CONCERNING WOMEN

From the Text of Luis Frois

In this chapter, I will address the problem of the historical shift in women's status. The new Buddhist sects of the Kamakura period I mentioned in the previous chapter preached salvation for both "non-humans" and women. This overlap suggests that the situation of women at the time was closely related to the status of non-humans. Women's history has recently become a hot topic in Japan. Many studies have shed new light on women's lives, and with the feminist movement the problem of women's status has been debated from a variety of angles. Nevertheless, there is still much about women's lives in Japanese society that needs to be investigated.

One source that will help us in such an investigation is a small book written by a Portuguese missionary named Luis Frois called A Comparison of Japanese and European Cultures.[1] Frois came to Japan in 1562 and stayed in the islands for the last thirty five years of his life, until he died in 1597. As indicated by the title, the book records the various differences between the customs of Europe and Japan, as discerned by Frois.

The second chapter of his book is called "Women: Their Appearance and Manners." Frois himself was surprised by what he observed of women's lives, but those of us who read his text today are also likely to be shocked by a number of his claims. For example, on the issue of sexuality, Frois contended, "The women of

[1]The Japanese translation has been published by Iwanami Publishers as a part of its series on the "Great Age of Seafaring," and exactly the same text has been edited and published by Matsuda Takashi as Furoisu no oboegaki, Chûô kôronsha, 1983.

Japan do not value chastity in the least. Even if they lose their virginity, there is no loss of honor, nor is this an obstacle to marriage." Contrary to our notions of patriarchal control, Frois claimed: "In Japan, daughters may go anywhere they like, for one or many days at a time, without their parents' permission. Japanese women have the freedom to go wherever they like without informing their husbands." On the topic of property, Frois held that "In Europe, a family's property is held in common between husband and wife. But in Japan, each one has his or her own property. Sometimes a wife will loan hers to her husband, at a high rate of interest." With regard to divorce, Frois flatly stated, "In Europe, divorcing one's wife is the highest dishonor. In Japan, one may divorce whenever one likes. The wife's honor does not suffer, and she may also remarry. In Japan, sometimes it is the wife who divorces the husband." In one of his more shocking assertions, Frois insisted: "In Japan, abortion is very common, and there are women who have had up to twenty. When a Japanese woman is unable to raise a child, she will kill the child by stepping upon its neck." And in a statement that would seem to strain credulity (and suggest Christian bias), Frois insisted that "In Japan, a Buddhist nunnery is practically a brothel." These observations are so counter to our common sense views of the time that one is likely to wonder if any of this could really be true.

When I first read his book, I felt that these claims were probably due to Frois's prejudice. Rather than take his claims at face value, I thought the text probably required a great deal of historical contextualization. At the same time, however, he also included some observations that seemed less tainted with disapproving prejudice, such as: "European women cannot write, but in Japan, an aristocratic woman who cannot write is of little worth.".

But as I began to investigate Frois' assertions, I gradually came to wonder if they might not, in fact, be true. Let us take, for example, Frois's claims about

divorce. The idea that a woman could divorce her husband and that she suffered no loss of honor and faced no obstacle to remarriage was not at all in accord with our understanding of the time. The mainstream view today is that women had no right of divorce in the Edo period, much less in earlier eras. When a woman went to a family as a wife, she could easily be sent away if she did not please her husband or her in-laws. But we believed that there was simply no way she could petition for a divorce herself. So we concluded that women suffered terrible oppression at the hands of men in the Edo period, with no right to speak for themselves.

The recent work of Takagi Tadashi, however, argues that things were not quite as we have been accustomed to believe.[2] Takagi, a specialist in legal history, combed through a large number of divorce documents to investigate in minute detail the actual conditions and processes of divorce in the Edo period. According to Takagi, the divorce rate at the beginning of the Meiji period was very high. It gradually fell thereafter, but from these statistics he surmised that the divorce rate during the Edo period had also been fairly high. While our knowledge of divorce in the Edo period is imprecise due to a lack of firm numbers, since the Meiji period shows a number of continuities from the Edo period, I believe it is entirely reasonable to infer that the earlier divorce rate had also been rather high. Much is still open to debate, but this book has convincingly demonstrated that the conventional wisdom has been inaccurate and one-sided.

When we examine actual divorce documents, we find that we have been greatly mistaken in our belief that initiating divorce was exclusively a male right. There were, in fact, a significant number of women who gained a divorce by fleeing their marriages, one option being to go to a "relationship-ending temple" (*enkiri-*

[2]Takagi Tadashi, Mikudarihan: Edo no rikon to joseitachi, Heibonsha, 1987.

dera).[3] Takagi gives many examples of flight-initiated divorces, such as a case in which a woman went home to her own family and refused to return to her husband. The husband wanted her to come back, but she refused. In the end, he was forced to write a letter of separation (*rienjô*), which he did, reportedly "shedding tears." In other words, what this particular case shows us is that a woman did not always have to flee to a place of asylum, such as a"relationship-ending temple," to get a divorce.

According to shogunal law, letters of divorce—called "*mikudarihan*"—were legally recognized only when issued by a husband to his wife. The stipulations of the legal code made it impossible for a letter of divorce to be issued from wife to husband. So, if we limit our historical investigation to documents, we are likely to conclude that men held an exclusive right of divorce. However, it would be more accurate to say that it was the husband who had the *obligation* (rather than simply the right) of writing a letter of divorce. Without the document, neither the husband nor the wife could remarry. Of course, it is important to note that only men issued letters of divorce, but we must also remember that the actual conditions of Japanese society were quite different from those stipulated by law.

If this was the case, then Frois's sixteenth century claim that "In Japan, one may divorce whenever one likes. The wife's honor does not suffer, and she may also remarry. In Japan, sometimes it is the wife who divorces the husband" may well have continued into the Edo period. In the Edo period, the formal and legal principle of men's exclusive right to divorce produced such institutions as the temples of asylum. We must be careful, therefore, not to overestimate the strength

[3]"Relationship-ending Temples" (enkiri dera) were temples that functioned as places of asylum for anyone who needed to (or wanted to) escape punishment or an unpleasant social situation. This was not dissimilar to the way the Catholic Church functioned as a place of asylum in the West. Amino's point here is to stress that women had a variety of options for ending a marriage, and that flight was only one.

of women's right to divorce. Nevertheless, Takagi's research has shown us just how great the gap can be between conventional wisdom and the historical facts.

Men and Women's Sexual Practices

Frois's claims that Japanese women did not value chastity or virginity, or that daughters and wives could leave on extensive journeys without objections from their fathers or husbands also struck me as dubious at first. But there is corroborating evidence, both textual and ethnological. For example, sometime after Frois, a Spanish missionary named Coriado wrote a text called A Record of Confessions in which he described women who spoke openly in confession about their many relations with men. In more recent ethnological examples—such as Miyamoto Tsuneichi's Forgotten Japanese and The Lessons of Home, and Akamatsu Keisuke's Folk Customs of the Anti-Folk—we find similar evidence of popular sexual customs up until World War II.[4] Miyamoto and Akamatsu's texts reveal that, at the least, the practice of "*yobai*" (literally, "night-crawing") continued in Western Japan well into the twentieth century.[5]

I have heard testimony on this practice myself. Once when I visited a town in the mountains of northern Okayama Prefecture, in Bitchû County, some of the older folks there told me they had continued "night-crawling" up until the mid-1950s.

[4]Miyamoto Tsuneichi, Wasurerareta nihonjin Iwanami shoten, 1984 (originally, 1960); Kakyo no oshie, Iwanami shoten, 1984 (originally, 1943). Akamatsu Keisuke, Hijômin no minzoku bunka: seikatsu minzoku to sabetsu mukashibanashi, Akashi shoten, 1986.

[5]"*Yobai*" was a custom in which unmarried young people in a village could engage in acceptable premarital sex. Its practices varied, but, as the literal translation of the term suggests, the typical practice was for a young man to "sneak" into the bed of a local young woman at night. There were many other ways of doing this, however, and as Amino describes in the next paragraph it was not always strictly among locals. It typically functioned as a form of courtship. If it continued between one man and one woman for a set period of time, then they would usually be recognized as married.

The mountains of Bitchû County formed a border between Okayama and the Izumo region and, as the people from the village described it to me, men from Izumo would form a defense line in the mountains, anticipating that men from Bitchû would attempt to come "night-crawling" to their village. My Bitchû informants regaled me with tales of their heroics, breaking through the defenses of the men of Izumo to make it over the mountains to the women of Izumo.

Likewise, orgiastic celebrations, known as "*utagaki*," continued to occur in many places until quite recently.[6] According to Miyamoto Tsuneichi, the *utagaki* custom of free sex was also commonly practiced at events such as festivals and popular Buddhist services. Miyamoto noted that during the festivals at the Kannon Hall in Tsushima and on saint's days at the Taishi Halls in the Kawachi region, men and women openly engaged in unrestricted intercourse. My Okayama informants confirmed this for me, noting that the custom came to an end only when police came out to investigate a murder in connection with an *utagaki* in the 1950s. Their testimony strikes me as quite plausible.

The same was true during retreats at temples and shrines in past eras. We occasionally see scenes in medieval picture scrolls where men and women can be found sleeping together in front of the deities. In one picture scroll, we even see men and women sleeping together using a large tree as a head rest. At the time, it would have been pitch dark, but since these are picture scrolls, we can see everything clearly.

Documentary evidence can also be found that indirectly points to the prevalence of these sexual practices. In 1261, the priests and attendants at Kasuga Shrine in Nara signed a vow stating that from then on, they would avoid "secret

[6]*Utagaki* were bacchanalian events with much singing, dancing and sexual intercourse. After much discussion, Amino has insisted that "orgy" is the best translation for "*utagaki*." In his chapter on "Commerce, Finance and Currency", Amino also mentions marketplaces as a common setting for *utagaki*.

assignations with women visiting the shrine, or with senior and junior councillors, in the vicinity of the worship hall or the greeting hall." The very fact that they had to take this vow suggests that such things were actually going on at Kasuga Shrine. In another fascinating document, Emperor Gouda sent a letter in 1285 to the Iwashimizu Hachiman Shrine ordering that "men and women should not mix when visiting the treasure hall or when spending the night." Emperor Gouda's admonition clearly suggests that men and women were regularly sleeping together in the retreat halls, and it is likely that even after this order was issued mixed residence continued.

The same was likely true for the festivals and Buddhist services I mentioned earlier. Being in the presence of the native deities and Buddhas meant being in a place subject to their power. In places subject to the power of the deities, the relations of the secular world were cancelled. As with the *utagaki* that appear in the ancient poetry collection, the Man'yoshû and various regional almanacs[7], these were places where men and women were not constrained by their secular relations as husband and wife.[8] As another sign of how different these places were seen to be, there are many stories of pilgrims receiving instruction from children upon visiting a temple or a shrine. This was, of course, also partially based on the belief mentioned in the previous chapter that children were imbued with the powers of the deities.

However, this release from the rules of social propriety were not limited to exceptional events like festivals or restricted spaces like temples and shrines. I

[7]Portions of the Man'yôshu, the oldest collection of poetry in Japan, have been translated into English. The Ten Thousand Leaves, trans. by Ian Hideo Levy, Princeton University Press, 1981. Local almanacs, known as *fûdoki*, featured compilations of local tales and histories. For an English translation of one such almanac see, Records of Wind and Earth: A Translation of Fûdoki, trans. by Michiko Y. Aoki, Association for Asian Studies, 1997.

[8]Unlike marriage in the West, which is seen as a union authorized and sanctioned by God, marriage in Japan was considered a secular, rather than sacred, relationship.

believe that the act of travel created a similar condition. In Forgotten Japanese, first published in 1960, Miyamoto Tsuneichi described young women going on long pilgrimages in groups of twos and threes. What is so shocking about Miyamoto's ethnography of these women is that he records how they could travel with very little money for months on end with complete ease. According to Miyamoto's informants, there were inns that allowed traveling women to stay for free, making it possible for them to take to the road easily. There are also stories of women going quite far to work, picking cotton or planting rice. This was also certainly going on in the Edo period, when women took up long journies in the name of "pilgrimage" (*okagemairi*). Further evidence of this can be found in picture scrolls, where we find many images of women in traveling garb—deep, face-covering sedge hats (*ichimegasa*), baggy kimono known as "jar costumes" (*tsubo sôzoku*) and straw sandals.

Travelers, especially those visiting temples and shrines, were believed to have severed their ties with the secular world, just as if they were on retreat. But the "non-connectedness" of travelers was not only due to their religious destinations. During the middle ages, roads and crossroads themselves were also considered places apart from the everyday world. Whenever an untoward incident took place on the road, its consequences could not be extended into the everyday world. Rather, the custom was that no matter how grave the incident, everything had to be resolved at the site itself. This can be supported by a document in the Kamakura era text called the "Kantô Formulary" (*Kantô onshikimoku*). Acording to the "Kantô Formulary," murders that occured in "mountains, coves, market towns and roads" could only be resolved by those who were there. Such incidents could not be carried out into the everyday world in such forms as vendettas.

During the middle ages, women walking the roads were sometimes victims

of incidents known as "*metori*" (taking a woman) or "*tsuji-tori*" (crossroads kidnapping). Rape was often involved, so at least in principle, such actions were strictly forbidden by law, for example, in the "Jôei Formulary" (1232). On close examination, however, we see that the punishment stipulated in the Formulary was not very heavy. In fact, the Jôei Formulary even directs that "allowances should be made in the case of monks."

Why is it that allowances should be made for monks, even for such serious crimes as rape and abduction? Kasamatsu Hiroshi surmises that since even low ranking monks were subject to the rule of abstinence—a restriction apparently felt to be beyond most men's capacities—it was understandable (and therefore cause for allowance) that they might occasionally abduct a woman.[9] Of course, this is only conjecture, but not unfounded.

The Muromachi period short story collection, Otogizôshi (Tales of a Companion), contains a story, the "Tale of Monogusa Tarô," that suggests that monks were not the only ones granted "allowances." In the tale, the protagonist, Monogusa Tarô, traveled to the capital and was told by the owner of an inn that the abduction of an unaccompanied woman walking on the road instead of riding in a palanquin was "permissable in this realm." In other words, female abduction was "publicly permissable" under certain conditions. Subsequently, Monogusa Tarô went out to visit Kiyomizu temple where he met a woman traveling alone. In the course of their meeting, Monogusa Tarô solved a poetic riddle posed by the woman and thus won her hand in marriage. Although this was not a violent incident, the narrative refers to this encounter as "taking a woman" (*metori*). Thus, we cannot immediately assume that all cases of *metori* were rape. In another case, the protagonist of the late Kamakura diary, The Confessions of Lady Nijô, was a woman

[9]Kasamatsu Hiroshi, Hô to kotoba no chûseshi, Heibonsha, 1984.

who, when she left the imperial palace to go on a long journey, found herself having to have sex with a number of men.[10]

That the custom of "taking a woman" actually existed, whatever form it took, demonstrates that what men and women did while traveling was quite different from what they did in the everyday world. More importantly, we must recognize that this was sanctioned by society. Might it not be, then, that such contemporary sayings as "one has no shame when traveling" are traces of these customs?

These records help us to see that customs that are inconceivable by today's standards of propriety and common sense actually existed in premodern Japan in a variety of forms. Frois's observations regarding the lack of import given to female chastity and virginity need not be considered outright lies. In particular, his assertions regarding women's freedom of travel can be seen to have been quite possible. So I have come to conclude that on these points Frois's text is not at all inaccurate. The boldness with which Frois made his claims elicits surprise, but he was apparently faithful in his account. It is also important for us to take these facts into account when thinking about historical transformations in women's lives.

On the matter of abortion, Frois depicted Japanese women as extremely cruel. In his view, Japanese women placed no value on the lives of children. Coupled with his opinion of Japanese women as sexually loose and unrestrained, the condemnation is clear. Frois deeply despised these attitudes from the standpoint of his Christian morals. Since Japanese society was not regulated by Christian morals, we may set aside his denunciatory tone, but we must recognize the veracity of his observations.

There was no religion in Japan capable of exerting the kind of totalizing

[10] Towazugatari, literally "A Tale Nobody Asked For" has been translated into English. The Confessions of Lady Nijô, trans. by Karen Brazell, Doubleday, 1973. The diary covers events from 1271 to 1306. We can imagine something of the rarity of circles in which she circulated by the fact that Lady Nijô was a lover of Emperor Gofukakusa.

influence that Christianity did in regulating people's everyday lives in the West. Thus, at the time, the common practices of abortion and infanticide—in which a woman stepped on the neck of a child she knew could not be raised—were seen as simply acts that grew out of poverty and the harsh conditions of life.

However, I believe that poverty alone does not explain these practices. The sexual practices I discussed above allow us to reasonably conclude that there were many "unwed mothers." Setting aside the moral dimensions of such behavior, we can see abortion and infanticide as ways that women at the time managed the actual conditions of their lives. Moreover, the flip-side of the belief that "a child is with the gods until seven" was that a child was not yet considered a human being. Infanticide in the Edo period continued trends from the medieval era. Here as well, most historians have sought an explanation in the travails of life. I am not arguing that we should not take into consideration the kinds of poverty that prevailed, but there are many aspects of that society that cannot be reduced to a question of poverty.

In any case, as a Christian missionary, Frois viewed the state of Japanese society with an extremely moralistic attitude. In the future, it would be instructive to explore the attitudes taken toward such problems by such Japanese religious groups as the Ikkô sect or the Nichiren sect. But whatever their views might have been, these sects were suppressed by worldly powers (the military class) from the sixteenth century into the Edo period. Their suppression also had a great deal to do with the subsequent state of society in the Japanese islands.

The Women of Taranoshô

There is little doubt that our conventional view of women's lives from the

Warring States period to the Edo period was fairly far off the mark. Until recently, we have seen this period as the time when the patriarchal family was established, when women had no rights and suffered under terrible oppression. But we must admit that actual conditions were quite different. When we go even further back in time to explore the state of women's lives before the fourteenth century, the documentary evidence clearly shows that women moved even more widely throughout society than they did in the Edo period. In order to illustrate this point I would like to take the example of a *shôen* estate I first studied as a student: Tara-no-shô in the Wakasa region. Tara-no-shô was a small estate, but since so many of its documents have survived to the present in the possession of Tôji temple in Kyôto, it provides a rare window on the operation of estates during that period.

At first, Tara-no-shô was an imperial territory (*kokugaryô*) said to have been developed by a monk named Niu Dewanobô Ungen from the monastery on Mt. Hiei. Ungen's grandfather acquired the fields of this settlement and decided to make it his financial base. When his grandfather died, Ungen's grandmother, a woman named Ozuki-no-uji-no-jo (literally, "woman of the Ozuki clan") passed the land onto the infant Ungen—who was known at the time by his childhood name of Wakamaru. This was near the end of the Heian period, but we know from this example that women had the right to dispose of family territory.

Sometime after the property had been passed to Ungen at the very end of the Heian period, Ungen's father died. In the official documents concerning his father's death we encounter for the first time the wet nurse who raised him in the Tara settlement. Around the same time, this wet nurse's husband also died, and Wakamaru was sent up to the monastery on Mt. Hiei to become a monk of the lowest rank, at which time he received his Buddhist name of Ungen. While on Mt. Hiei, Ungen left the management of his property to his wet nurse. This example

shows us that women were able to manage property. In particular, it also reminds us that wet nurses—and their husbands—fulfilled important functions in those days. This is a significant point to keep in mind as we examine women's lives.

In the end, Ungen became a vassal (*gokenin*) of Minamoto no Yoritomo (the founder of the Kamakura shogunate) in Wakasa Province. The standard procedure for determining vassals in the western part of Honshû was that the governor (*shugo*) would make a list of potential vassals already in the area to send on to Kamakura for the Shogun's approval. In the eastern half of Honshû, vassals would meet Yoritomo personally and submit their "registries," thus establishing a direct relationship of service.[11] Since Wakasa was in the West, the governor drafted a list and sent along some thirty-odd names, one of which was Ungen's.

In the same list of vassals we find the name of a woman named Fujiwara-no-uji-no-nyo (literally, "woman of the Fujiwara clan") who was the widow of a warrior named Miyakawa Mushanojo. We must be careful to note that her status was that of a widow, so in a sense she was acting in her husband's place. Nevertheless, it is extremely interesting that this document provides evidence that a woman could become an official vassal of the Kamakura shogunate.

In fact, women were not entirely excluded from donning a warrior's armor and acting in a military capacity in the medieval period. We believe that two women well-known in tales for their military abilities, named Tomoegozen and Hangakugozen, did indeed exist. Moreover, women did not only act as vassals. In the province of Hizen, there was a "female commander" (*onna jitô*) among the Matsura bandits. There were more than a few examples of this, so if it is true that women were able to take on the duties and territory of a constable (*jitô*) then women may have been able to fulfill any number of functions at this time.

[11] These "registries" (*myôbu*) were lists of lands to which they held title.

Returning to Tara-no-shô, Ungen soon fell to ruin and came under the protection of the largest vassal of Wakasa, one Nakahara Tokikuni (also known as Inaba Tokikuni). When Ungen accepted Tokikuni's protection, the job of estate manager (*kumon*) in Tara settlement—the most powerful position within the administration of the estate—passed from Ungen on to Inaba Tokikuni's mother, a nun named Nakamura-ni. Yet again, Tara-no-shô provides us with the example of another woman in a position of high responsibility, this time as estate manager.[12]

The income of the estate manager was provided by a grant of rice paddies and dry fields. Since Ungen was a vassal of Yoritomo, these lands could not be passed on to someone who was not also a vassal. Thus, Tara-no-shô was an example of an estate in which a woman governed territory received from a vassal and acted as the top administrator. Tara-no-shô was not the only estate where this kind of situation prevailed. Similar situations could be found in many other regions as well.

Among Ungen's lands was a set of fields, registered as Suetake-myô, measuring about five acres. After Ungen's death, this land became the object of a long-running struggle between two women, the daughter of one of Ungen's house vassals, Fujiwara-no-uji-no-nyo, and Inaba Tokikuni's granddaughter, Nakahara-no-uji-no-nyo. Note that both plaintiffs in this case were women. Since this was designated land that only a vassal of the Kamakura shogunate could hold, both of these women insisted for many years that they were themselves daughters of vassals. In the end, Nakahara won the suit, but even the loser, Fujiwara, was named the owner of the land for a short time. Consequently, we must conclude that in the Kamakura period women could be named vassals and be recognized as the owner

[12]The *kumon* of an estate was the on-site manager who produced and handled documents, assigned tax burdens and so on. As Amino suggests, it was a position of great importance and potential power.

of vassal land.

Women's Social Activities

In the early part of the Kamakura period, Ungen's Tara settlement became the property of Tôji temple and finally came to be officially known as the Tara estate (Tara-no-shô).[13] Upon obtaining this territory, Tôji immediately appointed officials to manage the property. The first manager was a monk named Jôen, but after a time the position of manager came to be considered a post that should be passed from woman to woman. As a result, Jôen's female descendents held that position throughout the Kamakura and Northern and Southern Courts periods.

Jôen was of the Fujiwara clan, so his female descendents were all known in the documents as Fujiwara-no-uji-no-nyo (woman of the Fujiwara clan). In the middle of the Kamakura period, a woman who went by the name Higashiyama Nyôbô (Higashiyama's woman) and her daughter, also known as Fujiwara-no-uji-no-nyo, came to hold this office. These women were not managers in name only. Over the years, they struggled to maintain Tôji's rights in long drawn-out lawsuits with local military constables. Some of the descendents of Jôen even went out on tours of the territory, suspecting that the villagers were not properly paying their yearly taxes. On these tours they made the villagers carry their palanquins and collected all taxes due without granting exceptions. In some cases, the villagers complained to Tôji that these women were altogether too harsh in their management. Thus, there was nothing merely symbolic about female management.

Apart from their activities in the field, we should note that these women

[13]Tôji is the Kyôto headquarters of the Shingon sect, one of the two major esoteric sects of the Heian period. It continued to be a major factor in national politics, and one of the largest landholders, until the Warring States period.

produced a great many documents, written in *hiragana*, concerning these incidents that remain in the possession of Tôji today. It goes without saying that the female managers of the estate and the daughters of vassals could write. But even the Fujiwara woman who was briefly named owner of the 5-acre Suetake fields— who was eventually determined not to be a vassal but a mere villager— was able to write magnificent *hiragana* letters. The documents at Tôji bear that out. Thus we know that by the latter half of the thirteenth century the writing of letters in *hiragana* had spread even to commoner women.

Around the middle of the fourteenth century, during the Northern and Southern Courts period, a dispute broke out in Tara estate over a couple of fields belonging to villagers. Three women named Zennichi-nyô, Kannon-nyô and Wakatsuru-nyô were among the disputants in this case. These women's names are unlike the clan names I described earlier. Instead, these women's names are in the form of children's names. Since these women appeared in a suit concerning the complicated problems of villager ownership, it is possible that there were many other village women who were designated proprietors of such fields by the fourteenth century. Thanks to documents like these, we know that by the fourteenth century women were publicly involved at every level of the social activities of estates and imperial lands. Such involvement included appointment to official duties, in payment for which these same women obtained and held land in their own names.

We can confirm this from another area of documentation: the family genealogies of the Shintô priests at the first and second shrines in Wakasa province dating from the Northern and Southern Courts period. Most family genealogies show only the patriarchal line, but the Wakasa documents also show the matriarchal line in great detail. In other words, these genealogies show *both* lines. This was not

only true for the Muku clan who served as Shintô priests, but also for many warrior clans of Wakasa, including the Tada and Wakuri clans.

Perhaps matriliny was particularly strong in Wakasa. Then again, we know so much about Tara estate because so many of the documents showing us these women's activities have survived until today. Other estates do not have such detailed records, so we might not be able to immediately generalize from the case of Tara-no-shô. But I believe that at least in Western Japan we can infer that conditions in general were similar to those of Tara estate. On what grounds do I say this?

Since Takeuchi Rizô's monumental work, *Kamakura Documents,* is nearly complete, we now have nearly all surviving documents from the Kamakura period in print. When we look at documents relating to the sale or transfer of fields and residential lands—particularly when we examine the names of the documents' supplicants and addressees—we find a rather high percentage of women's names. This has been statistically confirmed, so we can be sure that women elsewhere also held, transferred and bought land. I must stress that this can be ascertained from legal records.

However, by the Muromachi period women's rights to ownership of land and property were undermined. In the Edo period, women did not possess the formal right to own land, although their rights to moveable property were maintained. Thus if a woman's dowry was pawned by her husband, she could press for a divorce. Incidentally, the fact that women in the Edo period maintained their rights to moveable property, such as their dowry, provides support for Frois's observations on property and divorce.

Regarding women's relationship to land ownership in general, we have been able to confirm that women appear more frequently as the owners or participants in the sale or transfer of residential lands than in similar transactions with agricultural

land. For example, Daigoji temple currently possesses a late Kamakura period household register from a harbor near Tomaura (presently Toba) of Shima province. An examination of this register shows that a great many of the house owners formally listed in the area were women.

In his book, Love and Subservience in the Middle Ages, Hotate Michihisa has made some interesting observations concerning the close relationship women had to houses and residential land.[14] Hotate has made a careful study of the way the "*nurigome*"—later known as the "*nando*" or storeroom—of medieval houses were depicted in picture scrolls. Considered the most "sacred place" in the house, these rooms doubled as the parental bedroom and storeroom for the family's valuables.

Hotate points out that it was the women who managed this space. In historical documents, we often find women recorded as "the house woman" (*kajo*); their management of the most crucial spaces of the house may be the reason why women were often also called "master of the house" (*ietoji*) In fact, from the Kamakura period to the Northern and Southern Courts period, we find that many of the financiers popularly known as "lenders" (*kashiage*) or "moneylenders" (*dosô*) were women. This must have had something to do with their position in the home. The late Heian Scroll of Diseases (*Yamai sôshi*) refers to a female moneylender who "lives near the seventh avenue bridge in a wealthy home and has much to eat." She is portrayed in the scroll as an enormously obese woman who cannot get around without assistants to help carry her bulk. Other examples abound. In the late Kamakura period, a female moneylender in the port of Obama in Wakasa province was known as "the matron of the beach." Again, in Yamashiro province, a woman known as the "woman of the Taira clan" dealt in loans as high as 100 *kanmon.* I could go on listing women who owned warehouses, but all of this is simply to

[14] Hotate Michihisa, Chûsei no ai to jujun: emaki no naka no nikutai, Heibonsha, 1986.

underscore the fact that the managers of warehouses were generally women.

This also has to do with the social views of money I discussed in the chapter on "Commerce, Finance and Currency." The first harvest rice (*hatsuho*) and money offerings (*jôbun*) made to the native deities and buddhas were deposited in storehouses. These items in turn were used as financial capital for loans on which interest could be charged. The fact that a major proportion of the managers of these sacred storehouses were women may well have had to do the particularities of women's sexual being itself. Hotate Michihisa points out that in the middle ages, women were often given care of important documents and property, for example in time of war. Putting these items in the care of women guaranteed a degree of safety for them. I believe that this too had something to do with the particularity of women's sex.[15]

Elsewhere, I have described this as a belief in "women's unconnectedness" that prevailed until the Northern and Southern Courts period. Women possessed powers beyond those of men, and these powers marked them as bound to the sacred. The fact that women were managers and messengers of the peace in the midst of upheaval in the secular world points to this belief. Thus, Frois's claim that women would loan money to their husbands was not a simple absurdity. It is supported by the fact that women had their own property and engaged in financial activities.

The infamous Hino Tomiko (1440-1496) has often been criticized for amassing

[15]Amino is referring here to his discussion in "Fear and Loathing" of the concept of "pollution" in ancient Japanese society. According to Amino, the archaic Japanese believed that a state of pollution was caused by a breach in the border between the present world and the "other world" (the world of the gods or the after life). Because women give birth, thereby ushering life from that other world into the present world, their very sexual being places them on that unstable boundary. As the term "pollution" suggests, this is a situation to be feared and avoided. But looked at from another angle the ability to come into contact with that other world without being destroyed is what marks women as possessing a power beyond that of men.

a fortune by loaning large sums of money to daimyô while married to the Ashikaga Shogun Yoshimasa. In fact, she was not an "evil woman" who overstepped her bounds; moreover, she may have been just the tip of the iceberg.

The Emergence of Women's Professional Groups

The sacred character of women's sexual being was also linked to the issue of women's vocations (*shokuno*). For example, we have evidence of itinerant women's groups from very early on. Female shamans, known as "walking *miko*," were active well back to ancient times. We can also find traces in ancient documents of the origins of courtesans, described as "*asobime*" (play-girls) or "*ukareme*" (wandering women).

One well known ancient example of courtesans is from a record written by Ootomo Tabibito upon becoming a Major Counsellor in the imperial government. The records note that the officials of Dazaifu gathered to see him off on the occasion of his departure from Dazaifu, where he had been an officer, to take up his new post in the capital. Among them were a great many courtesans who exchanged poems with the new Major Counsellor. Judging from the later functions of courtesans, it seems quite possible that by this time courtesans were already formally associated with the imperial offices at Dazaifu.

In the previous chapter, I discussed courtesans in relation to non-humans. Under the Ritsuryô system, various imperial offices had jurisdiction over different vocational groups; as the Ritsuryô system decayed and the offices' functions changed, these vocational groups became independent. It is likely that courtesans followed the same path; the female officials and singers attached to the Women's Quarters of the Palace (*Kôkyû*) and the Bureau of Music (*Gagakuryô*) formed the

nucleus of this movement.

From around the tenth and eleventh centuries, courtesans began to form independent vocational groups under the leadership of a woman. The towns of Eguchi and Kanzaki were the best known places for these women. In general, courtesans made ports and harbors their base, and in Western Japan, these women also travelled by boat. Unfortunately, we have no concrete evidence as to whether or not the many regional groups had any kind of connections among themselves. It does appear, however, that these courtesan groups, organized as they were by a leader, had a seniority system much like that of merchant and artisanal groups. Puppeteers (*kugutsu*), usually female, were probably also organized along the same principles, and in Eastern Japan female puppetteers and courtesans overlapped, often locating their bases in post towns. In the East they appear to have made little use of boats.

Back at the capital, we see that despite the decline in the Ritsuryô bureaucracy in the medieval period, courtesans still held a prominent place in the imperial court. In his early Kamakura text, The Record of the Right, Ninnaji Omuro explicitly stated that courtesans and female dancers (*shirabyoshi*) were permanently employed in the imperial palace. Many aristocratic diaries also reveal that courtesan groups were placed under the jurisdiction of the Bureau of Music and the Office of Female Dancers and Musicians (*Naikyôbô*). They were managed by a special officer, organized in ranks, and brought to participate in imperial rites and ceremonies.

Shirabyoshi dancers and puppeteers were employed under similar conditions. For example, we have clear evidence of an official post called "*shirabyoshi* service" in the early Kamakura period. Thus, courtesans, *shirabyoshi* dancers and puppeteers were like shrine purveyors, as female vocational groups in the direct service of the emperor and the deities. If shrine purveyors possessed the kind of authority I

described in "Commerce, Finance and Currency," then the social position of these female professionals was far from low. Indeed, up until the Kamakura period, we have clear evidence that courtesans, *shirabyoshi* dancers and puppeteers were giving birth to children fathered by the emperor and nobles, while their compositions were included in imperially-commissioned poetry collections. Not at all what one would expect from a debased group.

Moreover, this status was not limited to women who were in the business of entertainment. From the late Heian period, we have ample evidence of women who participated in significant numbers in such non-agricultural occupations as craft work and religious performances, and who consequently became imperial or shrine purveyors. These tradeswomen may be traced back to at least the eighth century. The early Heian era text, Accounts of Miracles in Japan, presents images of women selling flowers and stories of women becoming wealthy by loaning offerings made to the deities (*suiko*).[16] One sermon deals with a woman known as Tanaka Mahito Hiromushinome who loaned out saké and rice as *suiko* in small measuring boxes and measured return payments of interest in large measuring boxes. Another story tells of a woman who became wealthy on interest earned from loans she made with cash offerings that had been given to the Buddha at the temple of Daianji.

All in all, there is little doubt that there were a great many female merchants in Japanese society. For example, fishmongers were, almost without exception, women. Likewise, the vendors from Lake Biwa who sold fish in stalls in the Rokkakuchô section of Kyôto in the early Kamakura period, later becoming imperial purveyors, were all women. The cormorant fishers on the Katsura River near Kyoto, later known as the Katsura imperial purveyors, also included women known as

[16] Nihon Ryôiki. A collection of 116 stories compiled by the priest Kyôkai circa 822. Portions of the collection are available in English. Miraculous Stories from the Japanese Buddhist Tradition, translated by Kyoko Nakamura, Curzon 1997.

Katsurame, who sold a fish called "ayu." In addition, female imperial purveyors from Ohara and Onoyama, to the north of Kyoto, sold charcoal and firewood, while others sold *konnyaku*, vegetables and shrine offerings. At Gion shrine in Kyôto, female shrine purveyors sold silk and padded garments (*kosode*). All of these examples date up until the Northern and Southern Courts period.

As I mentioned above, the role of shrine, temple and imperial purveyors as servants of the deities was clearly linked to their engagement in wide-ranging, intinerant, tax-exempt commerce. Many of these purveryors were women, which leads us back to my argument regarding the sacred character of females. As with the "non-humans," clothing was an important marker of their sacred distinction. For example, Katsurame traveled wearing special hats, thereby signifying that they were distinct from women in general. This practice of signifying status difference in clothing was also an important element in women's ability to undertake the long journeys I discussed earlier. In sum, up until the Kamakura and Northern and Southern Courts period, itinerant female merchants were far more active than previously supposed.

The Exclusion of Women From the Public

So how do we reconcile these facts with the conventional wisdom that women were excluded from the public and that they lived under continual oppression?

In recent years, research in the history of the family has made great progress. Prior to these studies, the assumption was that since archaic times Japanese society had been a patriarchal society that supported male superiority. However, scholars of women's history, such as Takamure Itsue, have countered this view by arguing

that, up until the Northern and Southern Courts period, Japanese society had strong tendencies toward matriarchy.

The most recent research suggests that lineage groups in archaic Japan did not take the form of clans. In other words, there were no clan groups, matrilineal or patrilineal, which operated on an extra-clan marriage system, and in which men and women within the same clan would be considered blood relatives and therefore subject to a marriage taboo. In such a system, marriage to partners from other clans is necessary. Instead, one of the noteworthy characteristics of Japanese society since ancient times has been a loose attitude toward marriage with close relatives (consanguinous marriage). In the Japanese islands, there appears to have been a dual lineage kinship system in which membership was recognized through both the father's and mother's lines. As a result, the taboo on marriage to close relatives was very weak in Japanese society; the taboo on marriage to those who have the same family name, still strong in China and Korea, simply did not exist in Japan.[17] Ancient documents reveal that marriage between children of the same mother was taboo, although mention was made of cases of sibling love for which the lovers suffered. We even have some examples in which they actually married. We also find many marriages between uncles and neices, or aunts and nephews, up until medieval times. Turning to the world of the imperial court, we find consanguinous marriages occurred to a surprising degree up to the end of the Kamakura period, supporting the contention of Tsuda Sôkichi that the ancient *uji* were different from clans.[18] Tsuda contends that *uji* were actually political associations that were first

[17]In the original, Amino notes, "I myself am a product of a marriage between close relatives; my parents were cousins. My father's parents and my mother's parents were also cousins. I have five brothers and sisters and we sometimes note with relief that none of the potential negatives of consanguinous marriages appeared in us."

[18]*Uji* are conventionally translated as "clans" thus presenting the problem of translating the sentence as "ancient clans were different from clans." For this specific example I have left "uji" untranslated. Tsuda Sokichi, Jôdai nihon no shakai oyobi shisô,

formed among the ruling strata under the influence of the Chinese continent.

Under such conditions, women's and men's social positions would not be that different. The Chinese Ritsuryô system was grafted onto this dual lineage situation. This is important because Chinese society developed a patriarchal structure from early on, taking on a formal structure where men were legally superior and patriliny and patriarchy were the rule. When family matters were taken up in public, the patriarchal line was followed.

When this system was grafted onto the society of the Japanese archipelago, the public obligations of the commoners—the *chô* (taxes in kind) and *yô* (corvée labor) taxes—were borne by men (adult males only) and the officials who determined policy were also strictly male. Meanwhile, women receded into the background, into the inner recesses of the palace in the case of the aristocracy. But this formal situation was vastly different from the actual conditions of society in Japan at that time, opening up a gap between appearance and reality.

The signs of friction produced by this gap are most easily found in those instances in which women made exceptional appearances in the formal system of the Ritsuryô State. For example, we occasionally find women designated as the head of the family in household registers. Similarly, in the eighth century there were a number of female emperors, which I believe is the result of the intervention of noble women in politics from the inner palace. While there are a variety of explanations for the appearance of these female emperors, I believe their rise to power was made possible by the fact that the formal gender principles of the Ritsuryô system—in which the public world was male and the inner private world was female—had not yet completely permeated society. But that was only through the eighth century. At the beginning of the ninth century, during the reign of

Iwanami shoten, 1933.

Emperor Heizei, the Kusuko Incident led to significant changes.[19] Emperor Saga came to power as a result of this incident, establishing the dynasty of the Saga line. From that point on, the formal principles of the Ritsuryô system came to be more thoroughly implemented. After this incident, women in the inner palace were unable to publicly engage in politics; men came to the fore, and women receded to the background.

The fact that women hardly ever made an appearance in the official registries was also due to the Ritsuryô ideology. For example, inspection reports were compiled for *shôen* estates and public lands until the eleventh century. These reports record the owner for each and every plot of agricultural land. Now, when we consider the fact that women had the right to buy, sell and transfer land (as I discussed above), it should not be hard to find the names of women in the registries. However, apart from a limited number of exceptions, the owners in these registries were always listed as men.

Until recently, historians have taken the exclusive male presence in these registries at face value, concluding that Japanese society had been patriarchal from the archaic past. But exclusive male registration was, in fact, only a formal principle,

[19]The Kusuko Incident refers to a complicated series of events from 807-810. It began with the eradication of a branch of the Fujiwara clan when its scion was accused of conspiring against Emperor Heizei. The accusation came from a member of another branch of the Fujiwara clan, Fujiwara Nakanari, but has been widely blamed on his sister, Fujiwara Kusuko, who held the highest post in the Office of the Women's Quarters of the imperial palace. Shortly after the plot, Emperor Heizei retired, citing health problems, and was succeeded by his younger brother who became Emperor Saga. Nevertheless, Kusuko, who had the ear of Heizei, reportedly harbored ambitions to become Empress. When Heizei recovered from his illness, she and others worked to get him reinstated to the throne. In response, Saga dismissed her from her post and demoted her brother, Nakanari. The following day Heizei and Kusuko left the capital and headed east to raise troops and retake the throne. But their uprising quickly failed. Heizei took the tonsure and became a priest, Nakanari was executed and Kusuko committed suicide.

The importance of this incident to Amino's argument is that its motive force was located in Kusuko and thus brought intense scrutiny to the political activities of women in the inner palace. Saga's response, according to Amino, was to strive to make the formal principles of patriarchy the practical principles of governance.

adopted as a result of the Ritsuryô system. As we saw in our discussion of the spread of writing, the world of Chinese characters (*kanji*) and public affairs was considered masculine. Yet the world of *hiragana* and the activities of women in the recesses of the private world were by no means insignificant. The truth is that writing had disseminated among women. Moreover, the unique women's literature that developed in the inner palace shows that women firmly maintained their own perspective. A hard and fast patriarchal system had merely been grafted onto a dual lineage society.

The transplanting of a patriarchal system onto a society in which women's social status was by no means low produced conditions rare in world history. I believe this gap between formal appearance and actual practice was critical to the development of the women's literature of the Heian period. We cannot understand the genesis of this literature so long as we simply see it as having been produced in a context in which women were firmly under the control of a patriarchy. The same applies to understanding the meaning of the very public social activity we noted in women earlier this chapter.

Pollution and Women

Just as women were being excluded from public life, a similar situation was developing in the Buddhist world. Takagi Yutaka claims that the first formal monks at the time of Buddhism's first entry to Japan during the Nara period were probably women—nuns, in other words.[20] In fact, there were many female monks (*sôryo*) during the Nara period who had gone through formal ordination procedures.[21]

[20]Takagi Yutaka, Bukkyôshi no naka no nyonin, Heibonsha, 1988.

[21]There is a specific term for nun (*ama*), but Amino insists on using the term *sôryo* which is currently gendered male. This suggests that the English word "monk," which is also

However, after the ninth century, we find no female monks seated at the altar and receiving formal rites. By this time, women were completely excluded from the formal, state-recognized, Buddhist altar. This exclusion was closely connected to women's exclusion from politics and public society, but in the case of Buddhism, it was argued that women's sexual being itself was "polluted." As a result, the teachings of Buddha came to be seen as being beyond the reach of women. Nevertheless, women's function as mothers, particularly as the mothers of monks, was recognized as valuable; this was how Buddhism from the late Heian period classified women.

This relation between women and "pollution" (*kegare*) presents us with the reason discussions of women and "non-humans" are inseparable. The so-called "new Kamakura Buddhist sects" that had made the salvation of "non-humans" a major goal also worked for the salvation of women as another group cast off by mainstream Buddhism. For example, the monks of the Ritsu sect were famous for their strenuous efforts toward the salvation of "non-humans." But Hosokawa Ryôichi has recently demonstrated that the Ritsu sect also built convents, thus opening a way for women to be welcomed into the religious association.[22] Unlike the Tendai and Shingon sects, which had formally and systematically excluded women from receiving rites of ordination, the Ritsu sect made it possible for women to become monks (or nuns) by pledging before the Buddhas to maintain the commandments. In this way, the monks of Ritsu turned what had previously been temples into convents. The Ji sect's founder, Ippen, also explicitly welcomed women into his group from the very beginning. In the Ji sect, female monks took the

gendered male, is not the best translation for the practice of this early period. In effect, Amino is talking about Buddhism before and during a gendered specialization of labor. As the following sentence suggests, "monk" (*sôryo*) was more a term of rank and accomplishment than of gender.

[22]Hosokawa Ryôichi, Chûsei no risshû jiin to minshû, Yoshikawa kôbunkan, 1987.

character for the numeral one into their names, while male monks attached the first two characters of Amida Buddha's name, *ami*, to theirs. For example, Ji nuns with the character "one" in their names frequently appear in the fourteenth century nobleman's diary known as The Record of Moromori. Likewise, the Picture Scroll of the Holyman Ippen shows female and male monks traveling together, and the salvation of women is one of its major themes. In essence, Ippen's Ji sect dealt with the issue of women's salvation in the same way as it dealt with the salvation of non-humans. Another of the new Kamakura Buddhist sects, Shinran's True Pure Land sect, is famous for allowing monks to marry. This was unprecedented in the history of Buddhism in Japan. Meanwhile, the reader may recall my mention of the scene in the Pictorial Biography of the Holyman Hônen in which courtesans appeal to Hônen for salvation. Without doubt, the salvation of women was a major issue for all of the new Buddhist sects of the Kamakura period.

But we can also read this trend against the grain, from the perspective of those who saw non-humans and similar groups as heavily polluted. The Picture Book of Goblins, discussed in the previous chapter, took Ippen to task by alleging that relations between men and women within his group were extremely improper. On that point, The Picture Book of Goblins attacks Ippen's group as immoral.

Thus, there was a violent intellectual and religious confrontation over how to understand women's sexual difference, just as there was with the existence of "non-humans." It was a struggle, in other words, over the concept of pollution. This, in turn, was linked to the fundamental issue of "evil." On the one hand, we have Shinran's doctrine of "the Advantage of Evil," in which the "evil person" is seen as the one most likely to be able to understand and embrace Amida Buddha's vow of unlimited compassion. On the other hand, the warrior government in Kamakura was engaged in an ever more urgent suppression of groups it had

designated “evil bandits” (*akutô*).

Relatively speaking, women’s social standing went into decline from the Muromachi and Warring States periods. Nevertheless, we still find many tradeswomen in the late fifteenth century picture scroll, Songs of Seventy-One Tradesmen. Indeed, this scroll contains a surprising number of images of saleswomen and female artisans. But they appear in decreasing numbers in the popular “Scenes In and Out of the Capital” (*Rakuchû rakugai*) paintings of the Momoyama period or the early Edo period Tradesmen’s Songs collections.

For example, fan-selling had traditionally been a women’s profession. We naturally find images of these women in the Songs of Seventy-One Tradesmen, and even some images of them at their stands in “Scenes In and Out of the Capital.” However, from the Edo period, these jobs were often taken by men. Although this had been an artisanal field where women had been able to work in the public sphere, from the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries women were forced into the background even here.

The Decline of the Status of Women

Discrimination against itinerant women and courtesans also came clearly to the fore during the Muromachi and Warring States periods. In one historical document from the Northern and Southern Courts period, we find that a courtesan house in Kyôto, called the Keiseiya[23] and run by the courtesans themselves, began to be popularly known as “Hell’s Corner.” In the Muromachi period, we find

[23]The term derives from an ancient Chinese story of a ruler who lost his kingdom because he was so enamored of a woman. It literally means “The House of the Fallen Castle,” but “keisei” also came to be a euphemism for a beautiful woman. The name of the operation was thus understood more as “The House of Beauties.” That is the implication in Amino’s description of the shift from Keiseiya to “Hell’s Corner.”

increasing use of the epithets “Hell’s Corner” and “Worldly Corner” in relation to courtesans. The discriminatory nuance in “Hell’s Corner” is obvious. While the “worldly” of “Worldly Corner” comes from a cryptic word used in women’s quarters, it too appears to have had a negative connotation. There is a great deal of corroborating evidence that courtesans came to be looked down upon during this period, and we have documents showing that men began to sell women into work as courtesans, or *keisei*, from the late Muromachi period.

This was entirely different from the way courtesans lived and worked up until the Northern and Southern Courts period. In this change we can discern the same kind of social stigmatization that the non-humans were subjected to. Frois’s observation that convents and nunneries were houses of prostitution may have been a reference to one extreme of the temples of the new Buddhist sects in this later period. The famous traveling Kumano Bikuni nuns were also said to be prostitutes.[24] The stigmatization directed at the Kumano Bikuni came to be directed more generally at traveling women of all kinds during late medieval times.

Things also changed for commoner women on the *shôen* estates. We still find a few examples of women involved in disputes over land ownership in the documents of Tara-no-shô in the Muromachi period, but conditions had changed dramatically compared to before the Northern and Southern Courts era. It is not entirely clear why things changed so drastically, but after the fourteenth century women hardly ever appeared as the named parties to legal disputes in *shôen* and government estates. The same was true in the world of the warriors. While the principle of male superiority went into decline when the Ritsuryô system broke down and women could once again make an unrestricted appearance in the secular

[24] Kumano Bikuni were Edo period nuns who travelled to the famous Kumano shrine (in present day Wakayama prefecture) to perform a series of rituals. On their return home, they sold amulets related to the Kumano shrine. They also became known as singers of popular songs and as diviners. As Amino notes, they were eventually associated with prostitution.

world from the end of the Heian period and into the middle ages, by the Muromachi period, women's exclusion from the front stage had been reinforced by a newly reconstituted patriarchal society.

It is likely that women were still quite active behind the scenes, but the principles of patriarchy took an even more thorough, systematic form in the Edo period. This is still not to say, however, that patriarchy had achieved total dominance. One can still find Edo period documents that hint at more flexible conditions for women behind the scenes. For example, on the island of Manabe in Bitchû province, we find what was, so far as we know, the only case of a village headwoman. Some have said this was only possible in the case of an island fishing village, unthinkable under normal conditions during the Edo period.[25] Nevertheless, for two years running, a woman named Sen was the village headwoman of Manabe. This took place in 1638-39, when the Edo shogunate's system was not yet thoroughly in place. Yet it indicates that women still possessed certain qualifications requisite for them to stand in such a position of responsibility.

At the least, the conventional view that women in the Edo period were simply and absolutely oppressed is unable to account for Sen's (admittedly brief) leadership. By this time, many women were still able to engage in travel, such as on *okagemairi* (Thanksgiving) pilgrimages, and literacy among women had reached a fairly high level. There were women who divorced on their own will, and it appears that women in merchant families had significant power. In addition, since many of the founders of the "new religions" of the Edo period were women, one can say that women still possessed a strong link to sacredness.[26] Thus, echoes of women's

[25]Meaning that the population was too small and the men out at sea for too long to fulfill the obligations of the office.

[26]The major example of a new religion founded during the Edo period by a woman is Tenrikyô.

conditions from before the early medieval era continued to reverberate into the Edo period, albeit in hushed tones.

Nevertheless, there is no doubt that male superiority had become the norm during the Edo period, and that Meiji civil law inherited and strengthened that principle. But the often overlooked history of women's authority and activity over the centuries reminds us that even in the modern period, which we tend to associate with the often brutal oppression of women, we also need to bring to light the valiant dimensions of modern women's lives. Miyamoto Tsuneichi's Forgotten Japanese is contemporary proof of that.