperial convents (*ama monzeki* 尼門跡) (Medieval Japanese Studies Institute 2009).

This asymmetry in research reflects the strong position women occupied in early Japanese Buddhism, when nuns were the first ordained clerics in Japan and convents were part of the system of state temples (cf. Katsuura 1999a). After the decline of the system of state-sponsored monasteries (*kokubunji* 国分寺) and nunneries (*kokubun niji* 国分尼寺) by the early Heian era (794-1186), “lay and other types of privately professed nuns continued to preach and to conduct rituals, though in unofficial capacities” (Meeks 2010: 23). Although formal ordination “appears to have lapsed altogether” (Stone 2006: 48), privately or self-ordained women remained active during the Heian era: “some nuns established private retreats, became mendicant, or supported themselves by washing and sewing robes for monks; many, however, continued to live in their family households while devoting themselves to Buddhist practice” (Stone 2006: 48; cf. Katsuura 1999b; Ruch 2002; Groner 2002). The lifestyle of nuns thus changed from cloistered life with officially recognized status to private lifestyle, sans status but individually defined. In the thirteenth century, the precept revival movement of Eison 叡尊 (1201-1290) and the subsequent establishment of a formally recognized ordination platform for nuns in the Hokkeji 法華寺 temple gave rise to a large-scale revival of women's monasticism.

By the late medieval period, hundreds of monastic institutions for women were in operation (Ushiyama 1989; 1990, 160). While it is true that these institutions were never recognized as the equals of male monastic institutions, officially ordained nuns and their convents retained, from this era onward, a continuous role in Japan's religious history.
(Meeks 2010: 3)

The diversity of nuns' social positions and living conditions in Japan's premodern history resonates with Schireson's distinction between “six functional roles inhabited by women Zen teachers” (Schireson 2009: 41) across Asia: the roles of founder, supporter, convent nun, nun who practiced with men, family nun, and working nun (Schireson 2009: 42). In Japan, the variety of lifestyles lived by nuns was officially legalized in the religious policy of the new Meiji government. In May 1872 and January 1873, the Grand Council

of State (Dajōkan 太政官) issued two decrees which officially undermined the precepts of Buddhist clerics by allowing ordained men and women to eat meat, marry, grow their hair and wear ordinary clothing.

From now on Buddhist clerics shall be free to eat meat, marry, grow their hair, and so on. Furthermore, they are permitted to wear ordinary clothing when not engaged in religious activities.

...

From now on nuns may freely grow their hair, eat meat, marry, and return to lay life. Furthermore, those who return to lay life should notify the ward registrar after reentering a household registry.

(Jaffe 2011: 72)

The decrees were part of the new government's policy to establish State Shintō as a national cult and to deprive Buddhism of its privileged position (cf. Ketelaar 1990; Antoni 1998). The edicts issued in 1868, ordering the separation of Buddhism and Shintō (*shinbutsu bunri rei* 神仏分離令), resulted in severe attacks on Buddhist temples and clergy, especially in regions where anti-Buddhist sentiments were already prevalent (cf. Ketelaar 1990). With the abolition of the temple registration system (*terauke seido* 寺請制度) in 1872, Buddhist temples lost their official function as institutions of household registration, in addition to the financial security provided by holding regular ritual services for their parishioners (*danka* 檀家) (Umeda 1971: 635). Further measures detrimental to Buddhism included the official classification of Shintō shrines, their interpretation as places of national worship, and the transformation of Shintō priests into state officials (*kanshi* 官史) in 1871 (Umeda 1971: 16-20). In the context of this religious policy, the “decriminalization of clerical marriage” (Jaffe 2011: 59) must be seen as part of the new government's efforts to implement a new civil code with a unified registration system and thus to turn all Japanese, including the clergy, into equal civilians. These efforts included the abolition of clerical privileges (as well as the privileges of the samurai), whether in outward appearance or with regard to names. Therefore, in 1872 all clerics were ordered to adopt surnames and registered with their secular names (Jaffe 2011: 70-78).¹ Since then, monks and nuns have been allowed to marry and have families.

The effects of this ambiguous status between cleric and layperson on individual identities, conceptions of roles, and the activities of present-day Buddhist male priests have been discussed by Stephen Covell (2005) in his field study of contemporary temple Buddhism. However, the impact of this change on ordained women's identities has been

¹ The resistance of Buddhist clerics against these regulations is analyzed in detail in Jaffe (2011).

largely neglected, even though their positions are often more uncertain and at risk than those of men. Kawahashi Noriko (2012: 118) has pointed out that for male head priests (*jūshoku* 住職) having their own family is widely accepted and often justified by the necessity to have an heir to their temple, although it contradicts the precepts conferred at ordination. An exception is Jōdo Shinshū, where clerical marriage was the norm from the times of Shinran 親鸞 (1173-1262).² Ordained women, however, are often more inclined to take the obligatory celibacy seriously, mostly in response to public expectations or regulations within their Buddhist schools (Kawahashi 2007: 252-253). With regard to Sōtō Zen Buddhism, Paula Arai states that, whereas “many ordained men marry and lead householder lives similar to laity,” ordained women adhere to the distinction between laity and clergy and live strictly according to the monastic regulations (Arai 1999: 17-19).

Nowadays, ordained Buddhist women in Japan live all sorts of lives, many of which coincide with the functional roles listed by Schireson. They may be married or unmarried, with or without children. They can be the head priestess of a temple or the wife of a chief priest. Some ordained women are employed by a temple, where their functions may include or exclude religious duties. Some live a secular life as artists or as company employees, whereas others live as world renouncers (*shukkesha* 出家者), either in their own homes or in a convent. Moreover, their status is invisible if they neither wear a Buddhist robe nor display the tonsure. At first sight, this diversity of lifestyles and individual interpretations of their role seem to be a continuation of the situation of nuns in premodern Japan. Yet, whereas in premodern Japan various forms of official and private ordinations co-existed, nowadays ordination procedures are determined exclusively by each Buddhist school. Therefore, this variety of life choices does not result from differences in the status acquired at ordination, but from the lifestyle chosen after ordination. These lifestyle decisions depend on biographical factors such as family background (lay or clerical); the type of religious education and training; age; clerical patronage or its absence; and the career opportunities for ordained women offered within each school. Ordained women in contemporary Japan thus face a difficult situation

² Although Shinran established the concept of the married cleric, he maintained the differentiation between clerics and laity. Accordingly, an independent Jōdo Shinshū ordination, which developed in the sixteenth century, did not include a vow to observe the precepts. However, the nature of ordination on the local level and for women in Jōdo Shinshū before that time remains unclear (Heidegger 2006: 71; cf. Starling 2013b). The issue at stake here for women is the implied right to be the head priestess of a temple. Ordination and acquiring the status of “religious teacher” (*kyōshi* 教士) was first permitted in the Honganji branch in 1931, but women were still excluded from the right to head a temple or vote in one of the school’s legislative committees. Only in 1946 and 1948 was the restriction of temple succession to men abolished. In the Ōtani branch, the first ordination of women was permitted in 1942, yet without the right to acquire the status of *kyōshi*. Ordained women in the Ōtani branch have been allowed to head a temple since 1996 (Heidegger 2006: 73-76; see also Heidegger’s contribution to this special issue).

characterized by the indeterminacy of clerical lifestyles, discriminatory practices within Buddhist schools, and their respective biographical and social contexts.

It is the aim of this article to examine more closely how ordained women define their role in society and embody this role under such conditions. How do they live a clerical life in non-monastic social contexts? Do they draw boundaries between themselves and Buddhist laywomen, or monastic nuns? How do they integrate other roles, such as mother or wife? Given the possibility to combine ordination with a married life, I direct particular attention to the aspect of gender. What relevance do gender images have in the self-understandings of ordained women?

Terminological and Methodological Reflections

The Japanese word for nun, *nisō*, combines the characters *ni* 尼, as in *bikuni* 比丘尼 (the Japanese transliteration of the Sanskrit word *bhikṣuṇī* for female monastics), and *sō* 僧, as in *sōryō* 僧侶 (the Japanese word for Buddhist clerics). Because many contemporary *nisō* do not live a monastic life, I do not translate *nisō* or *ama* as nun or “female monastic” (Arai 1999: 15). Instead, I prefer the term “ordained woman” for those who have completed clerical training and acquired the status of *kyōshi* 教師 (religious teacher). This definition includes the ordained women of Jōdo Shinshū, although the concept of ordination (*tokudo* 得度) in this tradition never entailed a monastic life. The status of *kyōshi* in Jōdo Shinshū, however, allows a woman to head a temple and perform ritual functions as in other Buddhist schools with a monastic tradition. Therefore, I use the term “ordained women” for women of all Buddhist schools who have acquired the status of *kyōshi*; “nun” exclusively for female monastics; and “priestess” to designate a head priestess of a temple or women in a subordinate priestly position.

The empirical data of this study are mainly derived from in-depth interviews I conducted with fifteen ordained women from various Buddhist schools, including Tendai-shū 天台宗, Shingon-shū 真言宗, the Zen schools Sōtō-shū 曹洞宗 and Rinzai-shū 臨濟宗, Nichiren-shū 日蓮宗, Jōdo-shū 淨土宗, Jōdo Shinshū 淨土真宗 and Theravada Buddhism.³ Although this sample is small in number, it is significant in that it reflects not only different school affiliations, but also a diversity of lifestyles and social contexts. Five women are head priestesses of a temple (or a convent) themselves; one is the future head of a temple; two are married to head priests; two are employees in a temple; two live according to the precepts in their own homes; one works in a company, and one works as an artist and has her own family. By means of semi-structured

³ I sincerely thank all the ordained women who have supported my research by sharing their thoughts and feelings with me, even going so far as to invite me to their temples or homes; for allowing me to catch a glimpse of their lives; and for letting me share their experiences through my research.

interviews, I sought to find out how these women define their roles as nuns in the context of their particular life circumstances. In what ways does their clerical background affect their everyday lives, their social relationships etc. and vice versa? Especially with regard to women who are not daughters of a temple priest, the question of why they decided to commit themselves to an expensive, time-consuming and often physically challenging religious training arises. In concrete terms, I asked why they decided to become ordained women, how they experienced their religious training, how they structure their daily lives, and what they consider to be the “function” or “role” (*yakuwari* 役割) of an ordained woman.

The results of these interviews are by no means representative of all ordained women. As my approach is qualitative, the voices introduced here illuminate a selection of possible views. Although many of these women’s opinions and assessments often coincide, each woman represents a distinctly individualistic interpretation and practical realization of her role as an ordained woman.

In addition to the interview data, I refer to the non-academic Buddhist journal *Jimon kōryū* 寺門興隆 (*Gekkan jūshoku* 月刊住職 as of December 2013), a monthly magazine directed at head priests, clerics, and the wives of head priests working within established Buddhist denominations.⁴ Since ordained women and the wives of priests belong to the target audience of the journal, the articles also articulate these women’s voices and provide new information concerning their official status.

By relying primarily on interview data, I attempt to reconstruct how ordained women expressed their self-understandings in their conversations with me. This approach rests on a notion of identity as a self-referential performative practice that is expressed verbally or in non-verbal self-enactments in interaction. As a performative practice, it depends upon the conditions of each interactive situation and is therefore of a fragmentary and temporary character (cf. Renn and Straub 2002; Krappmann 2005).

Therefore, the specific context of my interviews must be taken into account. Interviews are a particular kind of hierarchical conversation: usually one person, the researcher, raises questions to which the other person, the interviewee, is supposed to reply. To the women I interviewed, I was an outsider in various ways—a foreign scholar who is not ordained in any religion. No shared knowledge or experience could be assumed. For them, as the objects of my research, talking to me was like addressing the academic public. Although the interviews were conducted in a conversational way—that is, with

⁴ The journal is one of the main cross-denominational organs circulating up-to-date information on all issues relevant to running and maintaining a temple (including the status of the head priests’ family members, insurance or juridical questions, etc.), as well as internal debates on current topics. It was first published in 1974 as *Gekkan jūshoku*, changed its name to *Jimon kōryū* in December 1998, and was renamed *Gekkan jūshoku* in December 2013 (<http://www.kohzansha.com/jimon.html>, accessed 26 October 2015). The general editor at *Kōzansha* 興山舎 is Yazawa Chōdō 矢澤澄道, a head priest of the *Kōya* 高野 branch of *Shingonshū*.

the opportunity to raise questions on both sides—this situation must have created feelings of caution and reserve, resulting in a self-reflective way of presenting oneself. It seems to me that, under these conditions, the women interviewed felt the need to explain their decisions and actions to me rather more than they might have when in conversation with other ordained Buddhist women.

Ordained women's identities cannot be separated from their interpretations of their roles in life. In my eyes, it is the diversity of roles they integrate, including professional roles, family roles, religious role and more, that makes their self-understandings so unique. When talking about roles, I rely on Ralph Turner's definition:

A social role is a comprehensive pattern of behavior and attitudes, constituting a strategy for coping with a recurrent set of situations, which is socially identified – more or less clearly – as an entity. A social role is played recognizably by different individuals, and supplies a major basis for identifying and placing persons in a group, organization, or society (Turner 1968, 552). It can be thought of as consisting of rights and duties, or of expected behavior, provided these terms are interpreted broadly.

(Turner 1990: 87)

Roles, in this sense, are subject to interpretation, and these interpretations depend upon the actor and the situation. They differ with regard to role performance—patterns of behavior, rights and duties—and with regard to the “recurrent set of situations” in which specific patterns of behavior and attitude are applied. As we have seen, the role of an ordained Buddhist woman is characterized by the indeterminacy of role-specific “patterns of behavior and attitude”, which may or may not be shaped by religious precepts, and by vagueness concerning the “recurrent set of situations,” which may or may not include ritual acting.

Clerical Training

Although role performance may be open to interpretation, the procedures of acquiring an ordained status are not. The duration, contents, and regulations of the training programs differ according to Buddhist school, but they mostly consist of similar components. These can be summarized as doctrinal training (including the history of Buddhism in general, of Buddhism in Japan, and of the respective Buddhist tradition in particular), ritual training and ascetic training. Doctrinal training is offered in study programs at the universities of Buddhist schools; in short, intensive classes or longer lecture courses. Ritual and ascetic training usually takes place at the training centers (*dōjō* 道場) of each school.⁵ Graduates of the study programs at Buddhist universities are predominantly the

⁵ Exceptions to this rule can be found in the branches of Jōdo Shinshū, where the “practical training” (nenbutsu 念仏, sutra chanting, rituals etc.) forms part of the doctrinal training (Maeda 2005: 124).

sons and daughters of temple priests who are heirs to their father's (in a very few cases, their mother's) temples. However, those who turn to the Buddhist path later in life usually depend on short-term and intensive teaching programs. The curriculum is the same for women and for men, although training at the school-specific centers may be performed separately for women and men, as in the case of Nichirenshū.

The procedure in general is as follows. First, candidates need to have a “clerical guide” (*shisō* 師僧, *shishō* 師匠) from the same school who accepts the candidate as his or her disciple. The *shisō* serves as a judge of the candidate's religious progress and is expected to prepare him or her for ordination. A manual on how to become a cleric emphasizes the close and life-long relationship between *shisō* and disciple, and the implied responsibility on both sides. If someone is heir to a temple, the father—that is, the present head priest—will often serve as *shisō*. For women from lay families, on the other hand, it is often not easy to find a cleric willing to take on the role of *shisō*. Only with the *shisō*'s approval can the first ordination (*tokudo*) take place.

Afterwards, when the clerical guide has reported to the school's administration that the candidate has received first ordination, he or she is registered as cleric (*sōryo*) of this particular school and receives a certificate (*dochō* 度牒). This first ordination symbolizes the transition from lay to clerical status, but it is only the starting point of the training and does not qualify the new novice to conduct rituals or head a temple. The novice still has to complete the doctrinal, ritual and ascetic training in order to acquire the status of *kyōshi* and become a fully ordained religious teacher (Maeda 2005: 104-105).⁶ Each school has a minimum age for the first ordination, ranging from six to ten years old.

The vows of the Mahayana Buddhist ordination conducted in most Japanese Buddhist schools are called *endonkai* 円頓戒 (complete and sudden precepts) and *sanju jōkai* 三聚淨戒 (threefold pure precepts). They comprise the ten major and forty-eight minor precepts of the sutra *Bonmōkyō* 梵網經 (Sk. *Brahmajāla Sūtra*), including the prohibitions on having sexual intercourse, eating meat, or drinking alcohol; the six “perfections” of a Bodhisattva (generosity, discipline, forbearance, determination, meditation, and insight) and the four general vows of a Bodhisattva: to liberate all sentient beings, to overcome all passions, to know all teachings, and to master the Buddha path (Kleine 2011: 125-127).⁷

The duration and intensity of the ritual and ascetic training vary according to the school. It may take twenty days, as in Jōdoshū, or two to three years, as in Rinzai and Sōtōshū. The physical challenge is particularly high in esoteric Buddhist schools, with

⁶ The procedures are different in the case of Jōdo Shinshū, where doctrinal training has to be completed before receiving the first ordination (Maeda 2005: 123-125).

⁷ For more detailed information about the contents and the historical development of Mahayana Buddhist precepts, see Matsuo (2013).

their continuous repetition of prostrations (*gotai tōchi* 五体投地); in the Zen Buddhist schools, with their extended sitting meditation (*zazen* 座禪) periods; and in Nichirenshū, with its repeated water ablutions, to name just a few examples of ascetic practices required by monastic training.⁸ A woman ordained into Shingonshū describes her hundred-day training at Mount Kōya (Kōya san 高野山) primarily as an experience that tested her physical limits and her potential to overcome them:

I wouldn't call it good or bad, but I realized the ultimate limits of my body... although I felt that I definitely couldn't move my body beyond this point, I just couldn't do anymore, yet I did move it!

I think it's because of the spiritual, the religious, because it's religion, that I could move my body although I couldn't imagine how; well, to be honest, just physically, without any faith, I guess I wouldn't have lasted a week.⁹

(Interview, September 2014)

Enduring the physical pain, the heat, and sleep deprivation of training is described here as a positive experience, made possible only by the strength of her belief. During this time, any contact with the outside world or interruption of the program is prohibited—once the training has been interrupted, it cannot be done a second time.

Others like the Tendai priest quoted below acutely felt the gap between those coming from a temple and those from a lay background:

They [the sons and daughters of temple priests] can recite the sutras in line with the monks, and they are used to the way the robe is arranged... I felt quite painfully the difference between them and those of us who come from a lay background... I felt that those coming from a temple are imbued with the fragrance of a monk; I felt the smell of incense emanating from their bodies.

(Quoted in Maeda 2005: 109)

For those who are not the daughters and sons of a temple, it is difficult to work as a cleric, even if the status of religious teacher has been acquired:

But the most severe problem of those who turned from lay people to clerics, more than the difficulties of becoming a cleric, is to continue being a cleric. Despite the time and money you have invested into becoming a cleric, you may not be able to work, to make your living as a cleric.

⁸ For a detailed description of the characteristics of each school's training program, see Maeda (2005: 107-140) and Hirano (2000: 119-215).

⁹ Here and in the following quotes I rely on my translations of interviews I conducted between 2011 and 2014.

(Maeda 2005: 161)

Possible professional options for fully ordained clerics include head priest of a temple (*jūshoku*), priest at a temple (*yakusō* 役僧), being adopted into a temple as the head priest's successor, founding one's own temple, being employed in the administrative institutions of the respective Buddhist school, or working as a self-supporting ritual specialist (Maeda 2005: 162-175). In addition, ordained women have the option to marry a priest (except in Sōtōshū) and become a head priest's wife.

Statistics from 2012 (Jimon kōryū 2013: 57; Bunkachō 2014: 66-79) show that in most Buddhist schools ordained women are still a minority, especially head priestesses.

Buddhist school	Male religious teachers	Female religious teachers	Head priestesses
Tendaishū	3,840	393 (9.3%) 2013: 548	105 (4.6%) 2013: 106
Kōyasan Shingonshū	5,246	856 (14%)	---
Shingonshū Chisan-ha	3,426	149 (4.2%)	51 (2.6%)
Shingonshū Buzan-ha	2,961	301 (9.2%)	95 (5.3%)
Jōdoshū	10,005	934 (8.5%) 2013: 912 (8.5%)	276 (5.0%) 2013: 276 (5.0%)
Jōdo Shinshū			
Hongaji-ha	16,847	2,603 (13.4%)	328 (3.6%)
Shinshū Ōtani-ha	14,886	2,553 (14.6%)	120 (1.6%)
Sōtōshū	15,600	597 (3.7%)	346 (3.1%)
Rinzaishū			
Myōshinji-ha	3,297	114 (3.3%)	75 (3.2%)
Nichirensū	7,252	961 (11.7%)	242 (5.7%)

Figure 1. Numbers of ordained men, ordained women and head priestesses in each Buddhist school.

The small numbers of ordained women compared to ordained men reflect the percentage of women graduates from the respective training centers (cf. Figs. 2 and 3).

	Graduates	Men	Women
2012	228	196	32
2013	144	126	18

Figure 2. Denshū Denkai Dōjō 伝宗伝戒道場, Jōdoshū.¹⁰

	Graduates	Men	Women
2004	90	75	15
2012	40	30	10
2013	73	63	10

Figure 3. Hieizan Gyōin 比叡山行院, Tendaishū.¹¹

Discrimination against ordained women

Many women who have succeeded in becoming the head priestess of a temple encounter discriminatory practices in Buddhist institutions and among Buddhist believers. These practices (1) exclude women from ritual practice and leading positions, (2) degrade their ritual performances, and (3) assign them an inferior and servile position.

In an article in *Jimon kōryū*, the cross-denominational journal for Buddhist priests, mentioned above, four anonymous head priestesses wrote about experiences of discrimination. One priestess narrates how she was skipped in a rotating system of succession to a leading position. The reason she was given was that there was no precedent for a female leader (*Jimon kōryū* 2013: 52).

The degradation of women's ritual performances is especially obvious with regard to funerary rites. In a Nichiren Buddhist survey of ordained women of this Buddhist school, some women reported that they were not allowed to conduct funerary rites because the soul of a deceased was said to be unable to attain Buddhahood if the rites were performed by a woman. In addition, the quality of a religious rite was said to be reduced if it were to be conducted by a woman (*Nichirensū Gendai Shūkyō Kenkyūsho* 2004: 19).

Similarly, the female head priestess mentioned above states that, in the countryside, ordained women who perform Buddhist rituals receive less than half the remuneration given to their male counterparts for doing the same service. "There seem to be parishioners who ask their temple to have a nun perform the funerary rites because they want to keep the funeral cheap. But usually, nuns are not allowed to perform these rites because the parishioners don't like it" (*Jimon kōryū* 2013: 52). She also remembers that, while serving in a temple together with male clerics, it was she who had to clean up and work in the kitchen. However, in retrospect, she regards these experiences of discrimination as motivating her to commit herself to building up her own temple as a center of the local community and to gain respect in this community.

¹⁰ These figures are based on private data collected by the Department of Doctrine and Studies (Kyōgakukyoku 教学局) of Jōdoshū, given to me in December 2013.

¹¹ These figures are based on private information from the Office of Religious Affairs (Shūmūchō 宗務庁) of Tendaishū, given to me in January 2014.

Nowadays, I am content and happy every day. I am happy to be a woman. Had it not been for these male priests, the parishioners and believers wouldn't open their hearts to me now. Should I meet one of these male priests, I would like to thank him by saying, "I owe you for discriminating against me."
(Jimon kōryū 2013: 52)

Ordained Buddhist Women's Perspectives of Their Clerical Role

In order to reconstruct contemporary ordained women's self-understandings from the interviews, I will focus on (1) their individual motives for becoming an ordained woman, and (2) the functions ascribed to their role as ordained women. These include individual interpretations 'tailored' to each woman herself, as well as reflections about the general tasks of female clerics. The findings presented here are based on a thematic analysis of the interviews I conducted, with a special focus on women from lay backgrounds.

Motives for Becoming an Ordained Woman

Personal narrations of the motives for becoming ordained are of particular relevance in cases of women from lay families. For daughters succeeding their fathers as head priestess, ordination is an option that provides a certain lifestyle and, hopefully, a corresponding livelihood. In contrast, if a woman without a previous connection to a temple decides to become fully ordained, she usually does not know what kind of life she will be able to lead after her religious training. Hence there is more need to explain this decision. Often, these explanations are embedded in a biographical narrative that starts in childhood or youth. Recurrent narrative topics include an early interest in religions, expressed in phrases like "from the start I liked shrines and temples a lot" (interview, February 2014), an outstanding experience that changed the narrator's perspective on life before attaining adulthood, and the fascination caused by certain scriptures or people (dead or alive).

The outstanding experience mentioned most often is the encounter with death at an early age. Facing death in one's social surroundings is said to have caused an interest in the meaning of life and death and a questioning of conventional life paths. In the following quote, Ms. Arai,¹² a woman ordained into Nichirenshū in her early forties, narrates how she felt after the death of her cousin when she was sixteen years old:

I realized that death can come any time, and therefore my interest shifted from dreaming about the future to asking "what is life?", "what is death?"

It's a time when you ask yourself what dreams of the future you have, or what you want to become in future, and with this in mind everybody thinks about one's future

¹² Names of the women interviewed are pseudonyms except in cases where the full name is given, i.e. family name and surname.

job and wants to choose it accordingly. But I had realized that no matter what I might plan, I could die suddenly.

(Interview, November 2013)

The women who shared this same catalyst for their interest in becoming ordained described such a transformational experience as giving rise to the feeling that they were different. Whereas “everybody thinks about one’s future job” according to his or her dreams, Ms. Arai did not look for a job, but for a way of living: “I didn’t want to study to become this or that, but if there were studies teaching me how to live, then I could commit myself to them” (interview, November 2013). Thus, she considers turning to religion as deviating from the norm and links it to a metaphysical interest.

Another motive mentioned in the interviews is the influence ascribed to a particular person or to Buddhist scriptures. Usually, the fascination raised by Buddhist writings or people explains why a particular school was chosen, or is described as the final impulse for ordination. For Asuka Gotō, an ordained woman of Shingonshū, who is married with a teenage child, the encounter with a selection of Buddhist scriptures deposited in a hotel room¹³ initiated a comprehensive reading of Buddhist literature and ultimately the decision to become ordained into Shingonshū. “I read books from all Buddhist schools, and because what I wanted to get to know most was Shingonshū ... I, as a person, was interested in Shingonshū, as if I had chosen it” (interview, September 2014).

On the other hand, Ms. Arai narrates how studying the life and teachings of Nichiren (1222-1282) at a Nichiren Buddhist university stimulated her wish to “jump” into clerical life:

When I was a second-year student, part of me began to think that I won’t understand unless I jumped into what I studied.

Because I liked Nichiren’s teachings, I wanted to live on the basis of his teachings, I wanted to become a world renouncer (*shukke*).

(Interview, November 2013)

Another example describes how a Buddhist priest came to be a living ‘role model’. Ms. Suzuki, an ordained woman of Jōdo Shinshū, lives in a temple and works as a private psychotherapeutic counselor. In her narration, encounters with a priest who came regularly to teach at her grandparents’ temple while she was a child made her turn to a religious path. His constant murmuring of the *nenbutsu* 念仏 during his everyday life, coupled with his friendliness, made a deep impression on her. While a teenager, she decided to become a priest like him.

¹³ The compilation *Bukkyō seiten*, published by Bukkyō Dendō Kyōkai, is a translation of selected Buddhist texts that is often supplied in hotel rooms.

Therefore, the contents of his sermon—he was a professor talking about karma—I didn't understand it at all, but I heard his voice intoning the *nenbutsu*.

Well ... I felt his smile and his gentle heart. And I thought, if men grow old, they must become like him. And I thought I should become a cleric (*sōryo*), a priest (*obōsan* お坊さん).

(Interview, September 2014)

General Functions Ascribed to the Role of an Ordained Woman

Many of the women I talked to defined the role of an ordained woman, in a wide sense, as social support. In concrete terms, they described their role as being supportive, creating an atmosphere of warmth, security, solidarity, companionship, and consultation. Often, they explained this social commitment by referring to perceived gender-specific differences in abilities or behavioral patterns. Below is a quote by Ms. Arai, who works part-time in a temple and is a post-doctoral scholar of Nichiren's writings:

What nuns can do, somehow, rather than using strong words and rather than leading people; I think the most important attitude a nun should have is to make people feel that they are not alone, that someone who they can turn to whenever they want is by their side, that is, to be open and accepting.

Men, they push their way... they get angry, so I think they should leave it to us, because women, when someone comes to them and needs to talk, they create a feeling of safety (*anshinkan* 安心感), this feeling that someone is there for them.

(Interview, November 2013)

Ms. Arai claims that women are more empathetic and accepting than men, whose behavior she describes as generally direct, uncompromising, and frightening. The ideal of being "open and accepting" as a particular communicative behavior is illustrated with reference to the people coming to the temple to talk to her. Rather than directing the conversation or pushing them, Ms. Arai tries to respond to how people wish to communicate, no matter whether they want to discuss a problem or have a chat over cake and tea.

Well, if you're urged, "Now what happened? Tell me, tell me!" then you can't talk, can you? I think it's important to just have tea and spend some time together, be there for someone in this way.

If you're comfortable with me, then I'm glad to listen. If you're comfortable with me, let's talk. It's this kind of relationship.

So it's mothers who bring their children when they come, and I play catch ball with them.

(Interview, November 2013)

To Ms. Arai, this way of accepting people and things as they are is a core value of Buddhism: “When I come to the point where I want to do something from my side, then Buddhism, or religion for that matter, has broken down” (interview, November 2013). Buddhism and religion in general are defined here in an ethical sense; that is, as the practical realization of norms of living. Given her previous remarks on women’s social skills, this is an implicit yet strong claim that women are predestined to maintain religions as lived morality.

The same claim that women have a strong tendency to be supportive is expressed by Ms. Yoshida, a woman in her early forties ordained into Tendai Buddhism. She also comes from a lay family. After being ordained as a teenager, she lived a lay life for about ten years before she returned to the life of a cleric as a priestess in the temple she has founded in her home. She argues that women are destined to act in a motherly way because of the potential motherhood implied by their gender. In her terms, the main function of an ordained woman is to “stand by” someone (*yorisou* 寄り添う), a term also used by Ms. Arai but discussed more fully by Ms. Yoshida:

“Standing by” means, well ... it means being there, being close, being beside someone and creating an atmosphere that makes it easy for someone to talk about whatever they want to talk about. And helping anybody who wants to do something, giving a small push forward, supporting. Because after all, men and women are born from mothers.

Especially women have no reservations to talk to nuns, but also men say they feel less reserved towards women, because they are born from mothers. That’s also what I heard from my believers.

(Interview, February 2014)

Her emphasis on the motherly nature of ordained women corresponds to the rhetoric of a parent–child relationship in her general conception of the cleric’s role. As a “child of Buddha” (*hotoke no ko* 仏の子), a cleric’s function is to serve as an “intermediary” (*hashiwatashi* 橋渡し) who can transmit Buddha’s help to those in need of it. “Many people want to talk to somebody, they want to become comfortable by confiding into someone... There is this superb person called Buddha, and there are priests as his children, and because they are real people, the priests can listen directly...” (interview, February 2014). This mediation takes place in her own consultation practice (*sōdan* 相談): as Buddha’s child she “becomes empty” (*mu ni naru* 無になる) and then transmits the words of Buddha directed at this person.

Her interpretation of an ordained woman’s role is thus conceptualized in terms of family relationships. She herself fulfills a double role: as a child (of Buddha) and as a

mother (of lay people). By choosing this conceptualization, she refers to the values of filial piety and parental care that are quite prevalent in Japanese society.

Whereas these interpretations of an ordained woman's role emphasize the relevance of being a woman, others stress the support that can be provided specifically for women. Married women especially tended to point out the value of their experiences as mothers and wives in propagating Buddhism among women, thus claiming that married ordained women can serve particular functions because of their secular gender roles. These women contribute to a kind of grassroots Buddhism, perhaps a result of their desire to find ways of integrating Buddhist thought and practice into their everyday lives. In the following quote, Ms. Gotō, a married woman ordained into Shingonshū, describes her role as “taking care” of women by listening to their problems. Her particular qualification derives from combining Buddhist knowledge with experiences she shares with other wives or mothers. She is married with a child, and works as a manga writer and illustrator.

Well, the function (*yakuwari*), I can only talk for Japan, but myself, as a nun (*nisō*), first of all I want to take care of women...

...Because I'm not someone who is active inside the organization, but nuns who are in the main temple or related institutions... they work hard, and in such institutional places, I think, nuns may have a proper function as a priest. But me, I don't actually have a temple, I live with an ordinary family, how can I say, when friends call with all kinds of concerns, such as “I want to get divorced!”

Or “My husband!” or “The children!” I respond as a person in the same situation, and with the same experiences—well, I'm not divorced...

How can I say, with the wisdom of Buddhism, I think I can talk from a different perspective. But in the end, if a person who hasn't raised children tells you how to do it, then you don't listen, do you?

(Interview, September 2014)

Ms. Gotō emphasizes the importance of being close to lay people; essentially, being on the same level as they are, being “easy to talk to” (*iiyasui* 言いやすい). In order to maintain this closeness, she considers it important not to be too recognizable as an ordained woman. “Just for me, it is enough to be just a little bit like a nun (*nisōrashii* 尼僧らしい), a nun to whom one can talk easily and who can give advice”. This is one of the reasons why she does not shave her head (besides her consideration of her daughter's feelings). “Besides, well, if I shaved my head, a wall would arise. One couldn't talk comfortably with me” (interview, September 2014). To her, looking and living like an ordinary woman enables her to help women in her everyday life and to convey the

Buddhist “wisdom,” namely that Buddha (or the universe) is in everybody’s heart.¹⁴

This partial de-emphasis of a gap between ordained women and laywomen is justified by distinguishing between different types of ordained women. Drawing a boundary between women “inside” Buddhist institutions who can fulfill priestly functions and those “outside” like herself serves to justify an individual lifestyle that is perceived as not conforming to the expected role performance. At the same time, this boundary leaves room for alternative ways to open up to those who do not have the opportunity to act as a priestess.

The idea that, because of their secular roles, married ordained women are especially qualified to support other women is also expressed in responses to a questionnaire conducted among “women religious teachers” (*josei kyōshi* 女性教師) of Nichiren Buddhism in 2002 and 2003. Most of the respondents are married to head priests and have families; hence they live “inside the system.” Yet, they criticized their limited possibilities to perform Buddhist rituals. In reaction to these restrictions, they demand acknowledgment of their unique value in propagating Buddhism among women:

We want to be advisors for young women raising children, for those who suffer because they have parents in need of care.

Our experiences as women, as wives and as mothers, can contribute to spreading our faith.

(Nichirensū Gendai Shūkyō Kenkyūsho 2004: 24)

In their summary of the results, the initiators of the survey stressed the women’s pledge to value the social dimension of being a cleric rather than the ritual dimension. This shift would allow them to be active as ordained women within their social context, and to gain self-respect from performing this role.

The curriculum of the *dōjō* must not stop at formal and aesthetic guidance because this alone does not support creating dignified religious people who act on the basis of faith and lead a meaningful life... If in the Shingyō dōjō we could at least learn the meaning of what Nichiren taught about women’s ability to attain Buddhahood, and if we were taught the importance of a self-understanding as religious people who wholeheartedly deal with the sufferings of life and interact with people, there would be less laicization, and until the end of our lives, we could maintain a self-understanding and self-respect as ordained women who are useful in our time.

(Nichirensū Gendai Shūkyō Kenkyūsho 2004: 24)

¹⁴ In a conversation with Ms. Gotō just before submitting this article, she told me that she had recently started to shave her head, because her family agreed to it. Whereas she sees the advantage of her outward appearance as a lay woman in the fact that women talked to her “in their natural language,” for her, looking like an ordained woman has the advantage that people seeking consultation address her specifically because of her status (private email correspondence).

Whereas the women introduced above emphasized the support they can give to women because of their married status, the following case exemplifies a way of supporting women on the basis of one's clerical status. Myosei Midorikawa, ordained into Tendai-shū, offers classes in sutra copying (*shakyō* 写経) as a way of making use of a religious practice to ease the stress women experience in their everyday lives: "I want to provide a place where women who are exhausted from their work and young mothers can experience *shakyō* easily" (quoted in Kajiyama 2014: 43). As she explains in an interview in the cultural magazine *Tashinami*, concentrating on writing one character after the other has a calming effect on the mind, restoring the writer's individual rhythm by harmonizing writing and breathing. To her, writing the characters of the sutra is like a kind of meditation practice: "You don't have to try by all means to become 'empty.' If things come to your mind, it doesn't matter. If you concentrate on *shakyō*, your mind will naturally become empty" (quoted in Kajiyama 2014: 43). Ms. Midorikawa thinks this is especially popular among women because they are confronted with too much information, and therefore look for ways to "order their minds" and "restore their intuitive sensitivity" (Kajiyama 2014: 45). In her classes, she starts with a brief explanation of the meaning of the *Heart Sutra* (*Hannya shingyō* 般若心経), before it is chanted by all participants. Some short breathing and relaxation exercises prepare participants for the writing. Afterwards, name, date and a personal wish are written on the copied texts, and Ms. Midorikawa takes them back to the temple to present them as an offering. In this way, she applies Buddhist knowledge and practice in order to help women in dealing with their everyday lives (Kajiyama 2014: 43-35).

Ms. Midorikawa works in a temple and has the outward appearance of an ordained woman. In her classes, she wears a Buddhist robe, and she has a shaved head. In contrast, Ms. Gotō lives the life of a laywoman with a family. Both, however, emphasize solidarity between laywomen and ordained women, and claim that ordained women can help lay women because of their Buddhist knowledge.

The women I quoted in these examples tend to interpret the "patterns of behavior and attitude" and correspondingly the "duties" of an ordained woman's role as the practical realization of the attitude to support others. By doing so, they emphasized the social functions of a cleric and de-emphasized ritual functions. This interpretation provides freedom from spatial settings such as temples, with their ritual tools that are not necessarily accessible. Social engagement in the sense of being there for people in need of help is not limited to particular places; it can be practiced in one's own neighborhood, at work, in a temple, or anywhere else. Besides, since concrete forms of social support are open to interpretation, there is freedom to choose the ways in which these functions are realized. Furthermore, defining an ordained woman's role as a way of shaping human relationships increases its adaptability to other roles and to a diversity of living conditions. Nevertheless, ritual and doctrinal knowledge are not devalued, but rather *highly* valued

as what distinguishes an ordained woman from a laywoman, and what qualifies the former to support the latter.

Individualized Role Interpretations

Individual role interpretations in the examples above were authorized by the respective woman's social context and her role expertise as mother, wife, or ordained woman. Individualized role interpretations, on the other hand, refer to those activities that are defined as individual tasks on the basis of personal dispositions and abilities. The following examples will illustrate the legitimization strategies that are used in justifying such activities.

One example is Ms. Gotō's legitimization of her work as a manga illustrator. To her, the ritual training she received in her Buddhist school provides only the form of religious practice, whereas everybody has to find his or her own way to endow the formal practice with meaning. "Inserting genuine meaning (*honmono* 本物) into these forms, this is the work after the *kegyō* 加行" (interview, September 2014).¹⁵ To what extent and in what ways it is possible to "fill these forms with contents" depends on each person and his or her actual life situations. In this way, she provides a rather broad legitimization of individual interpretations of religious practice and its meaning. In addition, however, she refers to her inclination to draw manga in combination with the impossibility to live as a temple priestess. In a consultation with her clerical guide (*shisō*), they agreed that she could "liven up" (*ikasu* 活かす) her clerical role by drawing manga. Finally, she mentions the "indissoluble bond" (*kitemo kirenai en* 切っても切れない縁) that connects her with the Buddhist deity Fudō Myōō 不動明王, or Fudō-san 不動さん, who is a main protagonist in one of her manga.¹⁶ He is her ultimate legitimization.

I'm untalented in chanting sutras, and I don't have a temple, but I prayed that if I could draw manga and spread the Buddhist law this way, I really wanted to do my best. Suddenly there was this feeling, it emerged suddenly, a strong feeling. I felt as though he [Fudō-san] were here, and if I portrayed him in this shape, he would enter the image.

(Interview, September 2014)

Ms. Gotō's individualized role interpretation is thus authorized on three levels: on a fundamental level, she claims the general right to individual interpretations of Buddhist

¹⁵ *Kegyō* is an abbreviation for the ritual and ascetic clerical training in Shingonshū, the *shido kegyō* 四度加行.

¹⁶ A manga in which Fudō-san and Ms. Gotō introduce various Bodhisattvas and Buddhist deities to the reader (Gotō 2011).

practice; on the institutional level, she justifies her decision to spread the Buddhist law via manga by the permission of the responsible authority; and on a doctrinal level, she provides authorization from a Buddhist deity.

A similar pattern is reflected in Ms. Arai's way of justifying her decision to give up the life of a priestess to dedicate herself to research into Nichiren's scriptures. She describes herself as someone who is destined to do what she does because of her personal abilities and her initial commitment to study Nichiren.

But as for myself as a cleric, I feel that, rather than fulfilling social functions, I have a task to which I was called by Nichiren. Rather than social functions. If my own task contributes to society, that's great...

Because it turned out to be my job to write correctly about Nichiren as a person, I wonder whether this isn't what I was asked to do. It's my destiny. And committing myself to this job is my religious practice.

(Interview, November 2013)

This self-presentation is endowed with particular authority by reference to the school's founder. At the same time, she interprets her decision to take up Buddhist studies again as reflecting renewed awareness of her initial religious interest.

And I remembered why I wanted to become ordained, why I wanted to study Buddhism in the first place, I remembered right back to when my cousin had died, and I wondered, what was I doing?

I chanted sutras, I performed funerals, I did everything, but then it came to my mind that originally I wanted to study Nichiren. I felt I wanted to study more.

(Interview, November 2013)

In the examples above, ordained women claim their right to individualized role interpretations based on their personal inclinations and skills. They justify their activities in various ways, whether as a religious commitment, or whether with regard to social conditions that rule out other, more priestly activities, as in the case of Ms. Gotō. These women place huge importance on legitimization by a religious authority, whether the school founder or a Buddhist deity. By referring to these authorities, individual decisions can be interpreted as responding to a vocation rather than following the aim of self-fulfillment. At the same time, religious value is assigned to the person herself and to her activities as scholar or manga artist. Being called by the school founder or supported by a deity indicates that the women possess a certain spirituality themselves and elevates allegedly secular activities.

Conclusion

In accordance with the variety of their lifestyles, ordained women display different self-understandings of and perspectives on their role. Their characterization of an ordained woman's role in general, however, is surprisingly congruent. Many women define role performance as social engagement, as dedicating oneself to supporting others. Individual interpretations adapt the practical realization of this engagement to the respective social contexts of each woman. Depending on these contexts, the basis of their social practice is either claimed to be their particular knowledge of Buddhist thought and practice due to their clerical status, or the additional knowledge that comes from being a wife and mother if they are married and have children. In their individual ways of supporting women or people in general, ordained women create new relationships between clerical women and laywomen as well as new forms of spreading Buddhist knowledge and practice beyond the confines of a temple. In this sense, they contribute to a kind of grassroots Buddhism in which the boundaries between clerical and lay status dissolve in a secular context.

In these role interpretations, the relevance of ritual practice is displaced by that of social practice. Re-evaluating these two aspects of clerical functions is a way of detaching the role performance of ordained women from temples and ritual practice, thus countering the discrimination and restrictions they experience on the institutional level.

A main element in these role definitions is the implied gender rhetoric. In the cases presented here, re-interpreting the role of a cleric and re-evaluating conceptions of gender are interdependent and mutually strengthening strategies. Many of the ordained women I met make use of different conceptions of gender as a means of emphasizing their particular contribution to the role of cleric. These conceptions presume different social responsibilities and different behavioral patterns for men and women respectively. Women are depicted as more socially competent and anchored in people's everyday lives than men. Reference to such gender-specific characterizations, combined with the affirmative attitude towards women's roles as mothers and wives, maintain the rather conservative image of "strong, directive men" and "caring, accepting women." Yet this image is re-evaluated: because of the characteristics assigned to their gender, women can fulfill social functions that men cannot—or at least not as well as women. Women can therefore be clerics 'in a wider sense' than ordained men. Accentuating the social functions of clerics simultaneously elevates the position of ordained women, and the inferiority assigned to them in discriminatory practices is patently reversed.

Another characteristic of the self-understandings presented above is their underlying claim to individualism. All the women introduced above assume the right to articulate individual interpretations of their clerical role, and they make use of it. This freedom of individual choice finds expression in their outward appearance (shaved heads and Buddhist robes or secular clothing), as well as in their self-determined ways of living as ordained woman—as a scholar, an artist, the founder of a temple, or a self-supporting nun. In some cases, this freedom is seen as the positive reverse of the inaccessibility of more priestly ways of living. At the same time, individualism is sometimes paired with a lack of interest in solidarity among ordained women—many of the women I met

emphasized the uniqueness of their lifestyles, depending on their particular biographies and social contexts. Only monastic nuns demanded a common standard of lifestyle as laid down by clerical precepts. Instead, solidarity is advocated among Buddhist women in general, independently of their lay or clerical status.

Individualism in this sense of agency—that is, as subjective interpretations of roles that are individually chosen instead of being determined by the religious community—is accompanied by an individualizing tendency in defining the functions of their role. They are defined as addressing the individual and his or her needs. Buddhist and other knowledge, empathy and solidarity are to be applied to the individual in a specific situation rather than being taught dogmatically, as men are said to do.

An important strategy in these individual perspectives is the multiple ways of drawing boundaries, whether between women and men, between ordained women and laywomen, and also among ordained women. Often, nuns who live a monastic life were seen as a different type of ordained woman, and vice versa. Other boundaries were drawn between ordained women “in the system” (i.e. temple successors, chief temple priestesses or priestesses in minor positions) and those “outside the system”. Ordained women living a lay life were distinguished from those who live according to the precepts, and those who fulfilled their social function were distinguished from those who chose other ways of living. In the examples introduced here, boundary drawing is an important means of justifying individual choices without excluding different interpretations of these same roles. Individual lifestyles are designated as differing from an assumed ‘normal’ role performance (such as working as a priestess), while remaining within the frame of possible role performances. Hence, boundary drawing in these cases does not serve to exclude others, but rather to integrate a variety of self-understandings.

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