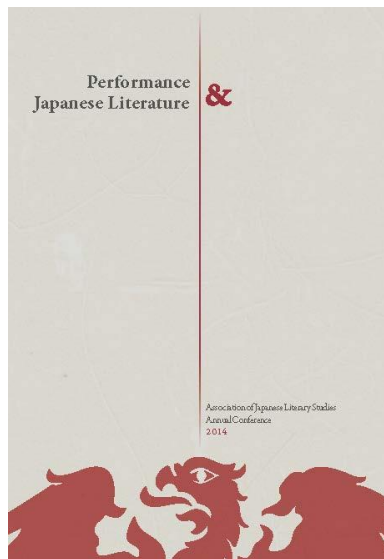


“Emanations of Power: Preachers and the
Performance of Homiletic Tales in Early Medieval
Japan”

Ethan Bushelle 

*Proceedings of the Association for Japanese
Literary Studies* 15 (2014): 21–27.



PAJLS 15:

Performance and Japanese Literature.

Ed. Michael Bourdaghs, Hoyt Long, and Reginald Jackson

**Emanations of Power:
Preachers and the Performance of Homiletic Tales in Early Medieval Japan**

Ethan Bushelle
Harvard University

Among the “vocal arts” (*onsei* 音芸) of the Japanese Buddhist tradition, the mid-Kamakura Buddhist history, *Genkō shakusho* 元亨釈書, includes preaching, or *shōdō* 唱導, alongside sutra recitation, *shōmyō* chanting, and *nembutsu* intonation. *Shōdō*, the text tells us, is, in its origins, “oration” (*enzetsu* 演説). The Buddha’s disciple Pūrāṇa, it reports, was renowned among Arhats for his oration. After its transmission east into China, however, oration, particularly under the influence of Huiyuan of Mt. Lushan, gradually devolved into preaching, which, the text suggests, contributed to the splintering of the Dharma in Six Dynasties China. Yet nonetheless, in Japan, the essence of preaching, it claims, remained oratory eloquence. Of the twelfth-century priest, Chōken 澄憲, who, according to the text, was the first to attain renown as a preacher in Japan, it writes, “His original nature flowed from the tip of his tongue, like a gushing spring. Mounted on the high seat, he purified the ears of the four assemblies (of monks, nuns, laymen, and women).”¹

Despite its high praise for Chōken’s oratory performance, *Genkō shakusho* is sharply critical of his way of life. It goes on to note that, in his later years, Chōken, “lacking reverence for the Monastic Law, fathered many children.” *Shōdō*, then, from the point of view of canonical Buddhist history in Kamakura Japan, signified an art of vocal performance that, though Buddhist in its intent, presupposed a form of life that was fundamentally ambivalent with respect to the holy law of the Dharma.

The ambivalent character of the life of the preacher is dramatically portrayed in the early twelfth-century collection, *Konjaku monogatari shū* 今昔物語集. Tale Thirty-One in Volume Seventeen, for example, tells the story of the preacher, or *sekkyō-sō* 説経僧, Shōren, who, after his death, appeared in the dream of a nun in order to reveal to her that, as karmic retribution for sins committed during his lifetime, he is suffering in hell and therefore needs her to pray for his redemption in the afterlife. At the beginning of the tale, Shōren is described as a priest who, “traveled far and wide in the world, making a living by preaching (*sekkyō*).”² Though he preached the Dharma and converted people, he himself was lax in his observation [of monastic law].³

¹ *Kokushi taikēi*. Vol. 31. *Nihon kōsōden yōbun shō, Genkō shakushō*. (Tokyo: Yoshikawa Kōbunkan, 2000), 434. All translations in this paper are my own.

² For the purposes of this paper, I will treat *sekkyō* as synonymous with *shōdō*.

³ *Shin Nihon koten zenshū*. Vol. 36. *Konjaku monogatari shū*. No. 2, 366.

Tale Thirty-Five in Volume Twenty suggests the ways in which the ambivalent character of the life of the preacher shaped and was shaped by the performance of preaching. Therein a priest is described as not only “distinguished in scholarship and skillful in preaching” but also “good at composing waka and telling monogatari,” talents that made him “adept at relating to laypeople.”⁴ He, as a result, often participated in “pleasant diversions” with them, which contributed to his popularity.

More detailed accounts of preaching performance are included in the fourteenth-century *Genpei jōsuiki* 源平盛衰記, an extended version of the early medieval warrior tale, *The Tales of Heike* (*Heike monogatari* 平家物語). Volume Three, in the first of a pair of tales about Chōken, describes the single event that established his preeminence among preachers.⁵ In the Fifth Month of the Fourth Year of Shōan (1174), in the middle of a drought that was devastating the countryside, Chōken, the story goes, was invited to the imperial palace to give a sermon, or more precisely, an exposition (*keibyaku* 啓白), at the Annual Lectures on the Golden Light Sutra (*Saishōkō* 最勝講). In the exposition, which is cited in full in the text, rather than setting forth the purpose and intent of the ritual, as was expected, he, instead, expounded an extended and elegantly wrought discourse on the dire situation of the people affected by the drought and the obligation of the court to support the Buddhist institutions whose task it is to make intercessions on behalf of the people to the Buddhas and Kami, particularly, in the case of drought, the Nagas. Then, after his preaching, the tale tells us, the Nagas sympathetically responded to Chōken’s intercession, the skies clouded over, and rain began to pour down. Everyone in the audience was moved to tears.

The record of Chōken’s exposition in his collection of homiletic texts, the *Kujō hyōbyakushū*, includes an addendum composed on the occasion of its submission to the office of the Retired Emperor Takakura 高倉院, who at had by that time taken up the title Dharma King (*Hōō* 法皇). It reports that Dharma King Takakura, “moved” (*eikan ari* 叡感あり) by Chōken’s preaching, hailed it as “magnificent” (*genjū* 嚴重) and, consequently, awarded him a special “commendation” (*genshō* 勸賞) for his performance (*gi* 儀).⁶

The second tale about Chōken in *Genpei jōsuiki* offers an especially dramatic portrayal of Chōken’s skill as a performer not only of preaching but also of dance.⁷ Once, the story goes, when Chōken was still a young up-and-coming preacher, after a dazzling sermon at the imperial palace, just as he was about to exit the center stage of the ritual, Retired Emperor GoShirakawa, the leading powerholder of the day, recognized him as the son of Fujiwara no

⁴ *Shin Nihon koten zenshū*. Vol. 37. *Konjaku monogatari shū*. No. 3, 123-124.

⁵ *Shintei Genpei jōsuiki*. Vol. 3, ed. Mizuhara Hajime. (Tokyo: Shinjin butsuō raisha, [year?]), 178-184.

⁶ Transcribed in Yamazaki Makoto, “Kanbyō *Kujō hyōbyaku shū* honkoku narabi ni kaidai.” *Kokubungaku kenkyū shiryō kan bunken shiryōbu chōsa kenkyū hōkoku* 17 (1996): 109.

⁷ *Shintei Genpei jōsuiki*. Vol. 3, 185-187.

Michinori 藤原通憲, a Buddhist devotee and advisor to the sovereign during his youth. Seizing the moment as an opportunity to test the mettle of his former advisor's son, GoShirakawa began to clap his hands to a steady beat, chanting, "A-MA-KU-DA-RI," a play on words that at once praises Chōken's preaching as something wondrous as though he were someone who had "descended (*kudari*) from the heavens (*ama*)" and also, more pointedly, mocks him as one who "descended from the womb of a nun (*ama*)." His ministers quickly followed suit and soon the whole audience was in an uproar. Chōken, unfazed, began to dance to the rhythm of the beat, while slowly making his way closer to the Retired Emperor and his attendants. Further laughter ensued. He then chanted in unison with their chanting, "Among the three hundred people [in attendance here today], one hundred imperial ladies jeer, one hundred courtiers of the Ise Taira clan along with one hundred ascetics all go wild." Repeating this retort, he then opened his folding fan, danced his way closer to the Retired Emperor, and waved it in front of him, saying, "Though everyone is born from the womb of a mother, only Chōken is 'A-MA-KU-DA-RI.'"

The next day, when Kiyomori, leader of the Taira clan, heard reports of Chōken's performance at court, he flatly dismissed the performance as nothing more than "*sarugaku*," literally, "monkey music," remarking that, "Though the Court may have been amused, it is a thoroughly scandalous scene." Kiyomori, from that point on, is said to have despised Chōken.

The unique power that derived from the ambivalent character of the life of the preacher and his performance of preaching is dramatically portrayed in the tale that sets the stage for the *Tales of the Heike* in the Engyōbon 延慶本, Nagatobon 長門本, and *Genpei jōsuiki* lineages of the text. The tale tells the story of the 1132 dedication of the Tokujōju-in Temple 得長寿院 and its one thousand and one Buddha statues, which, incidentally, served as the prototype for the world-famous Sanjusangendō that stands in Higashiyama Kyoto today. Just before the dedication ceremony, the story goes, the temple's sponsor, Retired Emperor Toba 鳥羽院, who had recently assumed the title of Dharma King, was informed that the Tendai Abbott had excused himself from his appointment as officiant (*dōshi* 導師) for the event. Thirteen other eminent priests of high birth and rank vied for the position, but after unsuccessfully drawing lots, the Dharma King decided to appoint, "the priest who, though of inferior peasant origins, has compassion in his heart, is virtuous in his practice, and most destitute in the Heavenly Realm."⁸ Then, upon making this decision, an extremely poor old priest suddenly appeared in a black robe with *kesa* and a straw raincoat and hat, or *minokasa* 蓑笠, a symbol of his outcast (*hinin* 非人) status as a self-ordained priest (*shidosō* 私度僧) and beggar (*kojiki* 乞食). He addressed Toba, saying, "Though this foolish priest may be lacking in compassion and virtue, my extreme poverty is unsurpassed in Japan." Defying the protests of his ministers and the Buddhist prelates, Toba thus appointed what the text describes as "the

⁸ *Engyōbon Heike monogatari zenchūshaku*, ed. *Engyōbon chūshaku no kai* (Tokyo: Kyōko shoin), 81.

unaffiliated (*muen* 無縁) priest of the Way of Poverty.”⁹

On the day of the dedication, the poor priest emerged from beneath Hiyoshi Sannō shrine on Mt. Hiei, and, declining the carriage sent for him, entered the temple in a procession of two attending monks and twelve low-ranking monks, looking appallingly disheveled and unkempt. His knees shook uncontrollably as he mounted the high seat to preach. The bell rang to commence the ceremonies and the poor priest looked to be at a loss for words. But then, just as the audience was about to lose patience, a sudden change took place in the demeanor of the priest.

They waited for a while and then [the old priest] intoned the invocatory lines, which superior to the voices of the kalavi ka, echoed throughout the thirty-three *ken* of the Hall and inspired the Divine Acceptance of the One Thousand and One Buddhas, making for a most auspicious scene. In the exposition, he expounded gems. His preaching of the Dharma had the oratory eloquence of Pūr a. There was not a doctrine in the Exoteric or Esoteric Dogmas, the Eighty Thousand Teachings, or the Twelve Categories of the Sutras that he did not cite. The ten thousand people in the assembly of the audience all shed tears of joy, purifying their beginningless karmic obstructions. Both lay and ordained in attendance waved their sleeves ecstatically and at that moment experienced an awakening of Bodhi.¹⁰

The poor priest then dismounted the high seat, whereupon members of the audience made offerings to him, and then, receiving the adulation of a holy man, parted the crowd. Before reaching the temple gate, he suddenly ascended to the sky and disappeared.

The narrator then tells us that the poor priest was in actuality a local emanation (*jishu gongen* 地主権現) of Yakushi Nyorai, the Medicine Buddha, enshrined in the Nemoto Chūdō Temple Hall on Mt. Hiei and that his two attending priests were the two Bodhisattvas of the Sun and the Moon, while the twelve lower-ranking priests were Yakushi’s Twelve Guardian Generals. It then remarks that such an emanation of the divine power of the Kami and Buddhas was a testament to the purity of faith of the temple’s sponsor, Dharma King Toba.

The tale thus unfolds by way of contrast between two extremes: the Retired Emperor and virtuous Dharma King, on the one hand, and the outcast and poor preacher, on the other. However, rather than simply exalting one over the other, it skillfully illustrates the mutual dependence of both on each other. That is, while explicitly extolling the purity of faith that inspired

⁹ *Engyōbon Heike monogatari zenchūshaku*, 82.

¹⁰ *Engyōbon Heike monogatari zenchūshaku*, 91.

the Dharma King's decision to appoint a lowly beggar priest, it also depicts in dramatic fashion the power of the preacher to consecrate the sovereign's temple as a sacred space for the emanation of divine powers and even the awakening of Bodhi—acts of revelation that effectively displayed to all imperial subjects Toba's sovereign authority as Dharma King. The figure of the outcast priest in the tale is thus a kind of cipher for the sacralizing power of the preacher and the tale itself an allegory of preaching performance.

There is tangential evidence that provides clues as to what might be at stake for *The Tales of Heike* in narrating an allegory of preaching in its opening passages. Chōken's own series of expositions for the dedication of Go Shirakawa's Renge Ōin Sanjūsangendō 蓮華王院三十三間堂, the successor to Toba's Tokujōju-in, correspond in terms of details about the event and rhetorical style.¹¹ There are moreover entire passages of Chōken's collection of exemplary phrases, the *Gonsenshū*, that are repeated verbatim throughout the *Heike*, suggesting that the tale in its entirety is a product of late-Heian preaching culture.¹² Given these fragments of textual similarities between Chōken's preaching and the *Heike*, it is tempting then to interpret the opening tale of the Tokujōju-in dedication as a self-reflexive allegorization of the context of *Heike monogatari*'s production.

Whatever the case may be, a subversive edge lies hidden in the allegorical implications of the tale. Under the cover of allegory, it seems to suggest that it is the outcast and unaffiliated, or *muen*, preacher, rather than the high-ranking priest, who truly possesses the potential to sacralize the sovereign power of the Dharma King. Preaching, in other words, according to the tale's allegorical figurations, provides the medieval sovereign with the possibility of suspending the sacred order of the Buddhist hierarchy and directly manifesting the sacrality of his own power as sovereign. If, as Carl Schmitt suggests in *Political Theology*, "Sovereign is he who decides on the exception,"¹³ preaching, as it is depicted in the tale, constitutes the performative medium by means of which the sovereign decision is made possible.

But what of the power of preaching itself? Wherein lie the conditions for the possibility of its power to realize the sovereign decision? Within the framework of the tale, they lie in none other than the life of the preacher himself. In his existence as an outcast self-ordained priest, he lives in a permanent state of exception outside the religio-political order. For this reason, he personifies the very structure of sovereignty itself, in which the sovereign's power to rule,

¹¹ For a transcription, see Nagai Yoshinori and Shimizu Yūshō, ed. *Agui shōdō shū jōkan*. (Tokyo: Kadokawa), 223-224. For an analysis of Chōken's expositions for the dedication of Go Shirakawa's Renge Ōin as a window onto the context for the formation of the Tokujōjuin narrative, see Abe Yasurō. "Shōdō to ōken: Tokujōjuin kuyō setsuwa wo megurite," in *Denshō no kosō: rekishi, gunki, shinwa*, ed. Mizuhara Hajime et al. (Tokyo: Ōfūsha, 1991), 237-243.

¹² See Shimizu Yūshō. "Chōken sakubun shū, Gonsenshū ni miru katarisei." *Kaishaku to kanshō* (51): 116-122.

¹³ Quoted in Giorgio Agamben. *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, trans. Daniel Heller-Roazen (Palo Alto: Stanford University Press, 1998), 8.

paradoxically, derives from the power to suspend and except himself from the rule of law. The outcast preacher and the sovereign Dharma King, in other words, are uncanny doubles—inverse images of each other. The life of the outcast preacher is a personification of the possibility of sovereignty, of power that operates outside the sphere of law. That Toba, in the tale, recognized this power and appropriated it for the purpose of consecrating a monument dedicated to his sacred authority underscores his legitimacy as Buddhist sovereign whose existence, like that of the outcast priest, is not dependent on the rule of law.

If the power of preaching to sacralize the sovereign power of the Dharma King lay in the ambivalent character of the life of the outcast preacher, what of his art? What, after all, is preaching? What about it in particular gives it its unique power? To conclude, I will put forward some preliminary thoughts.

The *Liang Dynasty Biography of Eminent Priests* (J. *Ryō kōsōden* 梁高僧伝) sets forth the classical definition of *shōdō*.

Preaching means to guide the hearts of sentient beings by invoking the principles of the Dharma. In the past, when the Dharma of the Buddha was first transmitted, at regular assemblies for vegetarian feasts, [priests] would invoke the Name of the Buddha and would worship by offering lines [of praise for him]. In the evening, when everyone became tired, to awaken and enlighten (*keigo* 啓悟) [the assembly], an accomplished priest would be specially invited to mount the high seat and preach the dharma using various etiologies (*innen* 因縁) and citing numerous parables (*hiyu* 譬喻).¹⁴

The use of etiology and parable as a means for *awakening* the audience, that is, in the dual sense of both energizing and enlightening them, can be traced back to *The Lotus Sutra*. In Chapter Two, “Expedient Means,” Śākyamuni explains to Śāriputra, “All Buddhas of the past orated (*enzetsu*) the Dharma for sentient beings by using as expedient means, in countless and innumerable varieties, the rhetorical devices of etiology and parable... By listening to these teachings, sentient beings are able to attain knowledge of all things.”¹⁵ In the verse section of the chapter, moreover, the purpose of Buddhas in preaching the Dharma thus is reiterated as, “to give joy to all [sentient beings] by using the power of rhetorical devices as expedient means.” What is striking about these two classical formulations of Buddhist preaching is their emphasis on the power of etiology and parable, or, broadly speaking, allegory, to creatively engage and “awaken,” as it were, would-be practitioners of the Dharma.

The Japanese tradition of preaching abounds in examples of etiological narratives. In the Heian period, entire collections of “*innen*,” or short narratives

¹⁴ Taishō shinshū Daizōkyō. Vol. 50, No. 2059, 417.

¹⁵ Taishō shinshū Daizōkyō. Vol. 9, No. 262, 9.

on the workings of karma, such as the *Shijū hyaku innen shū* 私聚百因縁集 and the *Hyakuza hōdan kikigakishō* 百座法談聞書抄, to name a few, were compiled as references for the purpose of preaching at rituals. As Komine Kazuaki has shown, such collections shed light on the important role of preaching in the formation of what in Japan are today called *setsuwa-shū*, from *Konjaku monogatari-shū* to *Uji shūi monogatari* 宇治拾遺物語.¹⁶ In light of preaching's role in the formation of *setsuwa*, I propose that the genre of *setsuwa*, which is a modern invention and has been translated into English variously as “didactic tales,” “Buddhist tales,” and “anecdotes,” may be strategically translated as “homiletic tales” in order to draw attention to the context of the genre's performance and reception.

Without getting into too much “genre trouble,” it might be said that what, from the point of view of the Buddhist establishment, distinguished *monogatari* such as *Konjaku* and *Uji shūi* from so-called “fabricated” *monogatari* (*tsukuri monogatari* 作り物語) such as *Taketori* and *Genji* was the karma of their words, their power, that is, to produce merit for rebirth.¹⁷ The karma of words was, for Buddhists, as Chōken's celebrated sermon on *The Tale of Genji* attests, dependent on the context of their performance.¹⁸ Preaching, then, can be understood to have provided the Buddhist establishment with an effective performative medium for converting profane *monogatari* into sacred language and, in so doing, making the Dharma accessible to a larger audience of laywomen and men. The implications of this act of expansion are far-reaching. By creating new audiences for exposition of the Dharma, preaching at the same time also extended the sphere of influence in late-Heian Japan of the Retired Emperor-cum-Dharma King.

By thus situating *monogatari* in its performative context, its relation to early medieval Japanese sovereignty also comes into view. Just as sovereignty operated beyond the rule of law and was sacralized by the preacher, *monogatari* circulated outside the Buddhist canon of letters and were converted into sacred language by means of preaching. Each thus existed as ambivalent potentialities in medieval Japanese society whose realization was dependent on the performance of preaching, a performance that, as we learn from late Heian *monogatari*, was the peculiar expression of bare life emanating from a sphere beyond both human and divine law.

¹⁶ Komine Kazuaki. *Setsuwa no gensetsu*. (Tokyo: Shinwasha, 2002), 111.

¹⁷ On the genre of *tsukuri monogatari*, see Komine, 193-194.

¹⁸ On Chōken's sermon on *The Tale of Genji*, see Komine Kazuaki. *Chūsei hōe bungei ron*. (Tokyo: Kasama Shoin), 475-487.