

Murasaki's Musings

Analyzing the Influence of Religion on the Court of Heian Japan



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Introduction

“I wish I could be more adaptable and live more gaily in the present world- had I not had an extraordinary sorrow- but whenever I hear delightful or interesting things my yearning for a religious life grows stronger”¹

This quote is by Murasaki Shikibu, a famous writer and court lady of Heian period Japan, and encompasses the dual “personalities” of this time period. Large influences of Buddhist thought had traveled over from India and China to Japan a little before this age, and had become a very characteristic part of Japanese culture. It cannot be discounted that religion had a large influence over the court and the persons of it, but sources show that the Heian court also picked and chose what it wanted to get from it. This comes in with the second personality of this time period, which was how “gaily” most people of the court lived. This was apparent in the extremely extravagant and important religious ceremonies which were the highlight of every courtier’s calendar. In this paper it will become apparent that while religion was very prominent in the court and in the lives of the aristocracy, it was altered considerably from its true form to meet the Heian period court’s needs. Murasaki’s diary is used to illustrate to this, as through descriptions of Buddhist influence in exact events and musings of trivial daily life occurrences, she gives a clear picture of how religion did and did not permeate into aristocrats’ lives during the Heian period.

¹ Murasaki Shikibu, “The Diary of Murasaki Shikibu” (1007-1010), in *Diaries of Court Ladies of Old Japan*, trans. Annie Shepley Omori and Kochi Do (Boston and New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1920), 94.

Lady Murasaki and Her Diary

During the Heian period in Japan, “because knowledge of ceremonial was a form of cultural capital courtiers kept diaries in which they carefully noted the details of the rites they attended...[these] diaries provide invaluable information on the religious lifestyles of the elite”² and this was especially true for court ladies. At this point in time the upper classes of society were very refined and involved in various forms of art, which included writing.³ While men stuck to writing in the foreign Chinese script because it was the scholarly language of the Confucian Classics, women began writing in Hangul, the newest Japanese script. This explains why there were many distinguished female writers in this time, especially among the ladies-in-waiting of the court. One of these ladies was Murasaki Shikibu, who was believed to be born in 978 to Fujiwara Tametoki, a member of a minor and literary branch of the Fujiwara clan.⁴ She grew up in a very cultured atmosphere, surrounded by studies of the Confucian classics and other forms of scholarship, and came from a “family with a long tradition of scholarly and artistic interests”⁵. While she as a female was not purposely educated, she learned off of her brothers studies and became well versed in Japanese literature as well as both Chinese and Buddhist classic texts⁶. Her father was an official and she traveled with him to the Echizen province near the capital, where he arranged for her to “enter court as maid-of-honour to Michiniga daughter Akiko, the nineteen-year-old consort of the young Emperor Ichijo”⁷. Previous to this she had begun writing the famous “Genji Monogatari”, an incredibly long

² Heather Blair, “Religion and Politics in Heian-Period Japan,” *Religious Compass* 7.8 (August 2013): 289.

³ Ivan Morris, *The World of the Shining Prince; Court Life in Ancient Japan* (New York: Knopf, 1964), 44.

⁴ Morris, *Shining Prince*, 252.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 253.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 253.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 254.

romance novel of a Heian prince which is thought to have been the first “psychological” novel of Japan. She was renowned as a writer after this, which may have been a factor leading to her appointment to the court in 1005. She began writing a diary in 1007, and continued it for two years, which told of activities at court and of the people in it⁸. As a close lady-in-waiting to the Empress she was intricately involved with the going-ons of the court and in such gives the reader a close look at the aristocratic and imperial life of the Heian period. Additionally, “Murasaki's diary throws considerable light on her knowledge of Buddhism and on her attitude to religion. Her writing shows that she knew a great deal about the intricate Buddhist ceremonial, its hierarchy, and its monastic orders...she shows herself to have been imbued with the underlying spirit of Buddhism common to all sects- the sense of universal impermanence”⁹ which demonstrates the influence of religion on individual members of the imperial court of the time. Buddhism not only influenced the personal lives of people in Heian Japan, but also the overall activities of the court.

The Heian Period

The Heian period took place in Japan starting in 794 AD when the capital was moved from Nara to Kyoto, and lasted until 1185¹⁰. The early Heian was when the Tendai and Shingon sects of Buddhism were founded, and the later Heian was Murasaki's time, when the Fujiwara clan monopolized power¹¹. Kyoto was a small city and during Murasaki's time it was ruled by Emperor Ichijo (980-1011) who had two empress consorts: Sadako was the first and Akiko the

⁸ Amy Lowell, introduction to *Diaries of Court Ladies of Old Japan*, trans. Annie Shepley Omori and Kochi Do (Boston and New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1920), xxvii.

⁹ Morris, *Shining Prince*, 258.

¹⁰ Lowell, intro. to *Diaries*, xiv.

¹¹ Morris, *Shining Prince*, 3.

second. They lived in different parts of the palace and there was a large rivalry between them, which extended to their entourages¹². The overall power organization of the Heian period was “characterized by a form of rulership in which three types of power blocks shared in state rights and functions...the court, the military houses, and shrine-temple complexes...religious institutions were able to negotiate with, and sometimes even coerce, the court”¹³ which illustrates how religion had a large sway over state affairs. At this time “the courts direct involvement in local governance, taxation, and military operations decreased sharply...aristocrats and royals, as well as religious institutions, began to develop manorial estates (shoen) over which they held sovereign rights”¹⁴ giving them huge influence and presence in the country. While the emperor’s position and power was and always had been legitimized by the idea that he was a descendent of the sun goddess Amaterasu¹⁵ (a major Shinto deity who was part of Japanese creation myths), by the middle of the tenth century the Emperor was really only theoretically supreme, and did not hold much actual power. His main functions then were sacerdotal and cultural- as a direct descendent of the high priest of Shinto it was essential that he be deeply involved and dedicated to both religious ceremonies and observances. In fact, “the native word for government (matsurigotot) meant ‘[Shinto] ceremonial affairs’”¹⁶, demonstrating how influenced by religion and how ritualistic government was. It was much more focused on religious ceremonies than about state affairs and governance.

¹² Lowell, intro. to *Diaries*, xvi.

¹³ Blair, “Religion and Politics”, 285.

¹⁴ Ibid., 287.

¹⁵ Morris, *Shining Prince*, 41.

¹⁶ Ibid., 43.

At this time there was more court positions filled than was needed which created an odd divide of power. This caused most officials to have a lot of time on their hands for cultural pursuits, such as religion, literature, and participating in extravagant court function¹⁷. This explains why this period in Japanese history is famous for its highly civilized and refined culture, as well as for its focus on the arts. Part of this was literature- a new Japanese script called Kana, also known as “woman’s hand”, emerged at the time. This and the penchant for men to prefer the more scholarly Chinese writing “is the main reason that [women] produced most of the important writers of the time”¹⁸, which included Lady Murasaki. The culture of the period was very polarized: one large aspect of it was “eiga” which included the “fascination with elaborate court ceremonial, with great religious processions, and with those brilliant state functions in which the magnificently courted officials move as though performing some stylized dance”¹⁹ and focused on pomp and color and grandeur. On the opposite side, “the negative tone of Buddhist doctrine-its picture of the world as a place of universal suffering- was [also] an important element”²⁰ of the period. This and the prediction that the world was about to enter into the “hopeless phase” the Buddha had earlier predicted gave the Heian period a very somber and bleak feeling.

Religious Context

While the Japanese court used Confucianism and Chinese classics to guide their court set up and policies, by tenth century Japan “matters of governance and authority necessarily

¹⁷Lowell, intro. to *Diaries*, xv.

¹⁸Morris, *Shining Prince*, 13.

¹⁹Ibid.

²⁰Ibid.

involved gods, spirits, Buddhas, and bodhisattvas...the kingly law and the Buddhist Dharma were interdependent”²¹. At this time Buddhist religion had permeated the society heavily and the indigenous Shinto religion had remained prominent as well. Even though they were contradictory in theology “for Murasaki and her countrymen there was no idea that the acceptance of one set of beliefs (Buddhism) might preclude adherence to another (Shintoism), or that either was incompatible with a mass of complex superstitions deriving both from native traditions and from Chinese folklore”²². This is due to the syncretism of the two powerful sects of Mahayana Buddhism, Tendai and Shingon, and the fact that Shintoism was never an extremely developed or all-encompassing religion. During this time period “Heian Buddhism [was] as affluent and well-established as the church of England in the eighteenth century”²³ due to links to the Imperial and powerful Fujiwara families, support from government, and the popularity of Buddhist ceremonies. Religion was so thoroughly enmeshed in the court and politics that superiors in the church were often of imperial or at least noble rank²⁴. Another factor of its success was the large network of temples across the country which connected the Imperial court to certified district temples to village shrines²⁵. In this way “religion served the interest of the central elites by binding the provinces to the center”²⁶ as well as spreading the religion and control over the entire nation.

²¹ Blair, “Religion and Politics”, 284.

²² Morris, *Shining Prince*, 92.

²³ Ibid., 103.

²⁴ Ibid., 104.

²⁵ Mikael Adolphson, Edward Kamens, and Stacie Matsumoto, eds., *Heian Japan, Centers and Peripheries* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2007), 222.

²⁶ Morris, *Shining Prince*, 290.

Religious Influence in the Court as Seen in “The Diary of Lady Murasaki”

Birth of the August Crown Prince

Murasaki began her diary with a detailed description of the birth of the Empress’s son and surrounding ceremonies. It is a very telling event in regards to both the scale of important events such as these as well as how much religion was involved in the imperial life. She describes that at the birth “there assembled not only the priests who had been summoned here for these three months, but also the itinerant monks who were brought from every mountain and temple. Their prayers would reach the Buddha’s of the three worlds. All the soothsayers in the world were summoned...messengers ran off to offer sutra-reciting at various temples”²⁷. This description, even though it is exaggerated, illustrates to what a large extent the court could pull in religious resources such as monks and priests, and how much religion was utilized at these important events. Even just the sounds she hears demonstrate the Buddhist influence: “the murmuring sounds of waters mingles all night with the never ceasing recitation of sutras”²⁸ and then “immediately the prayers at the five altars begin. The voices of the priests in lotus recitation, vying with each other far and near, are solemn indeed”²⁹, where these recitations and prayers are for the easy delivery of Queen Akiko. Both the recitation of the sutra and lotus are distinctly Buddhist, as this was the main religion of the court at the time. However, at the birth men also “cried at the tops of their voices to scare away evil spirits...eight million gods seemed to be listening with ears erect for their Shinto prayers”³⁰ which illustrates practices of the Shinto religion as well as the numerous indigenous god she is referring to. At this time

²⁷ Shikibu, “Diary”, 76.

²⁸ Ibid., 71.

²⁹ Ibid., 72.

³⁰ Ibid., 76.

period there was a large mixing of these religions without any conflict and “the inclusion of indigenous deities as participants in these rites was also distinctive to the practice in Japan...[they] simply recast existing customs in Buddhist terms”³¹. It is highly likely that these sorts of birthing ceremonies were common long before Buddhism reached Japan, but now they just added Buddhist priests and incantations to them as well to harness all the “religious power” they could.

Monastic Court Ceremonies

During this time the line between civil and monastic positions was relatively thin as “the Buddhist clergy functioned in short as a secondary bureaucracy complementing the aristocratic officials of the imperial court”³². For example at one of the ceremonies after the birth of the prince “the Reverend Gyocho and the other priests performed incantations. The Reverend Ingen recited the prayers written by the Lord Prime Minister in the previous day adding some of his own”³³ where the Lord Prime Minister was writing Buddhist prayers and the Reverend was most likely a court noble of some sort. These ceremonies and practice of religion by the court “were most often national in character- the guarantee of the well-being of the emperor or the protection of the nation”³⁴, the incantations previously mentioned were meant to bless the lives of the Empress, emperor, and the new prince. They were not enacted just for ritual practice or for true spiritual gain, but more to legitimize the power of these individuals.

³¹ Adolphson, *Centers and Peripheries*, 161.

³² *Ibid.*, 184.

³³ Shikibu, “Diary”, 77.

³⁴ Adolphson, *Centers and Peripheries*, 161.

Throughout her diary Murasaki mentions various other court ceremonies, though not in a very factual or explanatory nature. Her diary supports the thought that “many of these occasions were of religious or folk origin but had become accepted as part of secular, metropolitan life” and that “the celebrations of Heian Kyo concerned chiefly the aristocracy”³⁵ as they were all treated as social gatherings rather than purely religious. There is only ever mention of the imperial court and religious officials, not of any commoners. One event of significance was the “occasional festival of the Kamo shrine [where] the Vice-Lieutenant-General...was made the Kings substitute. It was a day of fasting also”³⁶ which is important because it demonstrates the combination of religious and civil events. These sorts of ceremonies were of religious nature in order to legitimize them, and they demonstrate how “the religious establishment provided ritual and ideological protection to the Heian state”³⁷. The court also made various pilgrimages to different temples, and these religious outings were often treated very leisurely, as seen in the passage below:

“On the eleventh of the First month, 1009, in the early morning they went to the temple. The Lord Ministers wife accompanied the Queen...There was preaching. People made confession according to the custom of the mountain temple. Many pictures of pagoda were painted, and they amused themselves. Most of the nobles had retired, and there were few persons left when the preaching began. The preachers and interpreters of the sutras were twenty in number....They all preached in different ways

³⁵ Morris, *Shining Prince*, 154.

³⁶ Shikibu, “Diary”, 119.

³⁷ Blair, “Religion and Politics”, 288.

about the merit of the Queen's presence; there were many things laughed at. After the preaching the courtiers went boating; they all rowed and enjoyed themselves"³⁸

Murasaki's descriptions of how "they amused themselves" and "rowed and enjoyed themselves" illustrate how religious activities like these were used as an escape from usual court life, and were not used for singularly religious purposes. Instead, "for many of the Heian aristocrats religion had become mere mummery"³⁹ as seen in how many left before the actual preaching began.

Aristocratic Flair vs. Buddhism

In descriptions of many events Murasaki spends an incredible amount of time describing the dress of people, at one point a full three pages. This may seem arbitrary, but during her life in the court "artistic sensibility was more highly valued than ethical goodness. Despite the influence of Buddhism, Heian society was on the whole governed by style rather than by any moral principles, and good looks tended to take the place of virtue"⁴⁰ and therefore she was judging the inherent worth of all the other women at these events. For example, during the New Year's Ceremonies Murasaki describes that "the dress of the ladies on the first days was karaginu of purple and old rose color, red kimono and shaded train; on the second, red and purple brocade, deep violet glossy silk, green karaginu, train dyed by rubbing flowers. On the third day we wore white and rose-coloured brocaded garments, trimmed with many folds"⁴¹ continuing on for a time without mentioning anything about the actual religious occurrences or

³⁸ Shikibu, "Diary", 138.

³⁹ Morris, *Shining Prince*, 106.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 195.

⁴¹ Shikibu, "Diary", 122.

ceremonies. This obsession with beauty and decoration was why the Shingon sect of Buddhism was so popular among the aristocrats as it had a “taste for gorgeous ceremonies and rituals”⁴² which took up a lot of time during the religious observances of the Heian calendar. This is all very contrary to the inherent idea of traditional Buddhism that one should not have connections to worldly things. While Buddhism was influential in the court, it did not change everything about the aristocracy. The members instead molded it to fit their own needs. This is confirmed again when Murasaki records that on a day of fasting the Prime Minister’s wife and son “came back from the shrine at two in the morning, and the sacred dance was performed listlessly, as the important persons were absent”⁴³. These days and rituals should have been important in of themselves, but instead they were only used for show and entertainment for the royalty, as seen in how the dance was “performed listlessly” since none of the imperial family was around.

Shintoism

Murasaki’s diary also exhibits how Shinto beliefs were still present in the court and the daily lives of the aristocracy during the Heian period. In the birthing room “on the west side there were lying the Queens substitutes possessed with [or who were enticing] the evil spirits. Each was lying surrounded by a pair of folding screens. The joints of the screens were curtained and priests were appointed to cry sutras there”⁴⁴. This situation is an example of the Shinto beliefs of evil spirits, who, in this case, would be trying to attack the queen but instead were distracted by the other women. It also shows the melding of the two religions, as the Buddhist

⁴² Morris, *Shining Prince*, 100.

⁴³ Shikibu, “Diary”, 120.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 76.

priests were there chanting sutras to ward off these spirits. Later she writes that the “First Secretary Yorisada, on his way home from the shrine at Isa where he has gone as Imperial Messenger to offer nusa, stopped at the gate [as he could not enter the house] to inquire for her majesty”⁴⁵ and this interjection can be explained by the idea of ritual uncleanliness. It was believed that people who were sick, injured, or in this case giving birth, were “unclean” and made their houses unclean as well. Therefore this pure and holy messenger to the gods could not enter the area or else he would be made impure. While Buddhism was the most influential force in the court overall in regards to religion, the aristocracy still abided by Shinto beliefs and taboos which affected their daily lives quite a bit⁴⁶.

Personal Religion

Reading Murasaki’s diary, one can also learn a lot from her scattered spiritual musings. On the very first page of her diary she states that “in spite of my better desires [for a religious life] I am here”⁴⁷ meaning that while she wants to enter the religious life she has duties at court and therefore cannot. For her this most likely is a very true and sincere thought, but for many courtiers at this time it was commonplace to say that they wanted to enter the monastery, but then find many excuses for why they could not. It was almost fashionable to desire to be more religious, but many of the aristocracy did not want to fully commit to living in a monastery and giving up their aristocratic lives of comfort and freedom. The ideology and ceremony of Buddhism was there in court but not in the practice. She later writes a passage which is very influenced by Buddhist thought:

⁴⁵ Shikibu, “Diary”, 82.

⁴⁶ Morris, *Shining Prince*, 94.

⁴⁷ Shikibu, “Diary”, 71.

“Everything in this world is burdensome. Now I shall not be afraid whatever happens. Whatever others say of me I will recite sutras kneeling in front of Amitabha Buddha. When my mind has become completely free from the burden of the world, nothing will weaken my determination to become a saint. Though I set myself devoutly against worldly passions, it seems that there extends before me a limbo of dull wanderings before I can mount the cloud. I must be there now. I am now a fit age for the religious life”⁴⁸

This passage captures fully the spirit of Buddhism: the idea of the impermanence of worldly things and that life is suffering, as well as that one can only escape from this by entering a monastic life⁴⁹. Her somber tone illustrates a trend of her time where “periodical protestations of melancholy and gloom were essential for people who regarded themselves as sensitive”⁵⁰ which came from the influence of the Buddhist religion. Her yearning to get away from the court life and enter a religious one was very common, because “to the people of Murasaki’s class...the idea that one should sooner or later retire into a religious life was never far from the surface of their minds”⁵¹. Even some emperors who abdicated the throne entered the monastery after to live out the rest of their lives as monks. In this period this was a very acceptable and encouraged thing to do, and further strengthened the ties between the court and the monasteries. While it was never directly talked about in Murasaki’s diary, many men and women in the court would “take the precepts” to enter into monastic life, but they changed the form of it so much that the monastic community did not even fully recognize it as

⁴⁸ Shikibu, “Diary”, 136.

⁴⁹ Morris, *Shining Prince*, 108-109.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 114.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 118.

entering the order. At the time “for aristocratic women...the ideals of ordination were determined less by the monastic community than by court precedent and by the religious, cultural, and aesthetic trends popular among fellow courtiers”⁵² as the taking of precepts became somewhat of a fad. Most women would even take them in stages and not shave their head (like a real monk would when taking the precepts) until right before death. These ordinances were basically a form of Buddhism with court flair thrown on; they were not really real. For many in the imperial court “taking of the precepts, was understood not as a formal entry into the religious life, but merely as a ritual aimed at creating merit and securing the protection of the deities”⁵³ and therefore they used religion for personal and political gain. Most courtiers would take the precepts in times of illness or just to further their prestige, as after taking them they typically had larger roles in Buddhist ceremonies at court⁵⁴. Instead of having to fully commit to train as a novice in a temple or live in a monastery, this hybrid form of ordination “allowed one to practice Buddhism while still enjoying the main prerogatives of aristocratic life”⁵⁵. Murasaki’s journal and the changing of precepts demonstrate that while Buddhism was highly influential in the court during the Heian period, the court also influenced Buddhism to a large extent.

Conclusion

While it is true that Shikibu Murasaki’s diary is disjointed and unbalanced in what it describes, focuses hugely on the dress of other women, includes more social commentary than

⁵² Lori R. Meeks, “Reconfiguring Ritual Authenticity: The Ordination Traditions of Aristocratic Women in Premodern Japan,” *Japanese Journal of Religious Studies* 33.1 (2006): 53.

⁵³ Meeks, “Reconfiguring Ritual”, 55.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 56.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*

actual details of the courts function, and was written by a woman who was not very involved in any state politics, it is exactly these characteristics that make it so useful for looking at this topic. Her diary gives a real and true account of what court members of the Heian period thought was important to record and illustrates her own personal thoughts and beliefs. This demonstrates to what extent religion played into her, and other courtiers, lives. Through her descriptions of religious ceremonies one gets the feeling that while it was extremely apparent in the court, religion was also very ritualized and made up with grandeur and pomp. Her diary, as well as other sources, also tells of how religion was used by the court and individuals for personal and political gain. Both of these themes (of religion being “done up” and used by its followers for only certain reasons) are recurrent throughout time and place. This process of religion changing from a strict all-encompassing institution to a more malleable one which states can use for their own gains is very important for any historian to study as it is still very apparent in today’s society.

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