

REVIEWS

Edward KAMENS, *The Buddhist Poetry of the Great Kamo Priestess: Daisain Senshi and Hosshin Wakashū*. Ann Arbor: Center for Japanese Studies, The University of Michigan, 1990. xi+170 pp. ISBN 0-939512-41-6.

Although the Heian nobles were concerned with religious matters of many kinds and, on the whole, obviously took them seriously, some unkind things have been said in print about their religious faith (KITAGAWA 1966, p. 58, for example). They have been charged with greed, vainglory, frivolousness, superstition, and so on. Their religion has also been seen often in terms of its institutions and their supporters, with much discussion of fund-raising and political struggles. In this context, *The Buddhist Poetry of the Great Kamo Priestess* is a refreshing work. As far as one can tell now, at a thousand years' remove, the poetry discussed in the book represents no one's political interests and would not have been written at all if the poet's faith had not been genuine.

For fifty-seven years, Princess Senshi (964–1035) served as High Priestess (*sain*) of the paired Kamo Shrines, on the outskirts of the imperial capital. In this capacity, she presided over the great Kamo Festival that figures so prominently in the *Tale of Genji* and other works of Heian literature. Her formal life was a round of purifications and of rituals in honor of the Kamo deities. However, she also had a distinguished literary reputation and gathered around her a group of like-minded ladies to whom she served as patron and guide. Murasaki Shikibu wrote in her diary:

Whenever I have visited [the ladies of the priestess residence], for it is a place famous for beautiful moonlit nights, marvelous dawn skies, cherries, and the song of the wood thrush, the High Priestess has always seemed most sensitive. The place has an aura of mystery and seclusion about it, and they have very little to distract them. . . . Amid such perfect elegance, how could one possibly fail to produce anything but excellent poems? (pp. 52–53, quoting BOWRING 1982, pp. 490–91)

But how can this priestess have written Buddhist poetry? For one thing, avowedly Buddhist poems (*shakkyōka*) were not then a particularly respected genre — none was included in an imperial anthology until *Goshūi wakashū*, compiled in 1086. For another, no one in the service of the Kamo deities was even allowed to speak the words “Buddha,” “sūtra,” etc. At Kamo as at Ise, Buddhist vocabulary was banished from conversation, together with words like “blood” and “death.” The priestess's Buddhist faith must have been heartfelt indeed if it welled forth even under these circumstances.

The Buddhist Poetry of the Great Kamo Priestess consists of two parts. The first is an introduction to Princess Senshi and to the ways of approaching her poetry. The second is a reading of her *Hosshin wakashū* [Collection of Japanese poems for the awakening of faith] (1012), a cycle of fifty-five poems, each of which varies on a sūtra text that precedes the poem. There are, in addition, a

prologue, an epilogue, an appendix giving the complete Japanese text of *Hosshin wakashū*, a bibliography, and an appendix.

It is in the prologue that Kamens discusses most thoroughly the relationship between “Shinto” and “Buddhism” as it bears upon *Hosshin wakashū*. He accepts as authoritative (pp. 5-6) the position taken by Kuroda Toshio and others, to the effect that there was in those times no valid line that could be drawn between the two, and that “Shinto” as a distinct entity therefore did not properly exist at all. However, he still feels compelled to write:

But in fact things are not quite that simple. If anything, *Hosshin wakashū* reveals a consciousness of differentiation, of limits on the integration of the two traditions at one particular juncture. At least insofar as their relationship is depicted in this cycle of poems by this particular High Priestess, Kamo—one particular manifestation of Shintō as it was constituted in the late tenth and early eleventh centuries—and Buddhism were by no means at ease with each other. (p. 6)

For myself, I suspect that *Hosshin wakashū* is less special than Kamens so very cautiously suggests, and that there really was a line drawn, at least in certain places and for certain purposes, between Buddhism and “Shinto.” (The last chapter of TYLER 1991 is a thorough statement on this issue.) At any rate, such a distinction is crucial to Kamens’s reading of these poems, which is done with great care and sympathy.

Kamens evokes a priestess unable even to utter the Buddha’s name and grieving at heart that she, alone among her relatives, is not free to engage in the forms of Buddhist devotion that were perfectly normal in her day, for persons of her standing. These, of course, included not only private observances of all kinds, but attendance at larger ceremonies, sūtra copying, patronage of monks and temples, the commissioning of images and halls, etc. For her, confined to her sacred precincts with their “aura of mystery and seclusion,” and deprived of the possibilities so freely available to those “outside” (p. 48), poetry was the only way to express her feelings and her faith.

Kamens analyzes very well the priestess’s conviction that such *poetry* can and must be genuine in the sense then recognized—a true marriage of Buddhist sentiment and of poetic diction in the style of *Kokinshū* (905), the first imperial anthology. The poems of *Hosshin wakashū* often speak of her hopes, fears, and uncertainties. Both the first and the last convey her wish that “there were a way for all to ride together, without distinctions, the dharma a raft that carries us to the opposite shore!” (poem no. 1, p. 77). This is in keeping with a story in *Ōkagami* that once, right in the middle of the Kamo Festival, she cried to the spectators, “Now, let’s all become Buddhas together!” (pp. 29–30, my translation). Kamens’s treatment of this appealing figure is both expert and welcome.

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