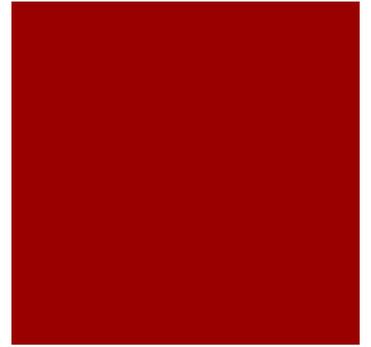


# Women in (Premodern) Japanese Buddhism



**Lori Meeks, University of Southern California**

Two parts:

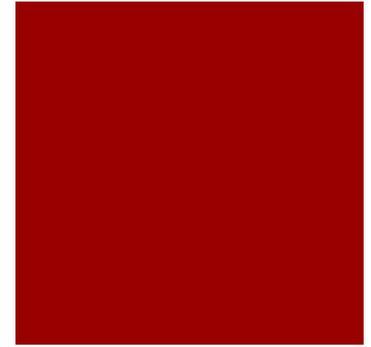
- 1- Nunhood in the Lifecycle of Women in Premodern Japan
- 2- The Role of Androcentric Ideology in Premodern Japanese Buddhist Discourse



# Neither Nun nor Laywoman?

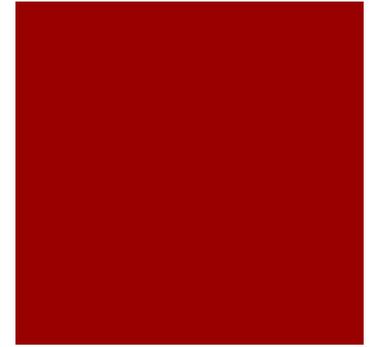
Buddhist Renunciation and the Female Lifecycle  
in Premodern Japan

# Nuns in Nara (712-793) and Heian (794-1185) Japan



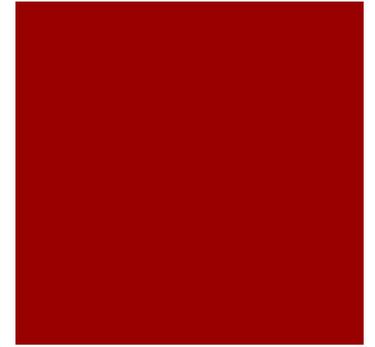
- Kokubun-niji 国分尼寺
- 773年: Last evidence of nun serving in official capacity at court
- Officially recognized *bikuni* disappear from the historical record during the ninth century.
- Ordination platforms for nuns were revived in the mid-thirteenth century by Ritsu and Zen groups.
- In the meantime, most Heian noblewomen spent the latter years of their lives as “lay renouncers” → neither officially recognized nuns nor laywomen

# The Rise of Lay Renunciation in Heian Japan



- *Shukke* 出家, “to leave home,” or “home-leaver”
- “Lay renouncers”: (1) assumed the name and appearance of monastics; and (2) made a commitment to full-time religious practice.
- Important agents of Buddhist culture

# Taking Vows



- *Jukai-e* 授戒会 or informal ceremonies
- Vast merit associated with taking vows
- Taken during period of grave illness, or to prepare for death
- *Shukke* as preparation for death → *Similar to last two life stages (ashrama) described in Hindu texts*
- In literature: moment of *shukke* = one of both relief and sadness

# The Merit of Home-Leaving

“Thus I have heard. Once, when the Buddha was at Karaṇḍa’s Bamboo Grove Monastery in Rājagṛha, Magadhā, at that time the World Honored One praised the act of leaving home, [saying that,] as a source of merit, its blessings are extremely great. If you release men or women [to leave home], if you release male or female servants [to leave home], if you allow the common people [to leave home], or if you yourself leave home and enter the Way, the merit [created by this act] is immeasurable . . . As for the rewards of *dāna*, its blessings have limits. [But] as for the blessings of leaving home, they are immeasurable and boundless. . . . Within the Buddha-Dharma, the rewards of leaving home cannot be fathomed. Even until one reaches *nirvana*, its blessings are inexhaustible. For example, if there were a person who erected a seven-jeweled stupa [so tall] that reached the Heaven of the Thirty-Three, the merit that would be received would not equal that of leaving home. Why is this? It is because greedy, evil, and ignorant people can destroy a seven-jeweled stupa, [but] the virtue (lit., the “dharma”) of leaving home cannot be damaged.” -- *Xianyu jing* 賢愚經 (*The Sutra of the Wise and the Foolish*, Jpns. *Gengukyō*)

# Onna San no Miya's *Shukke*

Takes vows after struggling to deliver Kashiwagi's son. She explains her decision to Genji:

“I still doubt that I will live, and they say that this sort of sin [dying in childbirth] is very grave. I think I shall become a nun, because that might help me live longer, or at least it might lighten this burden of sin if I am to die after all.”



# Genji's Response:

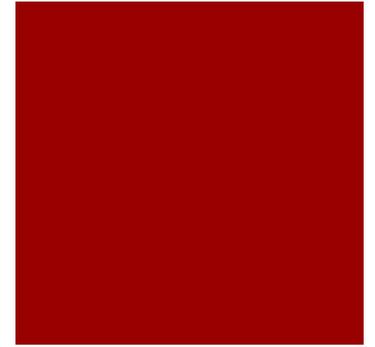
“I am extremely sorry to gather that my own stubborn helplessness and foolish tears are what made you forsake me like this. I only wish you could take it back.”

--*The Tale of Genji*, Tyler, trans.



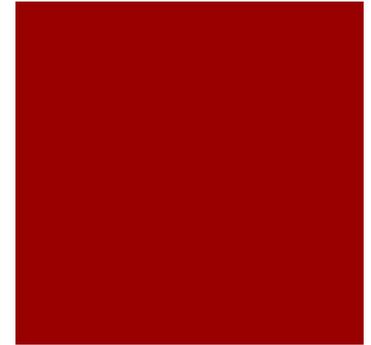
# The Nun of Ichijō

(Fujiwara no Munetada's Grandmother)



- Spent 30 years as a “lay renouncer” (roughly ages 50-80); she was 79 years old in 1102年
- Munetada records her daily practices in his journal *Chūyūki*

# The Nun of Ichijō's Devotional Practices



- Daily “offerings to Amida in the prescribed manner” (*Amida kuyō-hō* 阿弥陀供養法)
- Continuous intonations of the *Daizuigu darani kyō* 大隨求陀羅尼經
- One million intonations of Amida's name (*hyakuman-ben nembutsu* 百万遍念仏), on 20 occasions
- 10,000 recitations of Amida's Great Incantation (*Amida daiju*) 阿弥陀大呪 (once per month)
- 1000 recitations of the Thousand-armed Kannon Dharani (*Senju darani* 千手陀羅尼) (once per month)
- Commissioned at least 10 Buddhist images and at least ten *tendoku* 転讀 of Mahāyāna *sūtras*

## Shukke of Fujiwara no Kintō (966-1040)

as depicted in *Eiga monogatari*:

“Kintō sent a message to Bishop Shin’yo at the Hōjōji early on the morning of the Fourth, asking him to come to Nagatani. In the course of a quiet conversation, he told him of his wish to become a monk, and the weeping Bishop performed the tonsure and administered the commandments [Buddhist precepts].”

-- *A Tale of Flowering Fortunes: Annals of Japanese Aristocratic Life in the Heian Period* [*Eiga Monogatari*], William McCullough and Helen Craig McCullough, trans.

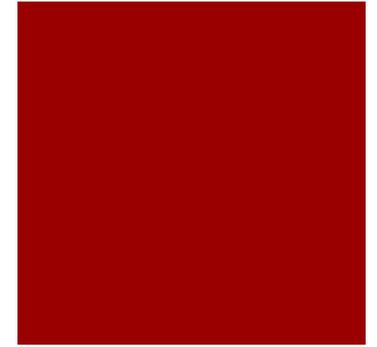


## *Shukke* of Fujiwara no Kintō (966-1040)

His son-in-law Norimichi (a son of Michinaga's): "rushed to Nagatani to pour out his disappointment," and  
"Kintō's wife and [daughter] Shishi [fell into] the depths of despair."



## *Shukke of Retired Sovereign Suzaku (Suzaku-in) in Genji monogatari*



“His Eminence Suzaku began feeling unwell soon after His Majesty’s [the Tennō, Son of Genji and Fujitsubo] visit to Rokujō. His health had never been strong, but this time he felt a distinct foreboding. Despite an old longing to devote himself to practice, he had refrained from that as from many other things while the Empress Mother [his mother, the Kokiden Consort] still lived, and hitherto he had therefore renounced the idea. Perhaps it was to restore his courage for it that he now talked of feeling as though he had little time left and began his preparations.”

-- *The Tale of Genji*, Royall Tyler, trans.

# Social Expectations Regarding *Shukke*

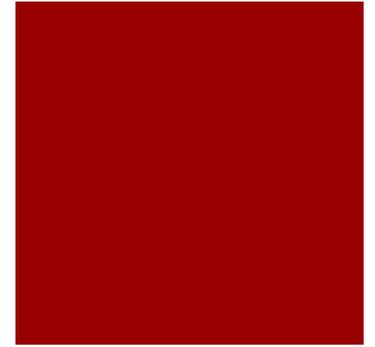
“Even though she should of course have shaven off her snow-white hair and become a nun (*bikuni*) without delay, she remained attached to this vain life.”

-- *Shinsarugakuki*, on wife of Uemon no jō

“Akimitsu talked all day long about his plans for the future. ‘I often think of becoming a monk,’ he would say, ‘but my chief desire is to see these children settled in life. . . .’ The monks staying in the mansion for the ritual seclusion must have chuckled to one other in private—not because there was anything laughable about the children, but because it was ridiculous for a dotard in his seventies to be planning for the remote future instead of reciting the name of Amitābha.”

-- *Eiga monogatari*, on Fujiwara no Akimitsu

# Vows taken by “lay renouncers”



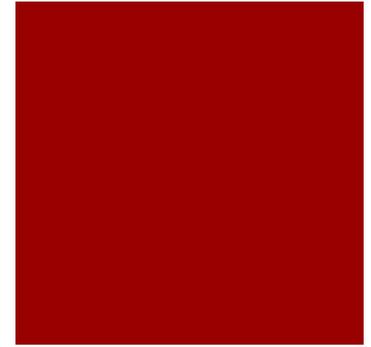
- five lay precepts (*gokai* 五戒)
- or the ten novice precepts (*jūkai* 十戒) of the *Shibun ritsu* 四分律 (Four-part vinaya, T. no. 1428)
- OR the ten major bodhisattva (*jūjūkai* 十重戒) precepts of the *Fanwang jing* 梵王經 (Brahma net sutra, T. no. 1484)

# Ordination Ceremonies for Laypeople



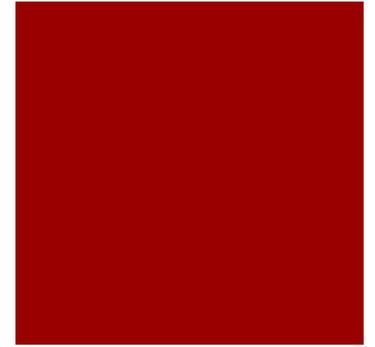
- *Shukke jukai sahō* 出家受戒作法, a text commonly attributed to Genshin (942–1017)
- Manshuin-bon *Shukke sahō* 曼殊院本出家作法, attributed to Ryōnin (1072-1132)
- Private ceremonies vs. mass conferral ceremonies (Rokuharamitsuji 六波羅蜜寺, Hasedera, Myōe (also known as Kōben, 1173-1232), Shōkū (1177-1247), and Eison (1201-1290).

# Ordination and the Gradual Shedding of Femininity



- *Shukke* marked change in sexual identity for women, but not for men
- Desexualized identity: loss of hair, taking of ambiguous name, leaving conjugal duties behind
- Hair as outward marker of change in life stage

# Nunhood as the end of household and conjugal duties

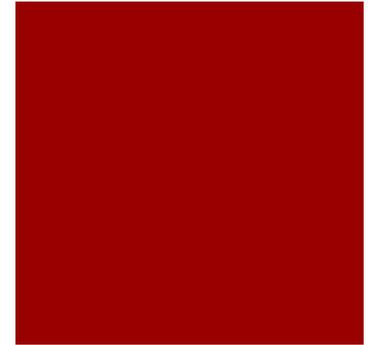


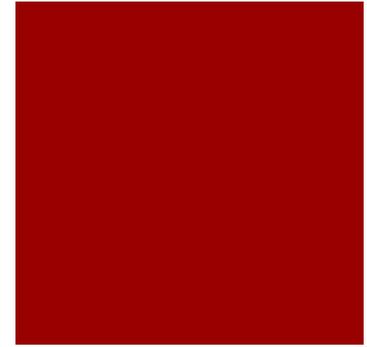
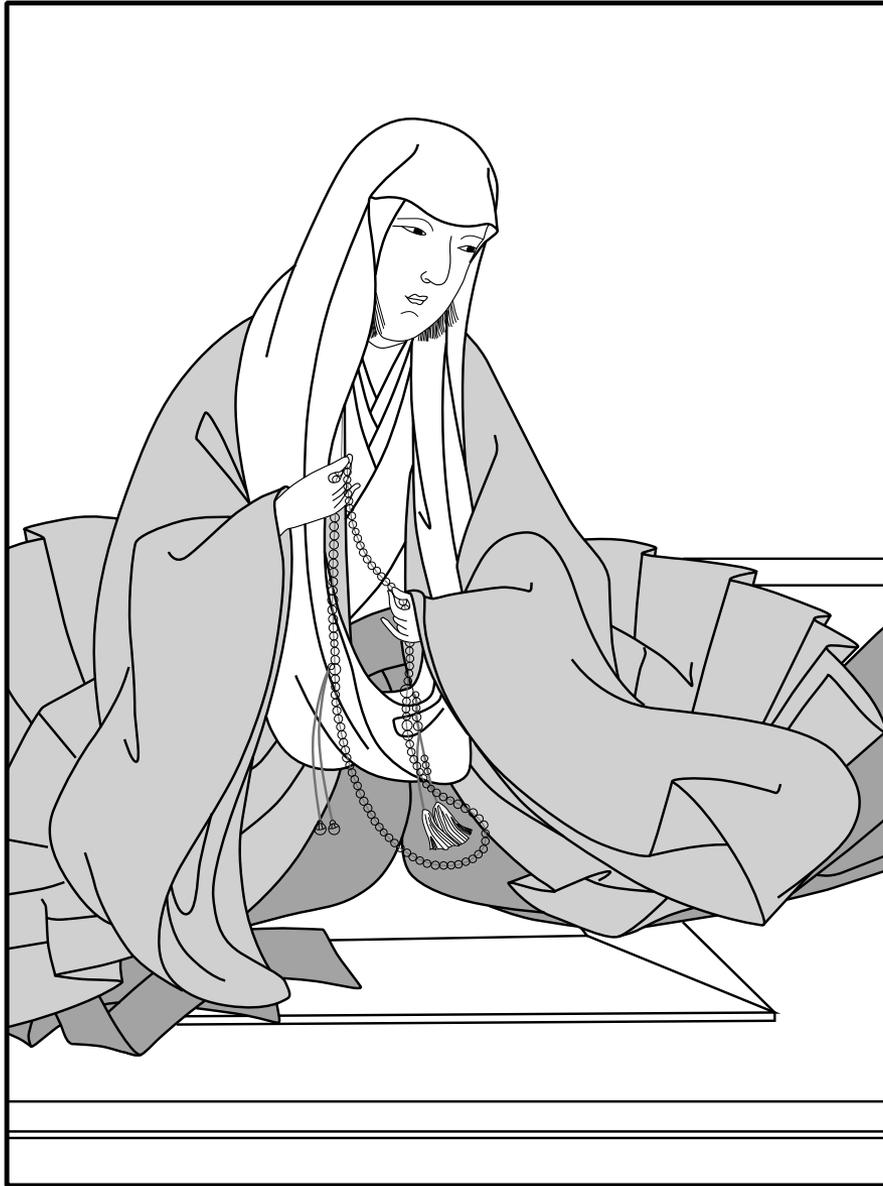
“ Mother became a nun. Even though she lived on the same estate as we did, she began living separately, in an annex building. As for Father, he simply had me take over the role of household manager, and he himself went without socializing with the people of the world; as though he had completely withdrawn from society, he lived in obscurity.”

--*Sarashina nikki*

# Stages of Tonsure

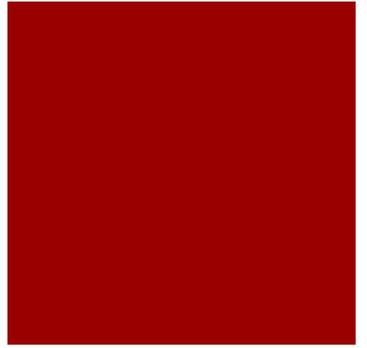
- *sageama* 垂げ尼, *sogiama* 削げ尼, or *amasogi* 尼削ぎ → partially tonsured “nuns” → fluid status that allowed women to return to lay life if necessary
- *shikishamana* 式叉摩那 (Skt. *śikṣamāṇā*, probationary nuns) in Indian texts: (1) young women who, having entered the order as girls, had advanced to the age of eighteen, or (2) adult women who had entered the order having already experienced married life.
- *bikuni*, 比丘尼, Skt. *bhikṣuṇī*: fully-ordained → common on deathbed
- *ubai* 優婆夷, Skt. *upāsikā*: female lay disciples

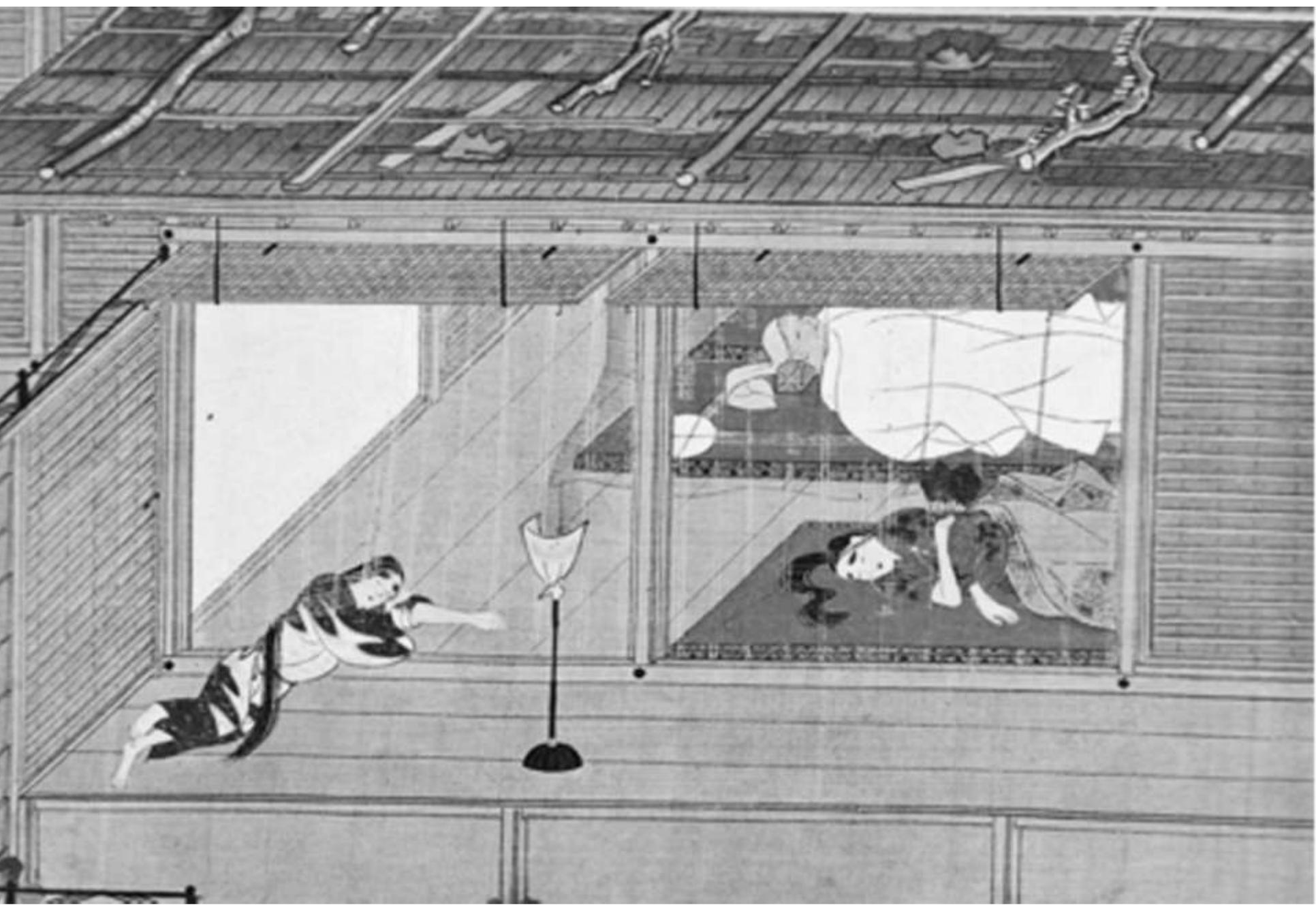














道金 八十四  
未村  
天正元年三月十九日

甲六  
天正八年正月十五日

甲五  
天正八年正月十五日

西三  
天正九年十月十日

妙鏡重女  
天正九年八月八日

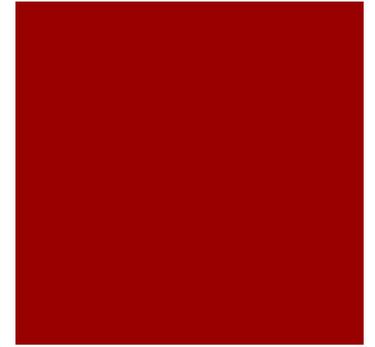
妙三 七十七  
廣長元年正月十九日

妙祐  
天正六年三月十八日

天正六年三月十八日

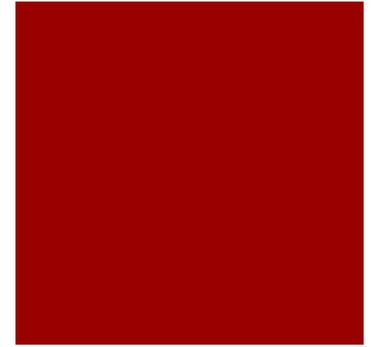


# Renunciation among Heian Noblewomen



- Common to take vows as an expression of religious devotion, even while husband still living
- Ordination could be used as a means of seeking legal separation from one's spouse

# Renunciation as a Display of Household Loyalty



- By the mid-Kamakura period (1185-1333), women were encouraged to wait until their husbands had passed before taking vows; they were to remain loyal to their households by serving a husband during his lifetime, and by serving his spirit after he had passed
- Story of Fujiwara no Kagetomo's wife, from Mujū Ichien's *Zōdanshū* 雑談集 (early fourteenth-century)

# Lady Nijō's Father on Household Loyalty

“If you should incur the ill will of your Lord [the retired sovereign Go-Fukakusa] and of the world and find you are unable to manage, you are immediately to enter the true way [*makoto no michi ni irite* 真実の道に入りて, i.e., to become a nun], which will allow you to work for your own salvation, repay your debts to your parents, and pray that we might all be together in paradise. But if, finding yourself forsaken and alone, you decide to serve another master or try to make your way by entering any other household whatsoever, consider yourself disowned even though I am already dead. . . . It would be shameful indeed if you remained in society only to blacken the name of our great family. It is only after retiring from society that you can do as you will without causing suffering.”

-- *The Confessions of Lady Nijō*, Brazell, trans. (with minor changes)

# The Case of Kozaishō (*Heike monogatari*)

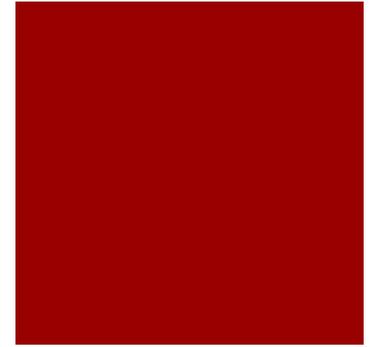


Kozaishō commits suicide when she learns that her husband, Taira no Michimori, has died in battle:

“Among the many women who have lost husbands, it has long been common practice to enter the religious life, but few have gone so far as to drown themselves. Might this be the kind of thing that is meant by the saying, ‘A loyal retainer [*chūshin* 忠臣] does not obey two lords; a chaste woman [*teijo* 貞女] will not serve two husbands’?”

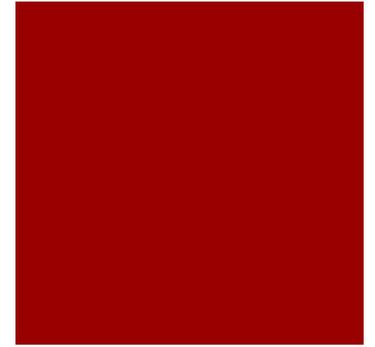
--*Heike monogatari*, McCullough and McCullough, trans. (with minor changes)

# “Widow-nuns” in the Kamakura period



- Constriction of women’s property rights (13<sup>th</sup> c.)
- Protections for widow-nuns who remained part of husband’s household
- Hōjō Masako (1157-1225), widow of Minamoto no Yoritomo

## Renunciation for personal salvation, or as a display of household loyalty?



“Take holy vows somewhere, even among the rocks and trees, and recite Buddha-invocations for Michimori’s [your deceased husband’s] enlightenment. You may think you are sure to go to the same place he does, but who knows which of the Six Paths and Four Births will be your lot after you enter the next life? It would be pointless to drown yourself when the chances of reunion are so uncertain.”

--*Heike monogatari*, McCullough and McCullough, trans.



## **A Closer Look at Androcentric Buddhist Rhetoric in Premodern Japan**

- *goshō/itsutsu no sawari* 五障
- *sanjū* 三従
- *henjō nanshi* 变成男子

*tennyo jōnan* 転女変男;

*nyonin no shin o hanare* 女人の身を離れ;

*nyonin no shin o itō* 女人の身を厭う

*tennyo jōbutsu* 転女成仏

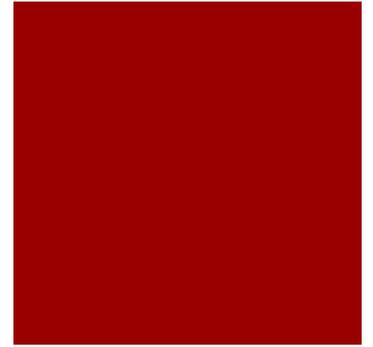


表2 「鎌倉遺文」の願文・寄進状等における〈仏教的性差別に関わる文言〉の登場頻度

	女性発給の文書	男性発給の文書	男女計(通)
五 障	10	4	14
三 従	3	0	3
転女成仏, 転女成男, 女人の身を離れ, 女人の身を厭う, など	10	4	14
龍 女	0	7	7
変成男子	0	1	1
計	23	16	39
文書数の計	20通	14通	34通

\* 同じ内容の文書が「鎌倉遺文」中に複数収められている場合は、1つと数えた。また、一通の文書の中に、2種類以上の文言が見られる場合は、それぞれの欄で1つとして数えた。「文書数の総計」は、以上2つの操作に関わりなく、上記文言の見られる文書の数を記したものである。いずれも、詳しくは表3以下を参照されたい。

なお、「日蓮書状」など高僧の文筆は除外した。

- *Tennyō jōbutsukyō* 轉女成仏經
- (*Bussetsu*) *tennyōshingyō* (仏説)轉女身經  
(T. no. 564)



- 
- *Brahma Net Sutra (Fanwang jing 梵網經, T. 1484)*
  - *Gyokuyō 玉葉, journal of Kujō Kanezane (sermon by Chōken)*
  - *Fugen jūrasetsunyo 普賢十羅刹女*
  - *Wagami ni tadoru himegimi 我が身にたどる姫君, 1271*
  - *Bodaishinshū 菩提心集, 1128*
  - *Eiga monogatari 栄華物語, ca. 1092-1107*



