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The Halo of Golden Light: Imperial Authority and Buddhist Ritual in Heian Japan. By Asuka Sango. University of Hawai'i Press, Honolulu, 2015. xxii, 216 pages. $54.00.

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Asuka Sango argues that three Buddhist rituals reveal a profound shift in the structure of state and society in the Heian era (794–1185). Misai-e Assemblies, which entailed monks debating doctrine in the palace, epitomized the system of institutional authority—or, in her words, bureaucracy—and focused on the office of emperor. Nevertheless, changes in social practices led to the rise of the performance of the Golden Light Sutra, which exemplified a personal system, described here as the "politics of affinity," whereby individuals, most often retired emperors, demanded loyalty through their patronage. Finally, "provisional" or Jun Misai-e rites, which originated in the ninth century and gained prominence in the twelfth, reveal the shift between these two "systems" and represent an attempt by emperors and retired emperors to "reinvent imperial religious authority."

Sango relies on a variety of picture scrolls, chronicles, and doctrinal sources to explain the rationale behind these rites and to illustrate how they were performed. Her analysis of the Misai-e Assemblies provides an important corrective to standard observations of Heian Buddhism, as she shows how doctrinal debates were central to the performance of this rite and often influenced monastic promotion. The Misai-e Assembly both increased the state's control over Buddhism and, at the same time, ensured that doctrine, rather than "esoteric" ritual per se, would remain prominent, something which many generalizations about Buddhism, epitomized by the research of Kuroda Toshio, tend to ignore.

Sango explains how Heian Buddhism was not tightly controlled by the state, as commonly assumed, for many opportunities existed for resistance by monks, although this apparently became less likely in the late Heian period when the notion of loyalty to a patron predominated. Thereupon, retired emperors became "masters of risk," because, through their powers of patronage, they could ensure that their rites were well staffed and attended and thus, in Sango's view, successful.

Adopting a thematic rather than chronological narrative, Sango first explores the Misai-e Assembly and Golden Light Sutra before discussing monastic promotions, failed rites, and the mimetic provisional (Jun) Misai-e rites. This approach obscures her argument. Chronologically, the third chapter, "Clerical Promotion," recounts events of the tenth through twelfth centuries and should be juxtaposed with the fourth chapter, "Bud-

dhist Rituals and the Reconstitution of the Ritsuryō Polity," which primarily focuses on events of the ninth. Likewise, because Jun Misai-e rites represent a transitory phase between a bureaucratic "system" to one dominated by the "politics of affinity," this sixth chapter, which focuses on events of the eleventh and twelfth centuries, belongs before the fifth chapter, "When Rites Go Wrong," in which Sango explores the dominance of retired emperors in the late eleventh and twelfth centuries.

The lack of a chronological framework for this monograph leads to an episodic narrative, whereby certain processes can only be fully understood after reading the entire book. For example, on page 54, Sango notes an increase in alternate avenues of promotion, irrespective of the Misai-e Assembly during the latter half of the eleventh century, but she does not explain until pages 112–14 that this happened because retired emperors started promoting monks through *abiseka* initiation rituals.

Sango inexplicably limits her analysis to the Nara and Heian eras, which is curious as both the Misai-e Assembly and the Golden Light Sutra rites continued to be performed through the latter half of the fourteenth century. As the abeyance of these rites coincided with Ashikaga Yoshimitsu's assertion of rites of sovereignty, Sango's monograph would have been improved if she had extended her narrative through this time.

The careful reader will note sources concerning the Golden Light Sutra dating from the early Kamakura era (1191) (pp. 37–38) as well as criticisms concerning monastic appointment from the monk Sonnen in the fourteenth century (p. 55), but the continuation of these rites through this time is otherwise not commented upon. Instead, the main post-Heian historical event that Sango refers to is the 1990 enthronement of Emperor Akihito, which she mentions in the introduction. This seems only tenuously related to the topic, as his coronation rites did not include the Misai-e Assembly, but this episode does allow Sango to discuss the emperor as representing a "beautiful contradiction" between the modern and the traditional, and from there she dusts off Eric Hobsbawm's old chestnut about the invention of tradition.

Unfortunately, the notion of the invention of tradition does not fit Heian society, in which the past remained very immediate and real, and courtiers jealously guarded precedent and its constituent knowledge of the past, so that the consequences of precise ritual acts could be abductively reasoned to generate a proper response. This tradition, if one wants to call it that, did not establish social cohesion as much as social difference, for the guardians of precedent kept their knowledge tightly controlled and largely secret. Sango would have been well advised to jettison this trope entirely and focus instead on how these rites were performed in the twelfth through the fourteenth centuries, why they were significant, and what caused their extinction in Ashikaga Yoshimitsu's time.

Influenced by Durkheimian notions of ritual as creating a social net-

work and reflecting social ties, Sango reductively asserts that a ritual's success or failure hinged upon the numbers of its participants, but she does not perceive the rituals as determining change per se. To the nobles, emperors, and monks of the Heian period, rituals were vital actions that determined peace and political stability or turmoil and war. The book would have been stronger if Sango had argued that rituals created their own political reality and were thus the essence of politics. The concept of ritual mimesis also works particularly well in analyzing the initiation of Jun Misai-e rites by enervated emperors, as they show that these rites arose in response to a fractured present and provided a sense of how things should be.

Sango, to the contrary, perceives rituals as ultimately reflecting a sociopolitical reality and attributes changes in ritual practice as arising from changes in attendance at the court, the so-called *shōden* system (pp. 62, 65, 71, 73, 93, 108). This process "radically reformulated the authority relations at the court" away from "the traditional authority of the emperor associated with the office of the emperor" to "authority derived from the emperor's person" (p. 73) because it was confined to courtiers who could ascend the hallway of the Seiryōden Hall (p. 62), another moniker for the palace.

This approach diminishes the historical significance of rituals as agents of change and portrays them as merely reflecting new modes of social association, which are described monolithically as the "politics of affinity" whereby "loyalty to one's master was a major means of upward social mobility" (p. 80). In this narrative, retired emperors were the ultimate masters of patronage, although quoting Mikael Adolphson, who summarizes Kuroda, Sango also sees "power blocs" as having "retainers or followers who were loyal only to its leader" (p. 65).[1] Her excellent chapter on "Failed Ritual" reveals, to the contrary, that encompassing loyalty to a power bloc, transcending personal interests, did not exist but that members of a *kenmon* could be enticed to attend and participate in the competing rituals of the retired emperor. Hence, Sango's analysis of the "loyalty principle" (p. 66) seems two-dimensional at best.

Sango eschews analyzing institutions, going so far as to state: "the specifics of the institutional functions of the retired emperor's rule would take us into the purview of institutional history, which is beyond our scope here" (p. 76; see also p. 60), but many of the social changes she refers to could better be understood if the institutional context was clarified. For example, the encroachment of provincial governors, who were clients of retired emperors, into the lowest echelons of the palace nobility is a process that could strengthen her argument. Conversely, Sango rebuts imagined scholarship that characterized imperial authority as being eclipsed with the collapse

1. Mikael Adolphson, *The Gates of Power: Monks, Courtiers, and Warriors in Premodern Japan* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2000), p. 13.

of the state's institutional foundation (pp. 60, 73–74), but scholars such as G. Cameron Hurst have long argued that retired emperors governed through earlier *ritsuryō* channels, thereby revealing that this argument for imperial eclipse is a straw man.[2]

Inadvertently, Sango's monograph reveals the real limitation of the *kenmon* system in explaining sovereign authority in Japan. Although Sango describes how the time of the Retired Emperor Shirakawa, in the late eleventh century, led to the establishment of a system of "kingship shared by the emperor and the retired emperor, based on a system of power blocs" (pp. 76, 90–91), she fails to explain what constitutes sovereign authority, or for that matter how one determines what is meant by "loyalty."

At their most fundamental level, *kenmon* were institutions, for they possessed their own office of records, or *mandokoro,* and were thus capable of transmitting and issuing their own orders, and therefore governing territory, in the name of major temples, nobles, retired emperors, and, in later times, the Kamakura *bakufu.* Kuroda is mistaken to portray these institutions as servicing as the focus of "loyalty," an encompassing devotion transcending the interests of the self. The concept of *kenmon* ably explains how orders were transmitted, but it cannot account for personal bonds of allegiance, a fact which a cursory analysis of the internal power dynamics of these *kenmon* readily reveals. Retired emperors ruled through the institutions of a *kenmon,* but they were not the equals or near equals of the others. Sango's narrative to the contrary provides powerful evidence of the supremacy of the retired emperor's *kenmon* over all. The concept of shared rulership as an aspect of the *kenmon* system is inadequate, for retired emperors such as Shirakawa did not share power, particularly as expressed through rituals, lightly. Although Sango is aware of what she describes as "new power dynamics centered on the retired emperor" (p. 90), she could have better explained the powers of retired emperors and more thoroughly analyzed the ritual basis for their rule.

The Retired Emperors Go-Sanjō and Shirakawa, who are featured most prominently in this book, reconstituted provincial authority by making provincial governors, and their absentee representatives, their clients. They also used their *mandokoro,* known as an *in no chō,* to analyze the propriety of estates and confiscate those whose papers were not in order, although initially Go-Sanjō pointedly refrained from confiscating estates that were associated with the regent's line of the Fujiwara. They were not attempting

2. G. Cameron Hurst III, "The Development of the Insei: A Problem in Japanese History and Historiography," in John Whitney Hall and Jeffrey P. Mass, eds., *Medieval Japan: Essays in Institutional History* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1974), pp. 60–90, especially p. 74.

to "prevent private estates from falling into Fujiwara hands" (p. 89) as much as trying to abolish these estates altogether.

Governors, as clients of retired emperors, then provided immense sums from the public provinces to these "masters of risk" and patronage. Important appointments to lucrative positions depended upon good ties with the retired emperor, and thus governors built storehouses near the seat of a retired emperor's residence and helped him to build massive temples such as Hosshōji and perform the rites that demarcated sovereign authority. The idea that environmental considerations, such as the existence of the Kamo River, determined this concentration (pp. 110–11) proves reductionist and myopic. Further, more analysis of the rites patronized by the retired emperors and their links to Asokan norms of kingship alluded to on page xiii could provide more insight into the decentering of imperial authority alluded to on pages 118–19.

Better editing would have made for a tighter book. One of the most egregious flaws is the use of the word "secular" to describe a court, which, after all, made Buddhist rites the core of its legitimacy and politics (pp. 42, 118). As Sango carefully describes how "secular" constitutes a modern concept (p. x), this is most likely an editorial rather than a conceptual shortcoming. Some translations, like that of prime minister (p. 80), are likewise opaque, while others, such as "guardian palace monk" (p. 53) for protector monk (*gojisō*) prove misleading, for these monks protected above all a person and not a palace. Likewise, so many things are described as "systems" that the term becomes devoid of meaning. But these are minor flaws and do not detract greatly from this work.

To conclude, scholars and students of Heian Japan will find much of interest in this monograph, which provides an excellent overview of the Misai-e Assembly. Although this constitutes a good book, more consideration of the importance of ritual in enacting change in the Heian period and beyond could have made it an excellent one.