

tion deteriorated steadily and in 1040 the chronicles record the distressing news that 'robbers broke into the Imperial Palace and stole some of [Emperor Goszoku's] clothing'.⁵⁰

Still more disturbing were the raids by mountain priests. Already in 981 soldier-priests from Mount Hiei, the great Buddhist centre that was designed to protect the city from danger, were marching unopposed through the streets of the capital to underline their demands to the government; and later in the period the inhabitants lived in terror of the warrior-monks who would periodically descend from the hills to indulge in arson, loot, and similar un-Buddhist practices.

Here again the Imperial Guards and Police were usually impotent; and it is significant of the steady shift of real power to the provinces that the government should have been obliged to call on families like the Minamotos to suppress such disorders. The weakening of central authority was correlated with the growth of new, more vigorous elements in the countryside, which was eventually to result in the formation of a feudal society. A separate warrior class was not consolidated until well after the period with which we are concerned, but already in Murasaki's time military families based on the manors were developing as a sort of 'second aristocracy'.⁵¹ That there could ever be anything aristocratic about soldiers and provincials would have struck the 'good people' of Heian as nothing short of ludicrous. They were the despised outsiders, who might be used to quell an occasional uprising or to collect taxes from a refractory estate, but who for all important purposes were beyond the pale of civilized society. Yet it was precisely these unpolished provincials who, when they had finally consolidated their strength, were to bring Murasaki's world down in ruins.

50. Reischauer, *op. cit.*, p. 336.

51. *Deuxième noblesse japonaise*, Ref. Des Longrais, *op. cit.*, p. 195 ff.

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IV

Religions

WITH Prince Niu's secret visit to Uji in Book 51, *The Tale of Genji* approaches its final climax.¹ Niu has succeeded in finding out about the attractive young girl whom Kaoru has kept hidden in the lonely house by Uji River. Travelling from the capital in disguise, he reaches the place late at night and manages to gain admittance, not only to the house, but to Ukifune's bed, by pretending that he is Kaoru, her 'official' lover. Niu is delighted by Ukifune's charms, and when the night is over, he cannot bear the idea of returning to the capital. The following passage is quoted at some length since it happens to reflect a number of beliefs that were current among the inhabitants of Murasaki's world:

The Prince summoned Ukon² and said to her, 'I fear you will think it very inconsiderate of me, but it really does not look as if I can leave here today. Kindly have my attendants lodged somewhere nearby where they will not be seen. Tokitaka³ had better return to the city and tell them that I am in retreat at a mountain temple or any other excuse that sounds convincing.'

Ukon was dumbfounded.⁴ When she remembered how careless she had been on the previous evening, she almost felt that she would go out of her mind. But gradually she managed to calm down, comforting herself with the thought that at this stage it would do no good to make a fuss or to get excited – besides which it would be a breach of etiquette. She reminded herself that the Prince had fallen in love with Ukifune at their very first meeting.⁵ Clearly it was his karma from a previous incarnation that things

1. See pp. 284-5.

2. Ukifune's gentlewoman.

3. A young attendant recently promoted to the Fifth Rank.

4. Until seeing Niu in the morning she had been unaware of the imposture.

5. Some months previously Niu met Ukifune at his wife's house in the capital and was instantly captivated; he had no idea that the girl was his wife's half-sister.

should have turned out as they did last night. How could she be blamed?

'But, Your Highness,' she said, 'it was today that they were coming to fetch her.⁶ What do you intend to do about that? Evidently it was ordained that Your Highness should behave as he did to my lady, and I have nothing to say on that score. But you could hardly have chosen a worse time. Would Your Highness not consider returning to the capital today? Then, if it is still your pleasure to see my lady at some future time, come back when you can stay quietly.'

Niou was impressed by Ukon's good sense, but he could not agree to her suggestion. 'Your lady has been in my mind for a long time,' he said, 'and now I am hopelessly in love with her. She has become an obsession, and it does not matter to me what people say or how they criticize me. Do you really think that if I cared in the slightest about my position I should have travelled here last night as I did? When they come to fetch her, you had better tell them that she has to stay at home because of a taboo [*monomi*] ...'

Ukon's main concern was to avoid letting anyone know that the visitor was Niou. When the watchmen came to her she told them, 'His Highness wishes to keep his movements secret. I gather that he had a bad experience on his way up here last night.' He has ordered his attendants to return secretly to the capital at nightfall and fetch a new set of clothes.'

Some of the ladies overheard her. 'Oh, how frightening!' they exclaimed. 'They do say that Mount Kohata is terribly dangerous. What a dreadful thing that His Highness had to come here without his foot-runners and in disguise!'

'Hush!' commanded Ukon. 'Not another word! If the servants should get wind of this, it will be a poor lookout for all of us.'

Now she was becoming frightened herself. What on earth would she do in the appalling event that a messenger arrived from Kaoru? 'Bring us safely through this day, O Kannon of Hatsuetsu!' she prayed in deep earnest.⁸

The other ladies had all been purifying themselves (*soji*) in preparation for the trip to Ishiyama Temple and they were now [ritually] clean

6. Ukifune's mother had arranged to take the girl on a pilgrimage to Ishiyama Temple on Lake Biwa.

7. Ukon wants the other members of the household to believe that Kaoru was attacked by highwaymen on his way to Uji and had his clothes robbed or dirtied, this being the reason he cannot show himself.

8. Hasedera, the famous Shingon temple south of Nara, is one of the thirty-three centres devoted to the worship of the Bodhisattva Kannon.

(*Shinonaraie aru*). 'Oh, what a shame!' they said. 'Now I suppose our lady won't be able to go to the temple after all.'⁹

Later in the morning Ukon went into Ukifune's room and remained in close attendance. She opened the lattice doors but had the blinds lowered and attached signs to them with the character for 'Taboo' clearly inscribed. It occurred to her that the mother might come herself to fetch the girl and so she reported that Ukifune had had an inauspicious dream ...¹⁰

It was towards noon when the people came to fetch Ukifune for the excursion to the temple. The two ox-drawn carriages were accompanied by the usual rough men on horseback who acted as outriders; with them came a number of uncouth servants, who entered the gates of the house, jabbering away in some outlandish dialect. Ukifune's ladies were embarrassed and told the men to wait in some place where they could not be seen ...

Ukon now took it upon herself to write a message to the mother: 'I regret to report, Madam, that my lady's monthly defilement started yesterday evening.'¹¹ She was greatly distressed about this and kept on saying what a pity it was. Then during the course of the night she had an inauspicious dream. What with one thing and another I felt that she ought to be on her guard, at least for today, and so I declared a taboo. It is a terrible shame, Madam, and I really wonder whether some evil influence isn't interfering with your plans.'

She had the message delivered to the servants with instructions that they should be given something to eat and then sent on their way. She also sent a note to the old nun: 'Today is a taboo day. Our lady is not going out.'¹²

What most impresses one about this passage – apart, perhaps, from the glib cynicism of Ukon's manoeuvres – is the way in which various religions and superstitions have become so inextricably entwined in the minds of the characters that one can hardly tell where one ends and the other begins. Ukifune's visit to a Buddhist temple, for example, is pre-

9. As a result of her recent intercourse with Niou (or, as they believed, Kaoru) she was ritually impure.

10. An inauspicious dream (e.g. about someone's death) would, according to current superstition, make it unwise for Ukifune to meet anyone; the real reason for the taboo could hardly be divulged to her mother.

11. The menses were a standard source of ritual defilement according to Shintoism and would make it necessary to cancel the visit to Ishiyama Temple.

12. Ikeda ed., vii, 30–5

vented by a defilement (Shintoism) and by a bad dream (superstition). Again, in order to prepare for the visit, Ukiyane's ladies have purified themselves according to Buddhist practice by abstaining from meat and fish (*sōji*) and also have rendered themselves ritually clean (*hiyomawarite aru*) by instruction and other Shintoist ritual; yet all their efforts become nugatory because of a taboo. Nio's excuse for spending the day at Uji is that he is on a retreat (Buddhist), while he keeps Ukiyane with him on the pretext of taboo (Shintoist).

This facile blending of beliefs reflects the eclecticism that is characteristic of Japanese thought. For Murasaki and her countrymen there was no idea that the acceptance of one set of beliefs (Buddhism) might preclude adherence to another (Shintoism), or that either was incompatible with a mass of complex superstitions deriving both from native tradition and from Chinese folklore.

The remarkable absence of *odium theologicum* between Shintoism and the advanced continental religion, which after the sixth century largely replaced it among the upper classes, is certainly not due to any intrinsic harmony between these ways of thought. Indeed one could hardly imagine two more different approaches. Buddhism, with its stress on the sorrows of the earthly condition, its rejection of transitory pleasures, its preoccupation with decay and death, and its offer of release by retirement from the world and a modification of the human consciousness, would appear in many ways to be the very antithesis of Shintoism, whose central themes are joyful acceptance of the natural world and gratitude for its bounty, coupled with a horror of illness and death, which are regarded as the source of all pollution. Yet during most of Japan's history, including the entire Heian period, the relationship between them has been one of peaceful coexistence – in the proper sense of the term.

This happy outcome owes something to the nature of both religions. On the one hand it results from the strong tendency towards syncretism in the type of Mahāyāna Buddhism that reached Japan from China and Korea. Such conflicts as arose in Japan between proponents of the two religions were basically political. For, unlike Christianity in Europe and Islam in Africa, the Buddhist church had no desire to suppress native beliefs in Japan, and was prepared to accommodate itself to them in a most tolerant fashion, by declaring, for example, that the native gods

were avatars of Buddhist deities. This process of syncretism was deliberately fostered during the early part of the Heian period, and in Murasaki's time any idea of a contradiction, let alone of a clash, between Buddhism and Shintoism would have been quite meaningless.

The extreme simplicity of Shintoism is a further reason for the absence of conflict. If it had been a developed religion with a philosophy, a system of ethics, an elaborate ritual, and a great sacerdotal institution, it might well have resisted the inroads of Buddhism, and conversely the foreign religion might have felt a need to suppress it. But this was precisely what Shintoism lacked. It had no philosophical, speculative, or ethical elements; no elaborate ritual or priestly hierarchy; no saints, martyrs, or even a founder; no scripture or exegesis; no interest in education and art – in fact, no positive, constructive aspect whatsoever. So vague and amorphous was the native religion that not until Buddhism appeared in Japan did it even acquire a name – *Shin-rō* ('the way of the gods'), as opposed to *Butsu-dō* ('the way of the Buddha').

Yet, just as the ancient line of emperors, the high priests of Shintoism, survived largely owing to their absence of political power, so it was the lack of any real positive character in the native religion that helped it to persist in the face of all external challenges. In Murasaki's time, although a popular form of Buddhism was slowly beginning to spread, Shintoist attitudes (they can hardly be called ideas) were still the main religious influence among the lower orders, especially the peasants in the provinces, who had been relatively untouched by imports from the continent; and Shintoist festivals and celebrations, which were mainly related to the agricultural cycle, were one of their few distractions. For the aristocracy Buddhism was a far more important force. Yet they too accepted without question the principal Shintoist notions about defilement and abstinence, viewing death, child-birth, intercourse, wounds, and menstruation as sources of ritual uncleanness, and subscribing to various forms of necromancy and witchcraft in which Shintoist influence was predominant.

This had a considerable effect on their daily life. For ritual uncleanness, especially when it derived from illness or death, applied not only to the person directly concerned but to all the other members of the household, who were regarded as having been, as it were, infected. The house that was subject to a taboo of this kind was out of bounds to

visitors, and willow-wood tags were hung on the shutters to keep them away (Ukon's precautions will be recalled). If a gentleman was obliged to venture abroad despite a taboo, for instance on the anniversary of his father's death, he would attach a taboo tag to his head-dress – women wore them on their sleeves – to keep people at arm's length and protect them from 'infection'.

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Before examining the role of Buddhism in the world of the shining prince we should briefly assess the influence of the other great doctrine imported from the continent. Knowledge of Confucianism had reached the islands well over a century before the first Buddhist sutras were presented to the court, and a study of the Confucian classics was central to organized education ever since its beginnings in Japan. Here again, the eclectic approach of the Japanese spared them the doctrinal controversies that have afflicted most other countries. The Confucian attitude to the dead, for instance, differed entirely from that of Shintoism. Yet in Japan the two ways of thought were not regarded as incompatible; or rather, the question of incompatibility never appears to have arisen. The addition of yet a third set of doctrines in the sixth century did nothing to undermine Confucianism. Conversely the new Buddhist religion was not regarded as a threat to Confucian ideas, though its approach could hardly have been more different; and it was spared the organized persecution that it suffered in China. In the eighth century, for example, the same empress issued an edict that each household in Japan should provide itself with a copy of *Hsiao Ching*, the Confucian 'Classic of Filial Piety', and also ordered the construction of one million miniature wooden pagodas to be distributed to all the Buddhist temples.

In Murasaki's time Confucian influence on the life of the aristocracy was directed mainly to family relationships. Family solidarity and pride appear to have been strong in Japan ever since the early days of the clan system. They were reinforced and given intellectual backing by Chinese doctrines that stressed the veneration of ancestors, filial piety, and family continuity. The cult of the traditional family and of formalized relationships within it was not properly established in Japan until the seventeenth century, when Confucianism first became a religion in its own right, in many ways taking precedence over Buddhism. The primacy of

the family unit, however, has a far longer history. In the Heian period the framework of social activity was always the family or house (*ke*) under the control of the patriarchal head (*kacho*). Heian politics, as we have seen, were largely family or clan politics, and Michinaga's key position during the long period of his hegemony was that of Head of the Clan (*Uji no Chōja*).

It is hard to say how much this stress on the family unit derived from Confucian influence and how much from early native tradition. The circulation of books like the 'Classic of Filial Piety' must have helped to give concrete, systematic form to ideas that until then were somewhat amorphous and ill-defined. The stress on family continuity, and the widespread habit of adoption that it involved, were certainly related to Confucian doctrine, which regarded the absence of posterity as the greatest of crimes. Ancestor worship and its numerous ramifications were mainly of Chinese origin; there is nothing in the native religion that prescribed the worship of deified men by their descendants. The impiety committed by Emperor Reizei in *The Tale of Genji* when he performs rites in honour of the deceased Emperor, who in fact is not his real father, is a heinous breach of Confucian practice and preys painfully on the young man's mind; yet neither Shintoism nor Buddhism would have regarded it as a moral offence, especially since Reizei had never been clearly informed about his paternity. According to Confucian doctrine, the actions of men, particularly of men who are in a position of authority, can have a serious effect on the natural order. A breach of filial piety by a character like Reizei, even if performed unwittingly, could therefore entail the most appalling consequences, not only for the people directly involved, but for the country at large, because nature, in order to right the balance as it were, might respond with floods, earthquakes, and other disasters. It is to avoid such calamities that Emperor Reizei abdicates at the earliest possible opportunity.

Although the main Confucian ideas were familiar to the people of Murasaki's circle and were accepted as an integral part of their intellectual luggage, we often get the impression that the precepts laid down by Confucius and his followers did not weigh too heavily on them when it came to their actual behaviour. Prince Genji, for instance, may have paid lip-service to the theories of the family cult and filial piety, but from a Confucian point of view his life could hardly have been less exem-

play.¹³ Yet Murasaki presents him as an almost ideal hero and no doubt most of her contemporary readers accepted him as such. It was not until many centuries later that Genji, Fujitsubo, and other characters in the novel were condemned for their flagrant breaches of Confucian ethics.

Sei Shōnagon relates an incident that even to a non-Confucian Westerner would seem to reflect a rather excessive lack of filial respect:

A certain lieutenant of the Headquarters of the Outer Palace Guards (Right Division) looked down on his father¹⁴ and was ashamed for people to see him. When they were journeying up to the capital from Iyo Province he pushed him into the sea (and he drowned). People were dismayed by his action and regarded it as shameful. (Yet) on the fifteenth day of the seventh month the man said that he was going to celebrate the Bon Festival of the Dead (in honour of his deceased father) and he began to busy himself with preparations.¹⁵

The commentaries point out that the lieutenant was a rough military provincial of whom one might expect such lapses, and no doubt this was a most exceptional incident. The remarkable aspect, however, is that the man was left at liberty to participate in the Bon Festival. Parricide was the most serious of the eight offences in Confucian law, and in contemporary China or later in Japan when Confucianism had become a state religion the lieutenant would have been condemned to the most painful and humiliating form of execution. In the event his only punishment, so far as we know, was to have a poem written about him by the Fujiwara monk, Dōmei:

A man who has pushed his father into the ocean's depths
Now celebrates the festival of Bon!¹⁶—
Alas, what a grievous sight!

Sei herself, usually so ready with her comments, has nothing to say about the lieutenant's behaviour.

13. See p. 270–71.

14. For being old and ugly, according to the commentaries.

15. Kaneko ed., pp. 1044–5.

16. According to one rather far-fetched theory, mentioned by Kaneko (op. cit., p. 1046) there is a play of words on the word *bon*: (i) the Festival of the Dead, (ii) the splash that the old man made when he hit the water.

A more important field of Confucian influence was education. Here its role was preponderant. 'Learning' referred almost exclusively to a study of the Confucian classics, which was the main subject at the Court University, the provincial schools, and most of the private institutions. The University was also the centre for the performance of ceremonies in honour of Confucius. By Murasaki's time, however, Confucian studies in Japan had become sterile and jejune. Despite the continued paramountcy of Chinese learning for the minute percentage of the Japanese population that was literate, it was not until many centuries later that it began to have that overwhelming effect on the life and thought of the upper classes which it exerted in China.¹⁷ Far more important for the Heian aristocracy was the vast complex of beliefs, related to theories of *yin* and *yang* and the five agents, which had been introduced to Japan together with Confucianism but which did not belong to the original Confucian philosophy.¹⁸

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Despite the harmonious blending of different beliefs and traditions, there is no doubt that in the world of *The Tale of Genji* one religion exerted an overriding influence. By Murasaki's time the great Indian faith, which had reached Japan by way of China and Korea some four centuries earlier, had become thoroughly acclimatized. Though it had never sought to exclude, still less to persecute, rival creeds, the Buddhist institution had come to occupy a role in the religious, intellectual, political, and artistic life of Heian which was hardly less impressive than that of the Catholic Church in medieval Europe. Without some knowledge of the varied functions of Buddhism in tenth-century Japan, our understanding of the people of Murasaki's world is bound to be superficial.¹⁹

The most powerful sect in her time, and the one with which she was mainly associated, was Tendai, named after T'ien-t'ai (Heavenly Terrace) Mountain in China where it originated. With its vast complex of

17. See pp. 184–9.

18. See p. 136 ff.

19. . . . the most fundamental difference between the Japanese (or, for that matter, any Far Eastern nation) and us is the fact, obvious indeed yet constantly overlooked, that they were not Christians. Arthur Waley, *The Pillow-Book of Sei Shōnagon*, p. 15.

temples and monasteries on Mount Hiei outside the capital and its close connexion with the ruling Fujiwara family, Tendai came closest to being the national church of Japan. It propounded the standard Mahāyāna doctrine of universal salvation, namely, that the Buddha nature resides in each of us and that it should be our aim in life to develop this nature until ultimately we find release from the cycle of rebirths in the state of Buddhahood. The basic scripture of the sect is the Lotus Sutra, which had been imported to China from India or Central Asia and interpreted by the Grand Master of T'ien T'ai. This sutra was regarded as the final and most complete revelation of Buddhist teaching.

Tendai, however, did not reject the doctrines of other schools or even of other religions. For an outstanding characteristic of the sect, both in China and in Japan, was its syncretic, all-embracing nature. While its main worship was directed to Sākyamuni (Gautama Buddha), it also revered the Cosmic Buddha (Vairocana) of the Shingon sect, Amida Buddha, Kannon, the Bodhisattva of Mercy, and countless other Buddhas and Bodhisattvas, as well as the many Shintoist deities with whom they were identified. Indeed almost any deity could be fitted into its capacious pantheon and any Buddhist idea (including Esoteric, Amidist, and Zen) into its catholic body of doctrines. The fierce conflicts that Tendai waged with rival institutions and within its own sect almost invariably arose from questions of property and organization; hardly ever were they based on doctrinal disputes, and it was only when they felt their entire structure to be threatened that they attacked rival creeds.

The second great sect in Murasaki's day was almost equally syncretic. Shingon, no less than Tendai, could accommodate itself to the numerous other forms of Buddhist belief and also to Shintoism and Taoism. In the focus of its teachings, however, it differed greatly from Tendai. Both sects reached Japan at about the same time in the early ninth century, but, unlike T'ien-t'ai with its overwhelming Chinese origins, Chên-yen (Shingon—the True Words) was Indian through and through. Its characteristic magic paintings or Mandaras are derived from India: not only is the name itself taken from an Indian word (Mandala), but the compartments into which the sacred picture is divided are filled with Sanskrit letters and with deities who often are not even Buddhist but Hindu. Similarly the importance of certain formalized gestures in Shingon ritual is clearly related to the Indian *mudrās*.

The Shingon sect is particularly hard to describe in outline. Its plethora of deities, rituals, formulae, and symbols are bound to confuse all but the initiated. Furthermore, its most important doctrines are secret, and can be learnt only from a master who will communicate his knowledge to certain outstanding pupils. This esoteric aspect of Shingon is related to its penchant for magic formulae and ritual, as well as for sexual arcana deriving from Indian Tantrism, which became an increasingly important part of the cult.

The hermetic nature of Shingon teachings is suggestive of Zen, which also stresses the need for direct communication between master and pupil. In Zen, however, the teacher can only guide or prod the student towards an understanding of the truth; the actual awakening (*satori*) must occur within the individual. In this sense Shingon is less demanding, since it does possess certain definite teachings that the master can communicate orally to the happy few, thus enabling them to attain enlightenment.

In another respect Shingon differs diametrically from early Zen. This is in its taste for gorgeous ceremonies and rituals. The most magnificent religious observances in the Heian calendar usually belonged to Shingon, and the impressive pomp and beauty of these displays help to account for the popularity of this sect among members of the Heian aristocracy, who, as we have seen, were much addicted to colour and pageantry. The Shingon sect was also closely associated with art and learning, and this too helped to maintain its prestige in Murasaki's world. The stress on paintings, sculpture, music and literature is related to the obscure nature of its teachings; for, as Kūkai (the founder of Japanese Shingon) wrote, '... the Esoteric scriptures are so abstruse that their meaning cannot be conveyed except through art', and again, '... the secrets of the sūtras and commentaries can be depicted in art and the essential truths of the Esoteric teaching are all set forth therein. Neither teachers nor students can dispense with it. Art is what reveals to us the state of perfection.'²⁰ If we are to credit traditional accounts, Shingon is also in a sense responsible for making works like *The Tale of Genji* possible. For the invention of the phonetic syllabary in which most of this literature was written is attributed to Kūkai, who apparently developed it in imitation of Sanskrit usage.

20. de Bary et al., ed., *Sources of the Japanese Tradition*, pp. 145, 142.

Though Tendai may be regarded as the Heian state religion, and though the proximity of the Hiei headquarters to the capital gave it a considerable advantage, its position was far from being exclusive. Shingon also received strong official backing and included many members of the imperial and Fujiwara families among its hierarchy. At times the government was able to make good use of the magic powers commanded by the sect. Some thirty years before Murasaki's time, for example, Masakado, a member of a provincial military clan, staged a successful revolt in the East. He proclaimed himself emperor, set up a court in imitation of Heian Kyō, and appointed governors to the eastern provinces. Government troops were sent against him, but for good measure the emperor also dispatched a Shingon priest (a member of the imperial family) carrying a famous sword called Amakuni no Tsurugi and an image of a certain fierce Shingon deity named Fudō. This image was said to have been brought from India to China; when Kūkai was studying in China, the image informed him in a dream that it wished to proceed further eastwards to Japan; Kūkai accordingly brought it with him on his return home and enshrined it in a temple near the capital. According to another tradition, however, it was carved by Kūkai himself out of an oak of the ship on which he travelled to China. In any case the image clearly possessed supernatural powers; for shortly after its arrival near the insurgents' capital the rebel leader was defeated and killed. When the time came to return the deity to Heian Kyō, however, it was discovered that its weight had increased so much that it could not be moved. The image then appeared in a dream and declared that it wished to remain in the eastern provinces in order to help civilize them. The grateful emperor acceded to the request and built a magnificent Shingon temple in the village of Narita. Here the god is still enshrined, together with the famous sword, which incidentally has the useful virtues of curing both insanity and the disorders that come from being possessed by foxes.²¹

Among the other forms of Buddhism in Murasaki's day there are two that exerted considerable influence on the established sects, though they

themselves did not grow important until the Kamakura period. Amidism was already becoming the basis of popular Buddhism, and the great Amidaist work, *The Essentials of Salvation* (one of the first books printed in Japan), appeared while Murasaki was still a girl. With its vivid descriptions of the horrors of hell and of the paradisaic bliss that awaited any believer who was prepared to put his faith in Amida Buddha, the book was bound to appeal to the fears and hopes of the masses, and its author paved the way for the huge Amidaist sects that swept Japan in later centuries. The basis of Amidism was the belief that men of this decadent age were no longer able to attain the state of nirvana by means of righteous conduct. Yet the situation was far from hopeless; for in his infinite mercy Amida, when he was a Bodhisattva, had vowed not to enter nirvana himself until every sentient being in the world was saved. In order to achieve this, ritual, scripture, and good works were all otiose. According to the Original Vow, all that was needed was to call on Amida by using a formula that even the simplest peasant could remember: *Namu Amida Butsu* ('I call on thee, Amida Buddha'). After death the believer would then automatically be reborn in the Western Paradise. Here, surrounded by every comfort and delight, he could live in such a way as to attain nirvana; as a rule, however, the Amidaists were so absorbed in the expected joys of paradise that they had comparatively small interest in the ultimate release.

The established Nara and Heian sects catered little for the ignorant and the lowly, and it was to them that Amidaism directed its main appeal. The 'good people', however, were not immune to its charms. Its adherents included many distinguished prelates, mainly those of the Tendai sect, which was the principal depository of Amidaist beliefs during the Heian period.²² Both Michinaga and Emperor Ichijō believed in salvation by Amida, as did Murasaki, who was an adherent of Tendai. 'Whatever others may do or say,' she writes in her diary, 'I shall recite my prayers tirelessly to Amida Buddha.'²³ Kaoru and many of the other characters in her novel are frequently described as doing *nebutsu* or *nembutsu*, that is to say, meditating on Amida's name and intoning the *Namu Amida Butsu* formula, although at the same time they carried out other

22. Chih K'ai, the founder of T'ien Tai, died repeating the name of Amida; Dengyō Daishi, who introduced the sect to Japan, was also a believer.

23. See p. 269.

forms of Buddhist practice that were entirely irrelevant to Amidism. Shortly after he has lost Fujiwara, Prince Genji prays to Amida Buddha that after his death they may share the same lotus flower²⁴—an ambition that moralists might regard as somewhat questionable inasmuch as this lady was his own father's wife.

When we come to the role of Zen in the Heian period, we are on more dubious ground. Zen is said to have been introduced from China shortly before the Great Reform, and at the beginning of the ninth century we hear of a Chinese priest preaching its doctrines in the capital and being received by the emperor. It was not, however, organized as a separate sect until several centuries later, and Zen as such appears to have had little success among the Heian aristocracy and none at all among the populace. The word Zen (Dhyāna, Ch'an) does not figure a single time in *The Tale of Genji*, nor is it ever mentioned by that great catalogue, Sei Shōnagon. Tea, which played so important a part in Zen, was brought from China in the ninth century; but tea-drinking was not appreciated, and it more or less died out until reintroduced some three hundred years later by the Zen monk, Eisai.

Yet we should not conclude from this that Zen ideas had no importance in the Heian period. The founder of the Tendai sect in Japan had studied Zen in China and accepted many of its doctrines: 'calm contemplation' (*shikan*), which was important for devout Tendai practitioners, was undoubtedly cognate with the Dhyāna-Zen form of self-trance. Shingon mysticism also was powerfully influenced by the Dhyāna ideas that had percolated into Japan from China, where they had been greatly affected by Taoism. Murasaki gives us only a few hints about the religious conversations between Kaoru and his preceptor, Prince Hachi, and about the periods of meditation to which they devote themselves; yet we can be fairly sure that their practices, though different from those of later Japanese Zen, derived a good deal from Dhyāna.

It is hard to disentwine the various strands of Far Eastern mysticism, and an attempt to do so can produce an artificial and misleading picture. What is certain is that Dhyāna ideas, though often not specifically recognized as such, were an essential ingredient in the mystical aspects of Heian Buddhism. To this extent they exerted an influence on the re-

²⁴ *Genji Monogatari*, Nihon Bungaku Taisho edition (hereafter abbreviated as N.B.T. ed.), vi, 501.

ligious life of the aristocracy. Their great role in Japanese social and cultural development, however, did not come until a later period.

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A general view of the church in Murasaki's time reveals two significant characteristics. The first is its secular success, which made the Heian Buddhist institution as affluent and well-established as the Church of England in the eighteenth century. This applies particularly to Tendai ('the state in religious form', as Sir Charles Eliot describes it), but also to Shingon and some of the old Nara sects. Though infrangible links still joined the imperial family with Shinism and though the great Shinō shrine at Ise remained Japan's Holy of Holies, the Buddhist church had the support of the government and the powerful patronage of the Fujiwaras, important Buddhist ceremonies being regularly attended by the emperor and his court. Buddhist affairs were handled by the Ministry of Civil Administration, and the emperor had the right to appoint priests to posts in the ecclesiastical hierarchy and to grant sacerdotal titles. It is significant of the established character of the church that ranks in the priestly and court hierarchies were precisely correlated, and that the superiors of great temple complexes, like Mount Hiei, were usually imperial princes. In Murasaki's time almost all the high ecclesiastical posts in the monasteries were held by court nobles of the Third Rank and above, and about half of the remaining positions were filled by gentlemen of the first five ranks.

By the end of the tenth century many of the Buddhist institutions were becoming sufficiently powerful to resist unpalatable government appointments and to assert their independence in other ways too. Tendai and Shingon in particular were acquiring a degree of political power such as was never achieved by any Buddhist church in China. Despite the noble spiritual and philosophical ideals that underlay their teachings, this power was all too often used for worldly ends. The great Buddhist temples were important landowners, to whom lesser holders would commend their manors in return for tax-exemption and other forms of protection. In consolidating and extending their estates, these temples were often no less predatory and ruthless than members of the rising class of provincial chieftains. When they could not accomplish their ends by political pressure, they would send out bands of warrior monks, whose

priestly habit could not conceal the fact that they were often mere mercenaries of the roughest kind. In blatant disregard of the Buddhist injunctions against violence, these armed bands would attack and destroy rival monasteries and, from the eleventh century, they would regularly demonstrate in the streets of the capital, blockading the houses of ministers, and even palace buildings, until their demands were granted. An eleventh-century emperor, who was himself a devout Buddhist, once remarked that the three things in the world he could not control were the floods of Kamo River, the hazards of gambling, and the monks of Mount Hiei.

The strength and prosperity of the great temples continued to grow in subsequent centuries, when many of them became feudal powers in their own right. Already in Murasaki's time Mount Hiei, which 'guarded' the capital from the north-east, contained several thousand Tendai temples and halls, and many were of great beauty and magnificence. The worldly success of the sect eventually proved to be its own undoing; for in the sixteenth century the buildings were all razed to the ground and their thousands of priestly inhabitants put to the sword.

The great cultural role of Heian Buddhism has already been mentioned in connexion with Shingon, but it is certainly not limited to that sect. Sculpture, painting, architecture, and the decorative arts were all deeply indebted to the patronage of the prosperous Buddhist temples, and almost all extant works from Murasaki's time, apart from literature, are of a religious nature. In contrast with the sober restraint that is usually regarded as characteristic of Japanese taste, the ornamental art of this period, especially that associated with the Kegon and Shingon sects, was often of a most sumptuous and colourful style. The sacred writings of the sutras were inscribed on deep blue paper in gold and silver characters; and to help people visualize the reluctant glories of the various Buddhist paradises the plastic arts made ample use of ivory, mother-of-pearl, gold, silver, and other precious metals. Like the pomp and splendour of Heian ecclesiastical ceremonial, all this was a far cry from the simplicity of the original religion as symbolized by the Buddha's own renunciation of luxury. In its worldly aspects, indeed, the Buddhist institution in Murasaki's time was no more related to the ancient Indian religion that preached the vanity of mundane things than were the political power, wealth, and cultural splendours of the Renais-

since Vatican relevant to the life and teachings of the man who was born in a Bethlehem stable.

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For Genji and his circle the Buddhist church had many diverse functions. In the first place, the numerous temples surrounding the capital offered an opportunity for those excursions and pilgrimages that were one of the main distractions in their somewhat uneventful lives. For women in particular, these visits provided an occasional escape from the claustrophobic confines of their crepuscular houses and an opportunity to glimpse, if only through the heavy silk hangings of their ox-drawn carriages, the wide bright world outside. Since many of the temples were situated in places of great scenic beauty, pilgrimages were often mainly outings to view the cherry blossoms in the foothills of Mount Hiei, for instance, or to admire the shimmering moonlight on Lake Biwa. Visits and retreats to outlying temples also served a very secular purpose in the gallant world of Heian, since they provided an ideal pretext for trysts or adventures of one kind or another; and it appears that the priests of the more fashionable temples were quite prepared to accommodate their aristocratic clients in this respect. In the passage quoted at the beginning of this chapter it will be recalled how glibly Niou excuses his absence from the capital by saying that he is in retreat at a mountain temple.

Contemporary literature suggests that for many of the Heian aristocrats religion had become mere nummery. The temples may have been crowded with visitors, but the motives that brought them there often had little connexion with the Buddhist faith. This is a subject that lends itself to satire and, as we might expect, no one has treated it more pungently than Sei Shōnagon, whose mordant wit was, so far as we can judge, uninhibited by any deep religious feelings. The following passage from the *Pillow Book* starts with some cynical observations that imply how lightly the Buddhist faith sat on Sei's shoulders:

A preacher should be good-looking. For, if we are properly to understand the worthy sentiments of his sermon, we must keep our eyes fixed on him while he speaks; by looking away we may forget to listen. Accordingly an ugly preacher may well be the source of sin...

Time often hangs heavily on the hands of former Chamberlains and they get into the habit of visiting temples. One will find them there even

on hot summer days, decked out in their bright linen robes and with their loose trousers of light violet or bluish grey spread about them. Some of them have a taboo tag attached to their black lacquered head-dresses. One might imagine that these gentlemen would prefer to stay at home [on such an inauspicious day], but apparently they believe that no harm can come to anyone who is bent on so worthy an errand as theirs. They arrive in haste, converse with the priest, look inside the carriages that are being lined up outside the temple;²⁵ – and in general take an interest in everything that is going on.

Now a couple of gentlemen who have not met for some time run into each other in the temple, and great is their surprise. They sit down together and chat away, nodding their heads, exchanging funny stories and opening their fans wide so that they can hold them in front of their faces and laugh more freely. They toy with their elegantly decorated rosaries and, glancing from side to side, criticize some defect they have noticed in one of the carriages and praise the elegance of another. Then they discuss various services that they have recently attended and compare the skill of different priests in performing the Eight Readings or the Offering of the Sutras. Meanwhile, of course, they pay not the slightest attention to the service that is going on...²⁶

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Despite the many secular motives that attracted 'good people' to the Buddhist establishments, we should certainly not assume that they were insensible to its intellectual and spiritual aspects. For some members of the aristocracy the social and aesthetic sides were no doubt all-important; but for many others it was a religion in the full sense of the word. To be familiar with the titles and general content of the Lotus Sutra and other important sacred texts was indispensable for any educated gentleman, and this knowledge was shared by the more cultured court ladies like Murasaki. In their polite conversation they would occasionally introduce stories and ideas from the scriptures, though pedantry and cant were carefully avoided. Thus when Prince Genji talks to Tamakazura

25. Women normally remained in their carriages during the service, and the Chamberlains ate not too pious to have a good look. According to Morioka Uchida, however, they are actually looking at their own carriages to make sure that they have been placed in a good position. In either case their minds are far from religion.

26. Kaneko ed., pp. 172-4.

about the nature of literature he explains his ideas by reference to concepts he has found in the Lotus Sutra.²⁷

Studying and reciting the sutras was one of the best ways to acquire spiritual merit. It is doubtful, however, whether many of the aristocrats, apart from devotees of Kaoru's stamp, had the necessary knowledge or training to understand the abstruse complexities of texts like the Lotus. In Murasaki's time the more usual way in which gentlemen 'read' the scriptures was to recite a few lines from the beginning, the middle, and the end, absorbing the remainder by the simple expedient of turning the pages. Sometimes even this seemed too time-consuming and they would pay priests to intone the sutras in their place.

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However little spiritual pabulum most people of Murasaki's world may have derived directly from the scriptures or from ecclesiastical teaching, there is no doubt that all of them, except the most insensitive and cretinous, were familiar with the fundamental spirit of Buddhism that was common to all the sects: the sense of the transitoriness of worldly things (*mujōkan*). The Japanese Mahāyāna form of Buddhism places somewhat less stress on the theme of suffering than the earlier Hinayāna teachings. Nevertheless, the emphasis on impermanence leads directly to the ideas that all is vanity and that, so long as we cling to the things of this world (including our own mortal lives), we are bound to suffer, since we are, as it were, playing a losing game. Thus we return to the first of the Four Noble Truths preached by the Buddha in his Sermon at Benares, namely, that all existence involves suffering. Though in the Heian period and later the aspects of suffering that most impressed the Japanese derived from the fleeting nature of life, the underlying postulate is essentially the same as in the other parts of Asia where Buddhism made its mark. For a proper understanding of the world of the shining prince we must know what this really signified.

It could well be argued that the ideas of impermanence and suffering are common to other religions, including Christianity. Indeed, what more poignant expression of *mujōkan* could we find than the Biblicalthrenody, 'Man that is born of a woman hath but a short time to live and is full of misery. He cometh up and is cast down like a flower? And

27. See Appendix 5, pp. 315-17.

what statement about the sorrow of the human condition could be more conclusive than the sentence in the Church of England burial service that reads, 'We give Thee hearty thanks for that it hath pleased Thee to deliver this our brother out of the miseries of this sinful world'?

Yet the Western approach to these universal themes differs fundamentally from that of Buddhism. A reference to a few of these differences may help to throw light on what the doctrines meant to the people of Murasaki's world. In the first place there was nothing corresponding to the Western idea that we must endure suffering as a duty or in obedience to some divine will, or that suffering improves and ennobles the character. The only thing that people like Kaoru and Prince Hachi learn from suffering is the emptiness of this world and the need to escape from it by meditation or, preferably, by a total withdrawal into a monastic life.

So far as the theme of impermanence was concerned, Buddhism insisted on the total disintegration of our physical being, and by its advocacy of cremation underlined the conclusive nature of death. Certain popular Buddhist writings even seem to gloat on the idea of physical decay. Christianity, on the other hand, holds out the promise of supernatural reconstitution: 'Though worms destroy this body, yet shall I see God in the flesh – and not as another.' The ideas of dissolution and death are far more important in Buddhist-inspired cultures than in the West, and in much Japanese literature the themes of time's ravages and of death are pervasive.

Perhaps the greatest difference is one of emphasis. Christianity, while reminding us of the impermanence and vanity of worldly things, does not as a rule dwell on the theme and prefers to stress the dichotomy of righteousness and sin. Japanese Buddhism, on the other hand, has tended to be preoccupied with the fleeting nature of the phenomenal world and has impressed this idea, perhaps more than any other, on its followers. Ever since the Heian period one of the first things that a Japanese child has learned is an ingenious ABC in which each of the forty-seven phonetic syllables is used once and once only to form a Buddhist poem. This poem is based on the Nirvana Sutra and informs the young pupil that all is transitory in this fleeting world:

Brightly coloured though the blossoms be,
All are doomed to scatter.
So in this world of ours,

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Who will last forever?
Today, having crossed the mountain recesses of Samskṛita,²⁸
I shall be free of fleeting dreams,
Nor shall I be fuddled [by the pleasures of this world].

We can hardly expect that the full impact of these chilling sentiments has been conveyed to each young Japanese who parrots the syllables. Yet it is surely significant that the theme of universal impermanence should have been incorporated into the country's traditional alphabet. Combined with all the other Buddhist influences, it impressed the sense of *mujo*kan on the Japanese, just as the opening lines of the Three-Character Classic memorized by young Chinese students ('Men by nature are fundamentally good; by nature they share this quality . . .') must have helped to give them a somewhat more sanguine approach to the human condition.

The Buddhist stress on evanescence has had a major influence on the literature of the Heian period and later. It is characteristic of the Japanese absorption with nature that their *memento mori* should be not a grinning skull nor the crumbling well of a deserted house but live, poignant images like the scattering of blossoms or the yellowing of autumn leaves, which served to remind them that all beautiful things must soon pass away.

Whereas the Western reaction to the common lot has often been an urgent admonition of *carpe diem* – an effort to defy fate by a hasty gathering of rosebuds – coupled with a stress on individual continuity in an after-life, the Japanese have tended to adopt a rather more resigned approach to the universal death sentence. Shintoism, with its horror of death, clearly had no part in producing this attitude. In the earliest Japanese poetry we frequently find the most bitter and outspoken lamentations about illness and death. By Murasaki's time, however, Buddhism had exerted its influence for over four hundred years, and the Japanese attitude to the evanescence and uncertainty of life had assumed its characteristic form. Three Heian poems – one by a Buddhist priest, the second by Murasaki, and the third by her fellow writer and court lady, Izumi Shikibu – will suggest this approach better than any amount of description:

28. i.e. having surmounted the difficulties of freeing oneself from this inconstant world.

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The World of the Shining Prince

This world of ours –
To what shall I compare it?
To the white waves behind a boat
As it rows away at dawn.

This world of ours –
Why should we lament it?
Let us view it as we do the cherries
That blossom on the hills.

Out of the dark
Into a dark path
I must now enter;
Shine on me from afar,
Moon of the mountain-fringe!²⁹

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A preoccupation with evanescence and death runs through *The Tale of Genji*. One after another, the characters sicken and die, leaving the survivors with an ever deeper sense of the transience of worldly things. According to some Japanese critics, it was the untimely death of Murasaki's husband³⁰ that caused her to dwell on the theme of impermanence.

29. Yo no naka wo
Nani ni tatoenu.
Asaborake

Kogiyuku fune no
Ato no shiranami. (Mansai)

Yo no naka wo
Nani nagakanashi.
Yamazakura
Hana miru hodo no
Kokoro nariseba. (Murasaki Shikibu)

Kuraki yori
Kuraki michi ni zo
Irinobeki.
Haruka ni terase
Yama no ha no tsuki. (Izumi Shikibu)

The last translation is Arthur Waley's; Izumi Shikibu is said to have written the poem on her death-bed, and the first two lines refer to a passage in the Lotus Sutra: 'Out of darkness we enter into darkness.'

30. See p. 265.

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Religions

Whether or not we accept this somewhat facile explanation, there is little doubt that Murasaki had a sombre disposition. She was well aware of this herself.

If only I could be more adaptable [she writes in her diary] and respond to the pleasures of this fleeting existence with a little more youthful enthusiasm! Whenever I hear of anything delightful or interesting, it only makes me more anxious [to retire from the world]... Thus I was musing one morning when I caught sight of waterfowl playing [on the lake] as if they did not have a care in the world...

Like the waterfowl that play there on the lake,
I too am floating along the surface
Of a transient world.³¹

I could not help comparing them with myself. For they too appeared to be enjoying themselves in the most carefree fashion; yet their lives must be full of sorrow.³¹

It is important to remember, however, that this preoccupation with the uncertainty of life was not at all unusual: Murasaki's writing reflects, though perhaps in a rather pronounced form, the Buddhist sense of transience that was common to the people of her world. Most of her fellow-writers, with the notable exception of Sei Shonagon, are plangent on the theme, and throughout contemporary *belles lettres* we find passages like:

The mourning period [for my mother's death] had come to an end and as usual time was hanging heavily on my hands. I took out my psalttery and, as I dusted it, plucked occasionally at the strings. Now there was no longer any taboo on playing music, and I reflected sadly on the transience of this world...

or again,

As I watch the plants pitifully bending in the wind, I think uneasily of my own life – no more lasting than those dewdrops that will be blown away at any moment. The sight of those trees and plants sorrowfully reminds me of my own existence.³²

31. Mochizuki ed., pp. 34–5.

32. These passages are taken from *Kogorō Nihki*, pp. 146–7, and *Izumi Shikibu Nikki*, p. 420.

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Prince Genji and many of the other principal figures in Murasaki's novel are 'tired of the world's impermanence'.³³ Confronted at an early age with the death of their relations and friends, they are keenly conscious of their own short life-expectancy. It is not only funerals and their doleful aftermaths of mourning that impress them with the idea of transience, but the fading blossoms, the falling leaves, and all the other natural images that were associated with it in both Buddhist and secular literature. Despite his youth, Kaoru is probably more preoccupied with the subject than any of the other main characters; this clearly is related to his deep concern with Buddhism. 'Whatever one may say', he remarks on one of his visits to Uji, 'each of us is bound sooner or later to turn into smoke and float up into the sky.'³⁴ (Here again the practice of cremation added to the sense of insubstantiality.) 'Our life is far too short and uncertain', he says on another occasion, when he is just twenty-four years old, 'for anything in this world to have much importance.'³⁵ Kaoru's friends are impressed by his feelings, which they recognize as an intense expression of their own sense of evanescence. Prince Niou recalls that Kaoru's emotions are so keenly attuned to the nature of things that the mere cry of a bird flying overhead can plunge him into the depths of gloom, 'for he is a man who is thoroughly absorbed with the idea of the world's impermanence'.³⁶

Mahâyâna Buddhism insisted also on the illusory character of all phenomena, and the people of Murasaki's world frequently refer to the nebulous, unreal quality of their lives. The idea that the physical world is an illusion, and our lives no more substantial than dew or gossamer, is most often evoked by the imagery of dreams. The characters in *The Tale of Genji* are forever dreaming, and they keenly recognize that the quality of their dreams is close to that of waking life. 'A night of endless dreams is this my life' (*akenu yo no yume*).³⁷ writes Lady Akashi in one of her poems to Genji, and the image is used again and again by other characters in the novel. The title of Murasaki's final book, 'The Floating

Bridge of Dreams' (*Yume no Ukihashi*) was for many centuries regarded as a clue to the entire work. This was disputed by later commentators, like Motoori, who wished to minimize the Buddhist influence. Yet the idea that our life is a dream-like bridge over which we cross from one state of existence to another appears to have been central to Murasaki's conception, and emerges particularly in the last part of the novel, where the Buddhist influence is greatest.³⁸ The 'bridge of dreams' image is not, however, original with Murasaki. It is taken from an early poem:

As I walk across the bridge
That spans the Ford of Yume,
I see that this world of ours too
Is like a floating bridge of dreams.³⁹

The image occurs frequently in the *Manyô Shû* and other early literature and must have struck a responsive chord among the people of Murasaki's world.

The reference to the evanescence and unreality of the world should not always be taken at face value. In Murasaki's time periodical protestations of melancholy and gloom were essential for people who regarded themselves as sensitive; and *mujôkan* (the sense of impermanence) was often merely a type of conventionalized world-weariness or *Weltschmerz*. When Heian diaries or fictional characters say that they are 'tired of this frail world's decay', their sentiments may be as formalized and specious as those of the romantic poet who claims that he is expiring of unrequited love. On the other hand, we must not go to the extreme of summarily dismissing the expressions of *mujôkan* as insincere formulae. For all its worldly aspects, Buddhism was a vital religious force, and its

38. 'The Bridge of Dreams is of course *yo no naka*, I, life itself, and the title means something like Calderon's *La Vida es Sueño*.' (Waley, *The Bridge of Dreams*, p. 16.)

The 'floating bridge of dreams' is probably related to the common Japanese metaphor, 'the floating world', *ukiyô no yume* (N.B.T. ed., vi, 360); in both images the world is regarded as a floating, i.e. a nebulous, place. Written with a different character, *ukiyô* also has the Buddhist sense of 'sad world'. Since Murasaki normally writes the word in the phonetic script, we cannot be certain about which of the two meanings she intends, but most commentators agree that in *ukiyô no yume* she refers to the 'floating' world.

39. Yume: (i) beauty spot on Yoshino River, (ii) dream.

33. Ware *akihagenu*/Tsume naranu yo ni. Ikeda ed., v, 108. These are the last two lines of Genji's poem to the Empress after Murasaki's death.

34. Ibid., vi, 198.

35. Ibid., vi, 39.

36. *Yo no naka no tsune naki koto wo shimite omoweru ooko*. Ibid., vii, 104-5.

37. N.B.T. ed., vi, 360.

approach to the physical world was bound to have a profound influence on people's thinking, even though it often appeared in the form of platitudes.

Japanese Buddhism not only regarded the human condition in general as a sad, fleeting affair but insisted that it was particularly unfortunate to have been born in the present age. This gloomy conclusion was based on the Mahāyāna belief about the three eras following the Buddha's entry into nirvāṇa – those of the True Law, the Reflected Law, and the Latter Days of the Law. In the third period the Buddha's teachings would finally lose their power and mankind enter an age of decadence. There was no general agreement about the length of these eras, nor for that matter about the year in which the Buddha attained his final release. Chinese clerics during the Six Dynasties (some five and a half centuries before Heian) had calculated that it was their doubtful distinction to be witnessing the beginning of the latter days of the Law. In Japan (where Buddhism was not introduced until the end of the Six Dynasties) the unhappy time was set considerably later. By moving the Buddha's birth back about half a millennium from its historical date and by ascribing a duration of two thousand years to the eras of the True Law and the Reflected Law, they concluded that the latter days of the Law would start in the eleventh century. At the beginning of the Heian period the founder of Japanese Tendai wrote a treatise on the subject in which he said, 'In the Latter Days of the Law there will be none to keep the Buddha's commandments. If there should be such, they will be as rare as a tiger in a market place.'⁴⁰

As the predicted era of decline approached, there was growing apprehension in many quarters. This never approached the frantic sense of doom that at approximately the same period in Europe inspired many Christians to prepare for the millennium by abandoning their homes and taking to the hills. None the less the visible decline of the old system, the increasing breakdown of law and order (emphasized, ironically enough, by the obstreperousness of the priests), and the gradual shift of power to a new class in the provinces, all seemingly provided evidence that the Buddhist prediction was far from fanciful, and made people regard the future with pessimism.

40. Dengyō Daishi, *Myōgō Tōmyō Ki*, quoted by Sir Charles Eliot, *Japanese Buddhism*, p. 424.

Another Buddhist idea that profoundly influenced the people of Murasaki's world is that the individual's destiny is determined by his actions in this and previous incarnations. The words *sakusei*, *en*, *gō*, and *inga*, which recur throughout contemporary literature, refer not to Fate in the Western sense but to the Chain of Cause and Effect to which each of us is ineluctably tied and which represents the moral sum of our deeds in successive states of existence. For many centuries it was believed that the principal aim of *The Tale of Genji* was to illustrate this philosophy of karma. Buddhist scholars particularly emphasized that Genji's suffering when he realizes that his young wife has been unfaithful to him is an automatic retribution for his own misdeeds as a youth.⁴¹

Again, Emperor Reizei's childlessness is shown to be the result of the sin that attended his birth. It is surely an oversimplification of *The Tale of Genji* to imagine that its purpose is to expound any particular theory or moral. As a Buddhist, Murasaki was bound to believe that our lives are predetermined by karma; and this pregnant idea is inevitably reflected in her novel. In the passage quoted at the beginning of this chapter Ukon resigns herself to the affair between Ukifune and Nio since it is the result of a predetermined karma (*sukuse*). Later the Assistant High Priest who discovers Ukifune after her attempted suicide knows that this encounter is not a matter of chance but the effect of something that happened in a previous incarnation. He will do his best to help the girl; if she dies despite all his efforts, it will mean that her karma is exhausted (*gōtsukinikeri*); in other words, she will have used up the entire stock of virtue accumulated in previous incarnations. Later, when he sees Ukifune at his sister's house, he is struck by her appearance, and remarks, 'She must have accumulated a great deal of virtue to have been born with such beauty.'⁴²

This form of determinism (a highly plausible one, incidentally, if one accepts the idea of reincarnation) provided a ready explanation for even the most secular and trivial events. In the *Sarashina Diary*, for example, the girl's father explains that the reason he has been appointed to govern a distant province instead of some more congenial place near the capital is that he has a bad karma from a previous existence. And in the *Pillow Book*, when Sei describes the cuckoo-hearing excursion and the failure of the ladies-in-waiting to produce adequate verses for the occasion, she remarks that poetry had a bad karma (*sakuse naki*) on that day.⁴³

41. See p. 279.

42. Ikeda ed., vii, 162-3.

43. See p. 191.

The long-term effect that this form of fatalism is likely to have on people's thinking need hardly be laboured. It is true that, according to the karma idea, the individual is free to determine his future by the moral quality of his present actions; the trouble is that these actions have themselves already been determined by what he has done in the past and that the causal chain reaches back through innumerable incarnations over which we no longer have the slightest control. The result is almost bound to be a sense of helplessness and resignation, a reluctance to take things into one's own hands or to improve the conditions of one's existence. This was combined with the Buddhist view regarding the fleeting, dreamlike quality of life to produce the somewhat negative and discouraged approach to the world that is prominent in the later books of *The Tale of Genji* and in much subsequent Japanese literature.

Having presented a thoroughly unattractive picture of the physical world and of the human condition, Buddhism offered a solution. If the origin of universal suffering was desire, and if this was inseparable from normal life, then the only answer was to abandon the fleeting world of sorrow (*shaba*) and thereby to eliminate desire, above all the desire for individual survival. By retiring into a monastic existence, and devoting oneself to prayer, meditation, and mystic practices, one could gradually slough off the habit of desire; the sorrows of this transient world would no longer torment one, death would lose its sting, and eventually one could shake oneself free from the chain of causation. The ideal of a complete and final release in nirvana (*nehan*) is never explicitly stated in *The Tale of Genji*, but this of course is the ultimate aspiration of characters like Prince Hachi and Kaoru. For less devout and single-minded men a complete escape might be difficult, and for women it was impossible; yet even they could find succour from the sorrows of mortal life by retiring to a monastery or convent, and at the same time they would be improving their chances in the next phase of their existence.

In the Heian period these aspirations had little relevance for the illiterate masses, though for them the sorrows of this mortal coil were only too real; but to the people of Murasaki's class they exerted a great appeal, and both in real life and in fiction the idea that one should sooner or later retire into a religious life was never far from the surface of their minds. Towards the end of *The Tale of Genji* we find a moving description of the Buddhist ideal of renouncing the world. Shortly after her

attempted suicide, Ukifune, who is now twenty-two years old, has expressed her desire to become a nun. The Assistant High Priest who found her is prepared to administer the vows, but his sister is opposed to this irrevocable step:

'The girl is too young to take the Vows,' she said. 'Far from procuring her salvation, it may lead to greater sin.⁴⁴ I really think you might have discussed the matter with me. It's quite outrageous!'

Her words had not the slightest effect on the priest. 'For you,' he said, turning to Ukifune, 'there remains only one thing – to pursue your devotions. Whether we are young or old, this is a world in which we can depend on nothing. You are quite right to regard it as an empty, fleeting place.'

He handed her some figured cloth, thin silk and other materials. 'Use this to make yourself a new habit. And remember, so long as I am alive I shall see that you have what you need. Where such things are concerned, you have nothing to worry about. As for the daily world outside – that fleeting world into which we have all been born – I know it is a hard place to quit. While we are still dazzled by its show and glitter (*eiga*), there seem to be innumerable obstacles that prevent us from leaving it. It was the same for me as for everyone else. Yet I can assure you that living now in these peaceful forest surroundings, absorbed in prayer and meditation, you will be free from all regret and remorse. Life will seem as light to you as a leaf. . . . At dawn you will see the moon hovering over the pine-wood gate.'⁴⁵

Many of Murasaki's characters are sincere when they speak of abandoning the world of desire and retiring to a monastic life. Yet often their protestations on this subject are as stereotyped and conventional as their laments about the fleeting quality of human life, and one feels that they are only too pleased about the obstacles that prevent them from taking the religious plunge. Genji is forever regretting the numerous mundane duties that prevent him from becoming a monk; yet he would no doubt be appalled to spend a single day in a bleak monastic cell, sequestered from the social and cultural delights of the capital. Even Kaoru is not entirely free of hypocrisy on this score. When he complains to the priest about the many troublesome bonds that tie him to this

44. Because she is still likely to succumb to the temptations of the flesh.

45. Ikeda ed., vii, 206. The last two sentences are quotations from a poem of Po Chü-i. As in Izumi Shikibu's poem on p. 124 above, the moon is symbolically associated with the Buddhist Law.

transient world and thwart his desire for a religious life, he seems to be protesting too much; and one cannot help suspecting that, if these obstacles were removed, he would soon find others.⁴⁶

Although it was conventional to express envy for those who had finally succeeded in abandoning the world, few members of the Heian aristocracy had any illusions about the hard, cheerless life that often awaited them in the monasteries and, still more, the convents. The gloom and squalor of a convent appears to them as a sort of living death and, when a girl takes her vows and her long hair is shorn by the priest, the onlookers weep, realizing that she is 'dead to the friendly and human part of life'.

It is true that in many cases the distinction between the world and the cloister was a hazy one. To 'retire' to a monastery often had several practical advantages and involved few restrictions. Kazan, for instance, was far freer to carry on his amorous intrigues after he had become a monk than when he was a reigning emperor;⁴⁷ and the priestly condition certainly did nothing to inhibit Michinaga during the last ten years of his life. Yet in many other cases (Emperor Suzaku and Prince Hachi in *The Tale of Genji* are examples) 'discarding one's fineries' and taking the tonsure did mark a genuine determination to embark on a life devoted to religious austerities and winnowed of worldly concerns.

Buddhist renunciation required a far harder sacrifice than giving up the pleasures of the senses; it insisted on total detachment from those one loved. Friends, wives, children – however close they might be and however dependent – had to be removed not only from one's daily life but from one's very thoughts. The Christian scriptures, too, sternly put

46. N.B.T., ed., vii, 843-4. 'Since my youth I have entertained serious religious ambitions. But the Princess, my mother, has in her helplessness been obliged to rely on my inadequate support. I became circumscribed by the stubborn bond of worldly obligations. I rose in rank and it became hard for me to arrange my life as I should have wished. As time passed, my inescapable duties only increased, and I found myself completely tied down by public and private responsibilities. Nevertheless I have scrupulously respected the Laws of Buddha in so far as I have been acquainted with them. My inner intentions are no less noble than those of a saint ...'

Kaoru's entire speech is contained in a single Japanese sentence. There is no mistaking the irony in the priest's pithy reply, 'How very noble of you!' (*to ote koto*.)

47. See P., 71-2.

family ties in their place ('Who is my mother, or my brethren?'), insisting that they must be submerged in a wider love. In Buddhism, however, the stress is on the need to extirpate human affections in general, since they are the strongest of all the bonds that tie one to this fleeting world of illusions. While we are still bound by human attachments, the Assistant High Priest informs Ukifune, to take the vows, so far from procuring one's salvation, can only lead to disaster.

When put into practice, the Buddhist ideal of renunciation was likely to involve a rupture of human ties that must often strike the Westerner as callous, even egoistic. To be sure, this ideal was aimed not at procuring any selfish advantage, but rather at total self-annihilation (*muge*); and, besides, enlightenment was regarded as the best means of securing spiritual benefit for others. Yet for those who belong to different traditions there can be something curiously chilling and inhuman about the attitude that it involves; and it was certainly the rejection of family bonds that most alienated Chinese Confucianists from Buddhism. In one of the early books of *The Tale of Genji* the moribund old nun who has been looking after Murasaki fears that her affection for the helpless little girl is a worldly tie that may impede her own spiritual promotion. The unyielding Buddhist attitude to family affections emerges most conspicuously in Prince Hachi's treatment of his daughters. When he retires to his monastery, he completely abandons the two unfortunate girls and refuses ever to meet them. After their father's death the daughters request permission to see him for a last time, but the Prince's spiritual mentor, the Holy Teacher, administers a blunt rebuff:

'What good can that possibly do at this stage? Before the Prince died I told him that he must never see you again, and now that he is no longer here it is all the more important that you resign yourself to the inevitable so that all mutual bonds of affection may disappear.'⁴⁸

Murasaki fully realizes how harsh the ideal of renunciation may seem when human emotions are involved:

The girls asked him about their father's life in his mountain retreat, but the holy man was so absorbed in his own pious quest for enlightenment that he could tell them nothing. His attitude struck the sisters as hard and cruel.

48. Ikeda ed., v, 264. 'Holy Teacher' is a translation of *Ajari*, a title given to distinguished priests of the Tendai and Shingon sects.

Among the many other aspects of Buddhism that influenced thought and behaviour in the Heian period was its attitude towards women. The sutras leave no doubt about their inferior spiritual status. For example, in the Lotus, the bible of the Tendai sect, we read that 'no women are to be found' in the Western Paradise; women who call on Amida will be reborn in his paradise as men.⁴⁹ Heian Buddhism did not, however, dwell on this subject, and it is only in later centuries, when the social position of Japanese women had drastically deteriorated, that we find passages like: 'Woman is originally an agent of the six devils and has been born as a woman to prevent man from following the way of Buddha; Her or 'Woman is the emissary of hell; she destroys the seed of Buddha. Her face resembles that of a saint; her heart is like that of a demon.'⁵⁰

The men and women of Murasaki's world were, however, well aware of the innate spiritual difference between the sexes, and they accepted it as one of the facts of life. Thus, when Genji has been confronted with the frenetic jealousy of Lady Rokujō's ghost, he reflects that all women are fundamentally evil (*onna no mi wa nina onji tsuni fukaki mono*) and that relations with them are almost bound to end in the type of repugnant scene he has just witnessed.⁵¹ Again, when Ukifune's mother enumerates the many difficulties that confront her daughter, she ends by saying that her greatest misfortune is to have been born a woman; for, 'Whatever their station may be, women are bound to have a hard lot, not only in this life but in the world to come.'⁵² There is not the slightest evidence that Murasaki herself questioned this gloomy assessment of her own sex.

The Buddhist interdiction of violence and the taking of life also had an effect on behaviour and customs in the Heian period. We have noticed the relative mildness of punishments and the preference of banishment to execution. Buddhism undoubtedly reinforced the disdain of the aristocracy for warfare and its practitioners, and discouraged people from hunting and eating meat. In the eighth century the government had set aside special ponds where fishing was prohibited and where people were encouraged to free and feed fish, crabs, and other water

animals in order to acquire Buddhist merit; throughout the Heian period mercy to animals was regarded as a means to spiritual improvement.

The gentleness of the period should certainly not be exaggerated. The 'good people' were on the whole indifferent to the suffering of the lower classes (though no more so than the gentry in Dickens's England), and various forms of violence were frequent – the priesthood itself not being behindhand in this respect when their material interests were at stake. In the *Pillow Book* we read that the dog Okinamaro has been beaten to death for having chased the emperor's cat; to judge from the shock of the empress and her ladies, this must have been unusually severe treatment, but in the provinces, where the lenitive influence of Buddhism was slight, animals and other helpless creatures were no doubt dealt with harshly.⁵³ It is in contrast with the succeeding centuries of military rule and internecine warfare, when a general could calmly give orders for his enemy's young children to be buried alive⁵⁴ and where horrors of every kind became commonplace, that we are impressed by the mildness and forbearance of the Heian period. In later times Buddhism was unable to prevent its adherents from indulging in the most barbarous behaviour; but in Murasaki's day it still appears to have had a mollifying influence on human cruelty and violence.

53. It may be significant that the two men who administer the fatal punishment to Okinamaro both come from a military family in the provinces.

54. *Heike Monogatari*, a pro-Minamoto work, coolly reports the treatment that the Minamotos meted out to the children of their defeated enemies, Taira no Shigemori and Munemori: the younger ones were drowned or buried alive, the older ones decapitated.

49. *Saddharmapundarika Sūtra* XXIV, verse 31, and XXII.

50. *Tokuetsu Kyōdōn Onna Shūinshū* (1745), quoted in Takamura Issue, *Nihon Jōei Shikai Shi*, p. 165. See Joyce Ackroyd, *Women in Feudal Japan*, pp. 54-5.

51. Ikeda ed., iv, 187.

52. N.B.T. ed., vii, 647.

V

Superstitions

WHEN it came to regulating the practical details of their daily life, the people of Heian relied far more on superstition than on religion. In Japan as elsewhere the line of demarcation is a tenuous one, especially since many of the superstitions were originally associated with Shintôism, Confucianism, Taoism, and Buddhism. Nevertheless exorcism, divination, and similar practices belong on the whole to a different category from the ideas described in the previous chapter.¹

In Murasaki's time there was a vast accretion of popular beliefs that had proliferated for many centuries and become closely intertwined. Here there is space to examine only a few of the principal strands that make up the tangled skein of Heian superstition. Some, notably those related to witchcraft, necromancy, and other occult practice, were influenced by Shintôism, and represent the shamanistic strain in the native religion; yet, though their practitioners often invoked Shintô deities, most of them were no longer specifically connected with any particular faith. Other superstitions, including many that are concerned with ghosts and demons, appear to have derived from ancient native folklore whose origin is still obscure.

Still another vast body of beliefs – and for the people of Murasaki's class perhaps the most important – was of Chinese origin. Together with

1. Superstition may perhaps be defined as a belief that is based neither on normally observed fact nor on any moral or ethical system, nor on a search for ultimate truth. Some superstitions may, if held firmly enough, assume a spurious factual validity (e.g. cure by exorcism, appearance of ghosts). Religion, on the other hand, invariably involves the quest for moral or ethical righteousness, or for purity, salvation, or enlightenment, usually in conjunction with some higher or more powerful force or forces (God, Heaven, nature deities, deified ancestors, etc.). It is, of course, possible to have a superstition with deities (e.g. directional taboos) and a religion without them (e.g. Zen Buddhism), and most religions, including Buddhism, are replete with superstitious practices.

Confucianism Japan had imported the vast system of omen lore based on *yin-yang* dualism and the five elements. Although these beliefs formed no part of the original Confucian system, they had thoroughly infiltrated both Confucianism and Taoism by the time that the classics were introduced to Japan. In Murasaki's day people were on the whole far more interested in the idea of a magic order that controlled human affairs by an alternation of the universal *yin* (female, dark, cold, passive, earth, water, moon) and *yang* (male, light, active, Heaven, fire, sun) elements, and in all the ramifications of this pseudo-scientific cosmology, than they were in the ethics of Confucius or the mystic insights of Lao Tzu.

One of the most important and active offices in the Ministry of Central Affairs was the Bureau of Divination (the Yin-Yang Bureau as it was called), which was in charge of astrological, calendrical, and alacatory calculations, the discernment of good and evil omens, and similar activities that were supposed to help the government shape its policy by acting in accordance with the fundamental process of growth and change in the natural world. The Masters of Yin-Yang, who imparted their findings both to the Great Council of State and to members of the nobility, helped to bring ideas about geomancy (*feng-shui*), astrology, and divination into the centre of Japanese practice. Although most of these ideas came from China, by Murasaki's time they had often developed on independent Japanese lines and were not regarded as foreign.

An interesting case of cultural blending is to be found in the idea of directional taboos (*karaimi*), where the native Shintô emphasis on *keisense* (*imi*) reappears in the *yin-yang* concept of lucky and unlucky directions. These taboos, which had great practical importance for the aristocracy, can be divided into three main types.² First was the permanently and universally unlucky direction, the north-east. It was to guard the capital from this direction that the great complex of Tendai monasteries had been built on Mount Hiei, although the Buddhist religion itself is unconcerned with taboos. The second type was permanently unlucky during specific periods of one's life; at the age of sixteen, for instance, one might (depending on one's sex, the time of one's birth, and other particulars) have to avoid the north-west. The final and most fre-

2. I am indebted to M. Bernard Frank's detailed study of directional taboos, *Étude sur les interdits de direction à l'époque Heian*.