

Priests, money and women: Religion in *Seji kenbunroku*

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Introduction

Seji kenbunroku, “A witness account of matters in the world,” is a long and detailed critique of all levels of society that was written in the 1810s by a samurai writer whom we only know by his pseudonym Buyō Inshi – the Hidden (or Retired) Gentleman from Musashi (that is, Edo)¹. All we know about this figure is what he reveals about himself in the text; and this is so little that it is unlikely that he will be identified unless a new contemporary source turns up that lifts the veil. The text’s anonymity has had the effect that there is as yet no detailed study of the text; there is little more to go on than the introductions to modern editions written by historians such as Honjō Eijirō (1888-1973), who prepared the first full edition of the text, Takimoto Seiichi (1857-1931), Takigawa Masajirō (1897-1992), and Naramoto Tatsuya (1913-2001) – all composed rather a long time ago. One often encounters short quotations from the text, which is full of colourful episodes from all walks of life, but I have yet to see a sustained analysis of its arguments and its view on society in either Japanese or a Western language.

Seji kenbunroku appeals to me for two reasons. The first is its sweeping set-up. The author (“Buyō”) has the grand ambition of writing a social critique that covers the whole of contemporary society, and dedicates separate chapters to each of the main sections of the social pyramid. Most of these chapters display a similar structure: first, Buyō briefly draws up an image of a magnificent ideal; then, he turns to the reality on the ground in great anecdotal detail, and finds it lacking in all respects. The fact that Buyō is explicit about the ideal that real life is measured against, makes it easier for the reader to discern the polemical nature of his descriptions, and it serves as a clear warning against taking Buyō’s portrayal of “reality” for granted. Buyō’s juxtaposition of high ideals and dirty actuality confuses the reader all the more because his ideals appear so utterly absurd. This makes Buyō’s text great material for methodical reflection on the nature of historical sources: what are we to make of a text’s descriptions of society if the world view that informs those descriptions is so utterly alien to our own? And, the other way around, how does our own modern perspective distort our understanding of texts written in another age and place?

The second reason for my fascination with the text is its position within Edo period intellectual history. Finished in c. 1816 by a streetwise samurai (probably a *rōnin*) who prides

¹ This paper is a result of a joint project that has been going over the last year or so. The participants include Kate Nakai, Anne Walthall, John Breen and Umezawa Fumiko, in addition to myself. The concrete aims of the project are to produce a full translation of this text, to analyse the text’s discourse on early nineteenth-century society and to place it in its historical context. All references are to the Iwanami Bunko edition of *Seji kenbunroku* (ed. Honjō Eijirō; rev. Naramoto Tatsuya) that appeared in 1994.

himself on his lack of any formal learning, the text reveals much about the impact (or lack of impact) of major trends in the age's intellectual history. As one would expect of a samurai author writing a decade or so after the Kansei reforms (1787-93), Buyō's outlook is in many ways a Confucian one. Loyalty and filial piety, imbedded in human nature and bestowed by heaven, are the central values to which he subscribes. Yet, he reserves his highest praise for *budō*, the martial Way, and he does not hesitate to criticise even Confucianism as and when it becomes an obstruction to that Way – for example by consistently preaching for mercy rather than physical punishment, and by severely restricting *bushi*'s right to exert violence.

Interestingly, Buyō also weaves some echoes of *Kokugaku* thought into his arguments. One example of this is his usage of the word *yamato-damashii* (“the Japanese spirit”), a term that predates *Kokugaku* but that was perhaps most readily associated with that school in the 1810s. In *Kokugaku* fashion, Buyō uses this term to denote the original, upright mind of the ancient Japanese before the advent of Buddhism and Confucianism, and he argues that both these Ways contributed to the corruption of this original, pure spirit that knew no good and evil and was therefore free of selfish desire. It would appear that this idea of a “primordial Japanese spirit of natural spontaneity spoiled by foreign ways” had its attractions also for Buyō. Yet, other central elements of *Kokugaku* thought are conspicuously absent. Buyō hardly mentions the emperor; for him, the ultimate hero of Japanese history was not Emperor Jinmu but Gongen-sama, Tokugawa Ieyasu. Also, Shinto means very little to Buyō, and he has almost nothing to say about it. For him *yamato-damashii* had nothing to do with the world of the *kami* or the emperor as their representative on earth; instead, it defined the pure spirit of which some remnants still survived in contemporary *budō*. Finally, Buyō is completely silent about those other foreigners – the encroaching West. In this sense, then, Buyō gives eloquent expression to a worldview that is situated somewhere between the Neo-Confucian orthodoxy of the Kansei reforms and the *sonnō jōi* fanaticism of the Bakumatsu period.

The “anti-Way” of idlers

In his analysis of society, Buyō roughly divides the population into two categories. He writes: “Those who sustain the state are warriors and cultivators. Society can do without townspeople and idlers (*yūmin*)” (p. 422). On the one hand, there are two social groups (warriors and cultivators) that together constitute the foundation of the state, and on the other hand, there is a growing number of people who undermine it and, like parasites, suck out its lifeblood. The first category stands for peace, order, public morality, and productivity; the second for chaos, corruption, selfish greed and wastefulness.

The first chapters of Buyō's book are dedicated to the two constituents of the first category: warriors and cultivators (who are also referred to as *kokumin*, “the people of the provinces”). The rest of the book deals with various types of parasites. The first to taste Buyō's poisonous brush are the *jishanin*, temple monks and shrine priests. They share their idler status with the likes of Yin Yang diviners, physicians, blind *zatō*, kabuki actors, and, to quote one of Buyō's own lists, “unregistered tramps, gangs of bandits, quacks, gamblers, whores, pimps, kidnappers (*kadowakashi*), robbers, thieves, peddlers of goma ashes (*goma no hai*)², purse cutters (*kinchaku-kiri*), *eta* and *hinin*” (p. 423). Buyō finds much to criticise in his discussion of the warriors and the cultivators, but at least he does not dispute their right to exist. The townspeople and the “idlers,” however, are not only a drain on the state but, even worse, a direct

2 In fact, this colourful expression means little more than “highway swindlers” or “street thieves”

cause of the corruption that is destroying even the warriors and the cultivators and turning so many of them into *de facto* idlers. Buyō's solution, then, is to save the productive classes – the classes on which society depends – by unleashing the violence of the *budō* upon the parasites that threaten to destroy it: “The government should establish appropriate laws, reduce the numbers of townspeople, idlers, vagrants and bandits, increase those who work the soil, and put a stop to the ways that encourage luxuries, lasciviousness, and greed” (p. 423).

In Buyō's view, these two categories of people stand for two irreconcilable value systems. Ideally, at least, the warriors and the cultivators embody the virtues of heaven. Theirs is the realm of loyalty, duty, righteousness and correctness. The townspeople and the idlers, in contrast, follow the Way of profit and are obsessed with a bottomless greed. Buyō calls this the anti-Way, *gyakudō*. The contrast between the Way of duty and the anti-Way of greed is the main theme of the introduction:

The faithless become rich while the dutiful are robbed and reduced to poverty. Because of this, the true meaning of all ways of life is lost. Profit comes first and duty comes last. It is as though the differences between the four classes of people and between high and low no longer exist. High and low prestige are determined solely by wealth or poverty. The order between high and low has been turned upside down in a manner that is utterly beyond words. (p. 19)

In short, the heavenly order based on loyalty and moral duty is destroyed by the selfish profit-hunting of townsmen and idlers.

But it is not only money, or a lack of it in the right places, that is the problem. Our author is not some clueless samurai who is jealous at the wealth of others; in fact, he insinuates that he has been “out there” making a bit of money himself. The *gyakudō* is not an economic concept; if we were to emphasise only the economic aspects of Buyō's argument, that would indeed represent a modern reading that remains caught in a discourse that is alien to our text (since we seem to think that society and economy are the same thing). I would argue that Buyō's obsession with money should be interpreted not in such a modern, utterly secular vein, but rather as one aspect of a more fundamental dialectic, or even a cosmic struggle between good and evil, the Way and the anti-Way, heavenly harmony based on duty versus selfish, destructive greed.

In fact, money seldom figures alone as a protagonist of the *gyakudō*; almost invariably, it is accompanied by that other source of desire, sex. At the risk of diverging from my topic, I would like to expand a little on this point. Buyō's concern with sex as a central aspect of corruption explains why he dedicates a fascinating chapter to prostitution. In this chapter, he explains the process that transforms a regular woman (*shirōto*) into a professional prostitute (*baita, baijo*). Buyō writes that a few months after entering that profession, women are attacked by an illness that Buyō describes in almost metaphysical terms, as the transformation of a human being endowed with heavenly virtue into something very different – a barren thing without true feelings that is damaged beyond repair, and that is doomed to the idle life of an idler, unable to do even the simplest kind of productive work (p. 326). Prostitutes, then, represent in Buyō's thinking the ultimate victims of the anti-Way: empty shells, robbed of the very essence of humanity. Buyō equates a woman's loss of chastity to the loss of loyalty in a samurai: prostitution destroys the very foundations on which society is built. It is an extremely serious matter; much more serious than one would expect in the thinking of a man who, to put it plainly, has an otherwise very “masculine” way of looking at things.

Religion, ritual and the anti-Way

All this sets the stage for the topic of this essay: Buyō's take on "religion." The above discussion of the Ways of duty and greed, warriors and prostitutes may at first sight seem irrelevant to this specific topic, but it is not. Religion as an abstract concept does not occur in *Seji kenbunroku*; but monks and priests do. When they are discussed, however, it is not within the context of a debate on religion per se. Rather than discussing religion as an abstraction, Buyō focuses on the position of monks and priests within society. This category of people takes on a significance in Buyō's text that is clearly out of proportion to their importance as social actors – in a manner similar to prostitutes. Taken together, these two categories represent to Buyō the very essence of idler (*yūmin*) corruption. In his usual in-your-face manner, Buyō writes: "There are two evils that contribute most to the corruption of the Great Way in our time. One is the Honganji sect; the other is prostitution." Even though he singles out Shinran's Honganji ("True Pure Land") sect, in Buyō's views other Buddhist sects are just as dim.

At the beginning of his chapter on monks and priests, Buyō briefly sets out his ideas about what constitutes a monk's correct way of conduct:

[Monastics] should have no possessions and no desire for fame; they should follow a master and lead humble lives. They are meant to go around with begging bowls to receive offerings from the people, to sew their own clothes and carry firewood, to lift the cooking pot and prepare their own meals. They may live from day to day in their hermits' huts, offering flowers and holy water while they gain merit studying and practicing Buddhism without selfishness or greed; or they may search for knowledge, traveling from one land to another in faraway regions and seeking access to the deepest meanings of the Dharma; or they may follow the regulations of a school, acquire a temple when they reach a certain age, educate the people and guide them to the next life. (p. 137)

In effect, Buyō gives monks the choice between pursuing knowledge of the Dharma as itinerant beggars, or, more realistically, acquiring a temple after a lifetime of study and dedicating themselves to the edification of the people. Notably absent from his list is the mainstay of monastic activity – the performance of ritual. Monks may study and teach with some legitimacy, but not perform rituals to solve the problems of others.

Much of the chapter is taken up by anecdotal evidence of corruption by temple monks. The temples emerge as true bastions of the anti-Way. Buyō reveals that temples are never granted to deserving monks who excel in their practice of the Dharma, but always to the highest bidder. As a result, temples fall into the hands of bandits with a warped skill in the anti-Way of profit making. Temple holders force even the poor to make donations; they take money for worthless ceremonies that they leave to underlings to perform; they make loans and collect high interests in the most merciless fashion; they organise lottery tours conducted by financial agents of no spiritual merit whatsoever (who take a cut of the profits and, predictably, spend it on prostitution); they set up provision funds for their retirement; and much more. Monks enjoy fixed temple incomes that they can add to by organising special viewings of secret Buddha statues (*kaichō*), by holding public sermons, collecting donations and gifts, and by performing rites and prayer ceremonies, all designed to extort more money from their parishioners. In short, running a temple is, in Buyō's words, "a business that has no need even for investment capital (*motode*); there is no other business quite like it."

Moreover, temple lands are the very places where the anti-Way thrives in all of its most appalling forms:

Vermilion-seal lands³ and other areas near the gates of temples and shrines have come to be called “places of evil” (*aku-basho*). Their grounds are full of illegal prostitutes (*kakushi-baita*) and serve as hide-ways for concubines (*kakoimono*). These places are also known as “hells.” They are packed with brothels, taverns and tea stands. They also offer other kinds of amusements such as theatre plays, pantomimes, jugglers and storytellers – all conspiring to deceive people and steal their money. Even in the provinces, these vermilion-seal lands are nests of gamblers, thugs, robbers and murderers. (p. 148)

In conclusion, the monks are “in truth the greatest enemies of the land.”

One may wonder whether it is the corruption of monks in his age that Buyō objects to, or whether he regards Buddhism as a whole as inherently evil. In my reading of the text, Buyō has two things to say about this. First, he rejects all Buddhist ritual as corrupt by its very nature, and second, he depicts Buddhism as a necessary evil among the populace at large but as a lethal threat against the samurai ethos.

In a striking passage, Buyō compares the rituals performed by monks and priests with, again, prostitution:

Rituals performed for money, whether they be Shinto purification rites or Buddhist *kitō*, will not move the gods and Buddhas. A bought woman will not give you sons. The Buddhas and the gods will simply ignore rituals that are inspired by desire. (pp. 185-6)

In other words: by offering to bribe the Buddhas and the gods, the monks are acting like pimps who sell their sacred divinities as though they were prostitutes, while pretending to their customers that this will actually bring them some real benefit. Of course, in Buyō’s view it will not; if the Buddhas and gods would favour those who offer them most coin, they would indeed be champions of the anti-Way of greed. This is one way in which Buddhism is a form of prostitution.

Buyō grudgingly accords some role to Buddhism by noting that at least in principle and in theory, it should lead the people away from greed. However, he immediately closes this opening by bringing up another fundamental fault of Buddhism as a teaching. Strikingly, he again expresses his critique in terms of illegitimate sex:

The Buddha Way is acceptable as long as it is only taught to low-ranking folks (*gezoku*) as a way for them to control their bodies and minds. For those of middle rank and above, it becomes a great obstacle that prevents them from handling their worldly duties and from leading others. If people in the position of retainers have faith in the Buddha Way and pray for their afterlife, they behave like those women who have intercourse with secret lovers: they are extremely disloyal towards their masters. As their hearts are taken in by Buddhism, they fear for their next rebirth and look upon their lives as something transient that may not last another day, and they make an effort not to go astray in the affairs of this floating existence (*ukiyo*). Thus, they move away from their natural duties, they lose their courage, and they become unable to stand up and put their lives on the line for the Way of loyalty and filial piety. Those Honganji followers who rebelled in Mikawa are an example of this. The Dharma is a great threat for the martial Way. (p. 401)

³ Land that has been confirmed by the *bakufu* as the property of a temple or shrine. The relevant document carried the imprint of a seal in red ink; hence the name. In Edo, these lands were self-policing and exempted from the jurisdiction of the city magistrate.

Even in its most legitimate form, then, as a sincere faith concerned with the afterlife, Buddhism turns loyal retainers into customers of pimps and followers of the anti-Way.

Discussion: *Seji kenbunroku* as the “*honne*” of nineteenth-century anti-Buddhism?

What are we to make of Buyō’s passionate anti-Buddhist pleas? First of all, it strikes me that we should think of them not as another exercise in the Confucian genre of anti-Buddhist treatises. Buyō does not come across as an intellectual who has a stake in Confucianism; in fact, he displays a clear distaste for all forms of academicism, and now and again he makes scornful remarks about the paralysing effect that Confucian sophistry can have on the effectiveness of the martial Way. At one point, he even gets himself to say that “surely, the First Emperor of the Qin dynasty had good reason to bury Confucian scholars in holes” (p. 402).

In fact, Buyō’s arguments show little overlap with more scholarly critiques of Buddhism current in the Edo period. Kashiwahara Yūsen arranged these in five broad categories:

1. Criticism of Buddhism’s transcendental aspirations and disdain for matters of this world.
2. Criticism of Buddhism’s claim to produce real results.
3. Criticism of Buddhist cosmology (Mt. Sumeru, paradise and hell).
4. Criticism of the sutras as apocryphal frauds.
5. Criticism of Buddhism as un-Japanese.⁴

None of these points are made by Buyō. Buyō does not blame monks for showing disdain for the world, but for failing to act like proper hermits. He concedes the fact that Buddhism might work, but argues that it is unethical to use the methods of Buddhism to “bribe Heaven.” He has little to say about Buddhist cosmology or sutras. He does regard Buddhism as a threat to the Japanese spirit, but for other reasons than *Kokugaku* scholars did.

Rather than reading Buyō’s text as a distant echo of the genre of Confucian anti-Buddhist treatises, I see his disgust for monks as a poignant but still subordinate element of a much larger argument. Monks are attacked not so much as representatives of a foreign teaching, but rather as a particularly vicious instance of the anti-Way of the *yūmin* and as enemies of *budō*, the martial Way. In this sense, Buyō’s arguments were more in line with seventeenth-century texts such as the works of Kumazawa Banzan (1619-91) and the popular *Honsaroku*, a text that Buyō singles out for the highest praise (p. 434). His view of Buddhism echoes, for example, this critique in *Honsaroku*: “Even in China, ignorant kings err in the Way (...), believe in the Buddha-dharma, burn *goma*, and pray by chanting sutras. Those were all invented merely so that the selling-monks (*maisū*) may make a living. One should not believe in them. Also, they differ from the heart of the Buddha.”⁵ Buyō’s work, then, attests to the staying power of seventeenth century texts in the nineteenth century, and reminds us not to read the intellectual climate of his age solely through a *Kokugaku* or Neo-Confucian lens.

Of course, it is possible to dismiss Buyō’s tirades as the rants of a madman without any real influence in his own society. After all, his text was not published in his own time, and it can hardly have served the purpose that Buyō had in mind while he was writing it. However, one can also read *Seji kenbunroku* as an expression of a certain strand of opinion that was shared by an admittedly unknown proportion of society. Whoever Buyō may have been, he is obviously

4 See Kashiwahara’s explanatory essay entitled “Kinsei no hai-butsu shisō” (“Anti-Buddhist Thought in the Early Modern Period”), in: *Kinsei Bukkyō no shisō* (Nihon Shisō Taikei 57, Kashiwahara Yūsen & Fujii Manabu, eds, Tokyo: Iwanami Shoten, 1973), pp. 517-531.

5 See the edition in *Nihon Shisō Taikei* 28, p. 281.

a voice from a section of society that seldom speaks to us at such length. Whether Buyō was representative of a larger constituency or not, it is striking that he expresses such a strong revulsion against the world of temples and shrines, and that he does so without taking recourse to the ideological arguments that one encounters in more intellectual kinds of texts. Buyō appears to be an example of a radical agnostic who sees Buddhism (together with its companion, prostitution) as the epitome of the anti-Way. He attacked Buddhism for reasons quite different from those expressed by, for instance, *Kokugaku* and *Mitogaku* scholars. Although Buyō took on board some elements of nativist rhetoric (*yamato-damashii*, and so on), he used them only as a useful confirmation of opinions that he held already for quite different reasons. It is worth noting, for example, that such rhetoric is much more prominent in the latter part of the text (a chapter called “On Japan as a Divine Land”) than in the chapter on monks and priest earlier in the book. Even in that later chapter, Buyō puts some distance between nativist statements and his own opinion by consistently qualifying the former as hearsay, using expressions such as *to iu*, “so they say” (pp. 399 ff.).

This suggests the possibility that Buyō allows us a glimpse at something like a *honne*, an unspoken motivational force, that led many to buy into the nativist, anti-Buddhist discourse of subsequent decades. At least, *Seji kenbunroku* makes it abundantly clear that there was a time when one did not need to have any special feelings for the emperor, for Japanese poetry or for shrines to see Buddhism as an agent of the anti-Way – and also, that feelings of contempt for Buddhism were not necessarily something that trickled down from higher intellectual spheres. Perhaps it was the other way around, and the systematic criticism of Buddhism in the work of thinkers such as Hirata Atsutane (1776-1843) was a reflex of sentiments that are expressed more directly and clearly by the likes of Buyō?

If that is the case, this should have consequences for our understanding both of the purges of temples in the late Edo period, and of the religious policies of the early Meiji period. *Seji kenbunroku* displays an almost instinctive disdain for all aspects of “religion” that cannot be reduced to secular morality. This disdain, which was shared by most *budō* “thinkers” as well as “doers,” can help us to understand why so many religious practices were regarded as suspect from a purely moralistic point of view and treated harshly by the authorities, both before and after the Restoration.

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