VISUAL DIMENSIONS IN MIKKYO PURE LAND

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RELIGION 399 SENIOR THESIS SEMINAR

APRIL 20, 2018
Acknowledgements

This project is a culmination of the love and support of friends and mentors.

I want to thank, in particular, Professor Glassman, whose passion and knowledge inspired me unceasingly these past two years.

I also want to express a very special thanks to Professor Ghosh, without whose patience, brilliance, and humor this project would have been impossible.
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ABSTRACT

This project contributes to recent scholarship in the study of Buddhism that strives to challenge established notions about the relationships between different religious traditions in medieval Japan. In particular, this project examines the relationship between *mikkyo* 密教 (secret teaching) and Pure Land Buddhism. By interpolating frameworks provided by James Dobbins and Aaron Proffitt, this project proposes that the True Pure Land ritual image of the *komyo honzon* is perhaps better understood under the conceptual rubric of “*mikkyo* Pure Land,” a construct I develop following the methodological frameworks proposed by James Dobbins and Aaron Proffitt. To do so, I compare the *komyo honzon* with the *Taima Mandara*, *raigo* image, and *Ajikan* to analyze their visual and ritual relationships. Such an approach allows me to supplement textual analyses that have attempted to reconceptualize the nature of interaction between Buddhist ideas and practices circulating in the medieval period.
DEFINING TERMS

Scholars of Buddhism have assigned sectarian distinctions that may not have been so rigidly understood by medieval Japanese Buddhists. Recent studies have since challenged these modes of classification.¹ This project aims to build upon the idea that Buddhism in medieval Japan existed as a large pool of religious practices and experiences that did not express itself in the sectarian terms that were employed later. I will examine how scholarship regarding medieval Japanese Buddhism has impacted understandings of those traditions and the relationships between them. Defining the ostensible sects is essential for a reappraisal of different traditions and the space between them.

Pure Land Buddhism was foundational for much of Buddhism in East Asia in the medieval period.² Pure Land Buddhism in the Japanese context expounded that, in short, through faithful practice devotees will be reborn after death in Sukhavati, the Western Pure Land of Amida³ Buddha.⁴ Within the Amidist soteriology, rebirth in Sukhavati is founded on a series of

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¹ James Dobbins, “Envisioning Kamakura Buddhism,” in Re-Visioning Kamakura Buddhism, ed. Richard Payne (Honolulu: Kuroda Institute, 1998). 25-27. Dobbins notes in particular the writing of Japanese scholar Hara Katsuro of Kyoto University who conceptualized the Kamakura period as a period of “Reformation” language that reflected his studies in Western historiography. In this vein Ienaga Saburo, Ono Tatsunosuke and Inoue Mitsusada rendered the six established “old” Kamakura schools in doctrinal opposition to the “new” sects that emerged at the time. Kuroda Toshio and those he influenced similarly divided between new and old based on social, political, and economic evidence.


³ In the original Sanskrit, Amida is known as Amitabha, but for my purposes, I will primarily be using the Japanese rendering for my project as it is mainly concerned with Japanese Buddhism. The entirety of this project will primarily use the Japanese names of figures and places unless it is necessary to contextualize them otherwise.

⁴ Today, the two main sects that understand rebirth in the Pure Land as the ultimate goal of religious practice during this life are the Pure Land School (浄土宗, Jōdo-shū) and the True Pure Land School (浄土真宗, Jōdo Shinshū). Because my analysis focuses on medieval Buddhism and not contemporary Buddhist understandings of Pure Land, but this is worth noting because the visual culture produced by the medieval founders of these sects persists even today.
promises made by Amida prior to his attainment of Buddhahood in the *Sutra on the Buddha of Infinite Life*. Although rebirth in the Buddha-field or otherworldly space in which buddhas reside has been shown to not be an idea exclusive to the cult of Amitabha, the Amidist *Sukhavati* became the most influential pure land in Japan by far. The physical accoutrements of Pure Land worship were introduced into Japan in the 7th Century via Korea, but it was not until the Kamakura period (1185-1333) that Pure Land practice would become widespread. I focus on the Pure Land tradition, as it became reinvigorated in the Kamakura period primarily as a result of the work of its proponents Honen (1133-1212) and later Shinran (1173-1263), and the *mikkyo* (secret teaching) esoteric tradition brought from the mainland by Kukai in the early 9th century. The practices that emerged at that time, and the ritual materials that survive indicate more complex relationships than scholarship has historically expounded I will demonstrate how Pure Land and *mikkyo* religious practices and their accompanying visual culture were not understood as rigidly distinct from each other in the way that scholarship has historically conceptualized them.

During the Kamakura period, Pure Land ideas became prominent in a religious environment previously entrenched in esoteric Buddhism. Esoteric Buddhism is particularly difficult to grapple with conceptually because the term takes on myriad valences in different times and places. The definition of esoteric Buddhism, and further, the choice of language and terms is one that is especially important to clarify, as the categories that exist under such signifiers as Esoteric, esoteric (small e), Tantric, Vajrayana, and *mikkyo* each carry different

connotations and associations that necessitate discretion when trying to illuminate the
connections between these traditions and Japanese Pure Land. Vajrayana practices have often
been conceptualized as a “third vehicle” in counterpoint to Hinayana and Mahayana traditions,
but as recent scholars such as Proffitt points out, practitioners of the Buddhist Vajrayana
understood their own practices as discrete, yet within the larger umbrella of Mahayana tradition.
Although mikkyo is largely composed of, and lends itself easily to comparison with the esoteric
Buddhist traditions of mainland Asia. Bogel, for example, limits the focus of her book With a
Single Glance by examining the teaching and influence of the monk Kukai 空海 (774-835) and
his consolidation of texts and practices into mikkyo. Kukai introduced and organized mainland
esoteric precepts and is credited with founding what became the head temple of the Shingon
school. Hence, he became recognized as the founder of the Shingon Sect 真言宗, though during
his lifetime such an entity did not exist. Mikkyo, then, identifies that tradition of Buddhism that
was imported to Japan by Kukai and its subsequent dissemination into the larger Buddhist corpus

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7 Bogel. 18. Scholars are not in agreement on their understanding of terminology surrounding esoteric
Buddhism and the sort of boundaries that arise in such delineations. Indian Vajrayana, also known as
Tibetan Tantra, existed as defined traditions in central Asia that had a significant influence on the
formation of Esoteric Buddhism in East Asia but were systematized differently as the teachings of these
traditions entered new religious communities. Tantra refers to a genre of ritual practices that are not
exclusive to Buddhism, and is utilized in describing religious practice in Jain and Hindu ritual as well.
8 Aaron Proffitt, “Mysteries of Speech and Breath: Dohan’s Himitsu Nenbutsusho and Esoteric Pure Land
Buddhism” n.d. 97. “Tantra, as a thing unto itself, may largely be a construct of the academic
imagination. Drawing upon Wedemeyer, I propose Mahā/Vajrayāna as the implied meaning of the term
Esoteric Buddhism, as the tantras (a genre of Mahāyāna rituals texts) and Mahāyāna discourse centered
upon the tantras (Vajrayāna) function within a broader Mahāyāna cosmological and doctrinal tradition.”
9 Proffitt. 24-25. Although Kukai is generally affiliated with the Shingon Sect and those sects that
branched off from it, the 天台 Tendai school predated Kukai and his esoteric teachings. Esoteric teaching
within the Tendai tradition 天台 taimitsu is relevant to this project because it is heavily influenced by
Kukai and was particularly influential and influenced the formation of Esoteric Pure Land.
10 Proffitt. 12. It is important to note that today, Japanese temples identify as operating under one specific
sect, but this was not the case until the Edo period, during which temples were required to affiliate with a
本山 honzan or head temple. As a result, it is a simple matter to make sectarian distinctions today.
of medieval Japan from the head temple complex of Mount Koya. Thus, the term *mikkyo*
usefully allows for an analysis of Japanese Buddhism without disavowing the impact of
mainland Asian esoteric Buddhist traditions in Japan.

However, not all scholars center their projects around the term *mikkyo*, Aaron Proffitt, for example does not limit his scope to *mikkyo* in his dissertation “Mysteries of Speech and Breath.” He uses the term Esoteric Pure Land to define the broad range of teachings that emerged from India and later developed in China before reaching Japan. This is useful for Proffitt especially in that he goes into in-depth analysis of ritual forms such as early *dharani* and mantra which could not be considered *mikkyo* for their mainland origin. Proffitt coins the term “Esoteric Pure Land” to flag the commonalities shared across Esoteric Buddhist and Pure Land doctrine and practice. In using this term, Proffitt aims to provide an alternate approach in response to academic understandings of Pure Land and Esoteric Buddhism that have historically cleaved these two traditions into discrete categories. Proffitt’s Esoteric Pure Land brings into view the rich variety of ways in which these traditions interacted, and how these ways that tended to slip through the cracks of scholarship. This turn to greater flexibility introduced in the term “Esoteric Pure Land” is useful to my investigation. As Proffitt states:

I do not proposed [sic] here that “Esoteric Pure Land” is a *kind* of Buddhism that has been unexamined, but rather, that Esoteric Pure Land is a useful academic distinction for examining features of the Mahayana world that have until now remained unexamined…the overall intent of this chapter is to consider the nature of “second order” terms in the study of Buddhism that seem to take on a life of their own, and re-embed them in their historical and polemical contexts.11

11 Proffitt. 15-16.
I find that Proffitt’s approach allows for an investigation of understudied resonances and features that are indicative of a religious conversation that manifested in a variety of experiences, practices, and ideas that do not all fit into stark dichotomies that arose out of modern scholarly discourse.\footnote{Whereas Proffitt looks to find evidence for Esoteric Pure Land in mainland Asia as well as after the proliferation of Pure Land and esoteric Buddhism in Japan, my scope will be limited to medieval Japan.}

By drawing from both of these frameworks, my project will be an exploration of “mikkyo Pure Land” visual culture that is, those practices and ideas that result from a religious environment of sharing and dialogue between Pure Land doctrine and those esoteric traditions that are rooted in Kukai and those influenced by his work. Buddhism has left an indelible mark in the aesthetic environment of Asia in the various ways that its doctrine was interpreted textually and visually. My project engages in Proffitt’s Esoteric Pure Land by an examination of visual culture. By investigating the way in which religious art in medieval Japan represents the doctrinal concerns of mikkyo Pure Land, I aim to emulate Proffitt by demonstrating the efficacy of this second order distinction. In order to understand how it is possible that these traditions came into contact, an illustration of that religious environment in which Pure Land and mikkyo traditions were able to comingle is vital for this project. I argue that Pure Land and mikkyo were not truly discrete doctrinal forms and were understood instead as different means of practice. Language of syncretism or any language that suggest a duality is therefore problematic in the sense that these traditions were understood to be part of the larger Buddhist corpus which encompassed a variety of different doctrines and practices.
RE-VISIONING TRADITIONS

In order to understand how Pure Land and mikkyo traditions interacted with one another in medieval Japan, the nature of that religious environment in which they came into contact must be illuminated. Scholarship on esoteric Buddhism in East Asia has long sought to differentiate it from other strains of Buddhist thought that were also present throughout Asia. Renderings of Japanese Buddhism in particular have historically expounded upon the doctrinal distinctions between the schools of Buddhism that flourished in Heian Japan (794-1185) and the religious movements that emerged later in the Kamakura period. Although this categorization was particularly influential and useful in renderings of Japanese Buddhism by Japanese and Western scholars alike in the 19th and 20th centuries, it has been challenged in more recent scholarship. James Dobbins writes in Envisioning Kamakura Buddhism, “The differentiation of Old and New Buddhism is primarily a product of Western-style historiography in Japan’s late 19th and early 20th century. Before that time there was no widespread sense that the six Kamakura schools shared fundamental characteristics.”13 Recent contributions to medieval Japanese Buddhist studies have worked to dismantle this narrative which largely mirrors the Protestant Reformation and accordingly transposes Christian biases and characterizations on to Japanese Buddhism in a way that has obscured the reality of that religious environment. The narrative of populist strains of religion subverting the calcified, stagnated institutions in power was a particularly influential conceptualization of that historical moment. Richard Payne identifies this bias in how it has produced narratives of success of the “new” Buddhism, and decadence of the “old.” The new

Buddhisms of this theory identifies Pure Land, Zen, and Nichiren sects as the most important types of Buddhism in that they supposedly addressed the soteriological concerns of the general populace who had been neglected by the old schools of Buddhism that were overly aristocratic and inaccessible. However, the success of these sects can be attributed to factors other than their soteriological function. Payne cites essays by James Foard and Jacqueline Stone to illustrate that such an assertion is out of touch with the religious ideas and economic shifts that accompanied the time period. In particular mappo (末法) the decay of the dharma, an apocalyptic era that resulted in the idea that Buddhists could no longer practice methods that had been available in the past. This notion resulted in an increasing number of Buddhists seeking out practices that guaranteed enlightenment within the foreseeable future, rather than older doctrines which taught that over the course of many rebirths enlightenment would eventually become attainable. Also, the shift of power from the centralized government of the Heian period to the bushi warrior class and the increase of wealth in the peasant class meant that those who adopted the sects of Buddhism like Nichiren often held power and property themselves. Thus, Payne claims that the idea that only those who belonged to a disenfranchised peasant class were the only adopters of these New Buddhisms is misinformed. Next, Payne notes, the new-old dichotomy is propped up by the notion that the New Buddhisms were more concerned with the Japanese people and accordingly aligned with Japanese soteriological anxieties. This is paired with the idea of the novelty of these sects that illustrate this narrative of an era of religious innovation that generated religion by and for Japanese people that replaced Buddhist ideas that were more distinctly Chinese or Indian in origin. In reality, Payne notes that Japanese Buddhism in the late Heian

period already bore the marks of Japanese innovation and were novel consolidations of
teological systems that had developed in China and India. Further, the ostensible New
Buddhisms—particularly Pure Land and Zen—did not identify themselves in terms of novelty as a
means of replacing an outdated system, rather they sought validation in their participation in
older, distinctly Chinese doctrinal ideas. The vision of medieval Japanese Buddhism that
emerges from Payne’s critique is one that actively tries to alleviate the established tensions
between different sects of Buddhism that emerge as discrete sects in their modern
reinterpretation by academics in Japan and abroad. In a similar vein, James Dobbins offers the
concept of cultic centers as a means of re-imagining how dynamics of power and theology
manifested in Kamakura Japan. Dobbins understands these centers as sites for institutionalized
religious practice.

The word “cultic” has negative connotations nowadays, especially when
associated with the idea of a religious cult. But what is intended by it is closer
to the idea of a culture. That is, these centers were built around set patterns of
thought and action, which gave meaning to the lives of people drawn to them.
In essence, they were centers of shared religious culture, albeit of narrowly
defined scope...[C]ultic centers of medieval Japan were not always
institutionally autonomous and distinct. There was much give-and-take
between Old and New Buddhisms—organizationally, ritually, and
doctrinally.15

These cultic centers surrounded different influential temples in Nara that defined proper religious
practice and doctrine in different ways. According to Dobbins, cultic centers interacted

dynamically as a network, sometimes clashing in opposition, but also at times resonating with each other, supporting doctrinal ideas of other centers. The overlap of the cultic centers allowed for a degree of fluidity that enabled different theological ideas to coexist in the same space. Dobbins notes that this characteristic is especially important in the context of the so-called New Buddhisms–Pure Land among them–that emerged during the early medieval period. Defining this religious environment is important for my purposes because it opens doors to analysis that runs counter to a long-held academic consensus. The implications of this shift allow us to not only re-vision the environment that medieval Japanese Buddhists occupied, but also the how practices and experiences are polyvalent in their reflection of different doctrines. It is at the site of this re-visioning that I believe novel understandings can be made that blur the distinctions between different groups that have been previously understood as incompatible. However, if we are to truly embrace the theoretical framework of cultic centers, we must be prepared to abandon strict sectarian distinctions.

In an environment of cultic centers, ideologies that were later subsumed into generalizing categories such as esoteric, and Pure Land had been studied and practiced by practitioners who understood them as part of a single religious corpus. Proffitt acknowledges and challenges the tendency for scholars to separate esoteric Buddhism from Mahayana Buddhism, the larger Buddhist movement which the Pure Land tradition is part. He points out that such a distinction has resulted in the neglect of materials that suggest that the two traditions are not so discrete. This concept of cultic centers and its implications are important because they enable Proffitt to engage in “Esoteric Pure Land” what he calls a “second order term” that allows for a study in the overlap between the esoteric and Pure Land traditions. For Proffitt, this means an in-depth analysis of the writing of the monk Dohan (1179-1252), who, while seriously engaged in
Shingon and the work of Kukai and his successor Kakuban (1095-1143), incorporated elements of Pure Land practice and theory into his writing. By framing his project in the new vision of the Kamakura religious milieu, Proffitt simultaneously engages in the crossover between two traditions and subverts the notion that these traditions are truly distinct. My project, which aims to illuminate the gap between mikkyo and Pure Land ideas during the same time period, is indebted to the Dobbins characterizes this era.

**Mikkyo Pure Land**

Often identified as the founder of the Japanese Shingon School (真言宗), Kukai and his influence on the formation of Shingon doctrine is the foundation of the mikkyo tradition in Japan and has been the subject of much commentary by Shingon practitioners and academics alike. Kukai is credited with bringing to Japan a set of Tantric Buddhist theory and practices, which developed since the 7th century in India. Kukai was responsible for systematizing these teachings so that they could be incorporated into the Japanese Buddhist milieu. Born in 774 to an influential aristocrat family, Kukai was well-educated but apparently dissatisfied with the Buddhist teachings available in Japan, though he was convinced of its superiority over contemporaneous Taoist and Confucian philosophy. The esoteric teachings available as part of the corpus of the Heian Period Nara schools was academic and offered little for practitioners to achieve enlightenment without numerous rebirths. According to one account of Kukai’s life, after reading the *Dainichi-kyo*, an esoteric sutra that expounded the idea that attainment of Buddhahood was possible in a single lifetime, he found that there was no one in Japan who could
satisfactorily explain its profound teaching. As a result, he travelled to China to seek advice from the esoteric masters at Ch’ang-an (長安) modern day Xi’an. After receiving esoteric Dharma succession from Hui-kuo, whose esoteric lineage ostensibly began with Dainichi Nyorai, the primordial Buddha and primary deity in the mikkyo tradition. Kukai returned to Japan with a wealth of material and textual artifacts from China and India. He emphasized in particular the importance of the ritual practices that must accompany the study of esoteric texts. Further, Kukai consolidated multiple categories of Esoteric ritual texts into a unified system that was distinctly his own. The ritual concepts that surrounded Kukai’s brand of esoteric Buddhism developed from a tradition that was distinct from earlier Nara Buddhist soteriology which required multiple lifetimes and eons to achieve enlightenment. The mikkyo tradition that Kukai had established became the foundation for the Shingon school and had a great influence on the Tendai tradition at the cultic center of Mount Hiei, which, though it focused primarily on the efficacy of the Lotus Sutra rather than the Dainichi-kyo and other esoteric scriptures, was also engaged in mainland Asian esoteric Buddhist culture. Although terms like “esoteric” and mikkyo (“secret teaching”) imply a degree of exclusivity, this did not prevent the Shingon cultic center of Mount Koya and Kukai’s teachings from maintaining political and ritual relevance.

17 Yamasaki. 28.
18 In many ways analogous to Mount Koya as a cultic center, Mount Hiei and the Tendai school engaged in many of the same esoteric texts as the Shingon tradition. The monk Saicho travelled to China to receive esoteric teaching at the same time as Kukai.
19 George Tanabe, “Koyasan in the Countryside,” in Re-Visioning Kamakura Buddhism, ed. Richard Payne (Honolulu: Kuroda Institute, 1998). 52. “We have surveyed the visible aspects of the institution at Koyasan: temple buildings, landholdings, ecclesiastical organization, ritual performances, vernacular preachings, doctrinal ideas, and institutional growth, even spurred by schism. All of these areas indicate a significant vigor rather than a decline and retreat of Shingon in the Kamakura period.” Moreover, Tanabe notes the various ways in which Pure Land ideas were incorporated into the religious culture of Mount Koya.
argument of the influence of mikkyo via cultic centers and the fluidity of Buddhist ideologies would be undermined if mikkyo had fizzled out during the Kamakura period.

Likewise, it is important to establish how Pure Land Buddhism entered the medieval Japanese Buddhist environment so that it could interact with these ideas established by Kukai and those that carried on the mikkyo tradition. Pure Land Buddhism did not gain widespread popularity until the 12th century, hundreds of years after Kukai had returned to Japan and established his headquarters at Mount Koya. Nonetheless, the teachings espoused by these different traditions came into close contact over the next few centuries. The work of one monk in particular, Honen, resulted in the rapid spread of Pure Land ideology. Honen rejected the preceding Buddhist milieu wherein practitioners strived to generate merit through proper ritual practice and meditation. Instead, Honen and his successors taught that it was exclusively through faith in the saving power of Amida Buddha that Buddhists could escape and eventually attain enlightenment in the Pure Land. He expounded that through ritual recitation of the name of Amida Buddha, a practice known generally as nenbutsu, devotees could achieve rebirth in Sukhavati. Fueled by cosmological anxieties as a result of the influence of mappo, Honen gained a great many followers. The established notion that, in order to achieve enlightenment, practitioners had to work tirelessly to cultivate merit and develop ritual techniques was challenged by the idea that, in this age of decay of the Dharma, such practices were no longer viable. Faith in Amida Buddha’s power became a popular alternative in opposition to the cultivation of personal power by the ritual practice. The spread of Honen’s influence and rhetoric

20 Fusae C. Kanda, “Hōnen’s Senchaku Doctrine and His Artistic Agenda,” Japanese Journal of Religious Studies 31, no. 1 (2004): 3–27. 5. In particular, the 称名念仏 shomyo nenbutsu (invocational nenbutsu) that was considered by Honen to be the ultimate salvific practice.
21 Payne, “Introduction.” 8. The era was characterized by frequent natural disasters that were understood at the time as fulfillment of prophecies.
of exclusivity earned him the ire of cultic centers such as Mount Hiei, the site of the main temple for the influential Tendai school. Although the doctrinal concerns of Pure Land and *mikkyo* traditions were certainly different, there were ways in which *mikkyo* adepts interpolated the *nenbutsu* into esoteric frameworks. This is the realm of Proffitt’s project. Mount Koya can be understood as a cultic center, a place where different Buddhist traditions came into intimate contact. This resulted in texts and commentaries that expounded upon esoteric renderings of Pure Land doctrine, the essence of what Proffitt calls Esoteric Pure Land. As part of his wider analysis of Esoteric Pure Land, he explores how *nenbutsu* and Pure Land culture intermingled on Mount Koya. His analysis of the writing of the monk Dohan reveals a cultic center that expected practitioners to be engaged in multiple traditions of discourse including Pure Land. This engagement in Pure Land doctrine was not understood in the way that Honen had espoused; rather, *mikkyo* understandings of Pure Land were understood in *mikkyo* language. In my project, it is not textual evidence that is utilized to render my domain of *mikkyo* Pure Land, it is through an examination of the ritual materials and the practices that surround them. By closely examining the connective tissue of material representations, I present a new possibility for analytic vision through the lens of *mikkyo* Pure Land.

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23 Proffitt, “Mysteries of Speech and Breath: Dohan’s Himitsu Nenbutsusho and Esoteric Pure Land Buddhism.” 404-405. “In fact, it should by now be clear that in Dōhan’s time, the various ordination and practice lineages were deeply interwoven and highly competitive in a politico-monastic culture wherein it was essential to master multiple areas 兼學 (J. kengaku) of ritual and doctrinal knowledge.”
**KOMYO HONZON: POLYVALENT IMAGE**

In order to develop the idea of *mikkyo* Pure Land, I will engage in an examination of the ritual images informed by these traditions to illustrate how this fusion is reflected in their shared iconography. I have chosen the *komyo honzon* for how it is located within the overlap of the *mikkyo* and Pure Land traditions. The *komyo honzon* or ray-emitting devotional object is an iconographic form important to the True Pure Land sect *Jodoshinshu* (浄土真宗). The iteration I have chosen is a silk scroll painted in ink made in the 15th century and is now located in the Ryukoku Museum in Kyoto (Figure 1.)

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24 Founded by the monk Shinran, the True Pure Land sect is based upon the teachings of Honen, but is distinct from the Pure Land sect *Jodoshu*, which was established by Honen and perpetuated by his followers. For the purposes of this paper, the distinction between these two is made in order to contextualize these iconographic forms in relation to their cultic centers and the figures that were important to these centers.
The composition of the *komyo honzon* is heavy with iconographic significance and doctrinal allusions. The central element of the scroll are the characters "南無不可思議光如来" *na-mu fu-ka-shi-gi ko-nyo-rai.* This is an invocation meaning “homage to the Buddha of incomprehensible brilliance.” This is a form of *nenbutsu* or worship of Amida by way of faithful recitation of his name. Invocations of "帰命尽十方無碍光如来" and "南無阿弥陀仏," other forms of paying homage to Amida, are also present. The central invocation is placed on a lotus pedestal, an iconographic form that is not limited to Buddhism in India, but in the Buddhist

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25 Ibid. 125
context denotes the status of Buddhahood. The placement of this invocation on a lotus pedal, especially in the context of the invocations on the sides which appear to be 2-dimensional rather than 3-dimensional, suggests that it serves as a stand in for an anthropomorphic form of Amida. The invocations on the side appear to be overlain (2-D) rather than occupying (3-D) the actual space of the composition in the way that the central invocation and the anthropomorphic figures in the composition are. As I have noted previously in the context of dharani, lotuses are not reserved for anthropomorphic forms and in fact can serve to emphasize the sacred nature of ritual implements, hand mudras, and—relevant for my project—bija mantra. That said, the composition and interpolation of iconographic forms in the komyo honzon do seem to imply a standing Amida form. The calligraphic form on the lotus is written in gold, echoing the portrayal of gold anthropomorphic Amida images. The gold rays of light also correspond with this characterization. The salvific rays of light from Amida are said in the Larger Sutra to extend out into all fields of reality in order to reach all living beings. The golden beams of light here extend out from the central invocation with vitality, widening as they move away from the center, implying an ever-increasing, infinitude. These rays of light extend to the edges of the scroll, behind, or perhaps through the invocations of the side and the figures that occupy the foreground and background. The figures in the foreground, though admittedly difficult to identify, are most likely the Bodhisattvas Kannon and Seishi as this would form an Amida triad, a common grouping in the Pure Land tradition.\(^{26}\) On either side of the central invocation, seated figures in

\(^{26}\) My interpretation of the image here is different from Grotenhuis. Whereas she notes that Sakyamuni, Amida, and Kannon are present here, I propose that an Amida triad here would make more sense in this context. Such a reading however, needs to be corroborated by visual examination of the original work as the quality of reproductions make it difficult to determine iconographic markers with any certainty. Given, the resolution of the image, it is difficult to discern iconographic markers that would make such an identification easy.
the background occupy the upper field of the composition. The figures on the right side are in monks’ robes, identifying them as important contributors to the True Pure Land lineage. On the left, Bodhisattvas or other divinities, possibly Indian patriarchs of Buddhism, are clad in rich robes atop lotus pedestals. As a whole, this composition emphasizes the efficacy of the Pure Land practice of the nenbutsu. So efficacious is the practice, the words that compose it are able to stand in for the central deity himself. In this form, the composition invites the viewer’s participation through vocalization or concentration on the invocation. Although the nenbutsu is understood as being effective insofar as Amida’s salvific power is responsive to the invocation, the words themselves here have become identified with the body of Amida. Moreover, it acknowledges the participation of relatively contemporary Pure Land monks in the generation of this iconographic form and places them alongside divinities and other figures more deeply embedded into the Buddhist corpus. By including recent masters of the True Pure Land tradition in the composition, the artist connects that moment in history to the ancient tradition of Buddhism, and localizes it to a specific lineage of teachers. The result is a polyvalent composition that claims inheritance of an ancient tradition while also interpolating contemporary practice in novel ways. By contextualizing this composition as part of the Pure Land visual tradition, I aim to reveal its polyvalent nature and ultimately characterize it as part of mikkyo Pure Land.

**CONTEXTUALIZING PURE LAND AESTHETICS: TAIMA MANDARA**

The komyo honzon exists as part of the larger corpus of Pure Land iconography. By establishing the identity of Pure Land visual forms, the relationship that this set of visual culture has with mikkyo can be more clearly understood. Much of the Pure Land visual culture in
medieval Japan can trace its origins to the *Taima Mandara*. The original *Taima Mandara* is believed to have been woven in the 8th century in China, and brought to Japan shortly thereafter. It acquired its name not as a result of its composition or content, but rather because it resides in the temple complex *Taimadera* (當麻寺) in Nara prefecture. Although the original is in poor condition, replications of the image in a variety of media have ensured a lasting understanding of its composition and iconography, as well as its many reinterpretations.

Figure 2.
The Taima Mandara displays the Pure Land understanding of the Western Pure Land in its visual splendor. A diagrammatic representation distributed by Taimadera (Figure 2.) displays two main visual elements: the central image, which portrays Amida Buddha in the Pure Land Sukhavati, and the border, which visually narrates the story of Queen Vaidehi and her emancipation into the Pure Land. Both are illustrations of passages from The Sutra on the Visualization of the Buddha of Infinite Life Delivered by Sakyamuni Buddha (The Visualization Sutra) and The Sutra on the Buddha of Infinite Light Delivered by Sakyamuni Buddha (The Larger Sutra). These sutras are rife with vibrant language describing the characteristics of Sukhavati, Amida, his retinue, and those being reborn in the Pure Land. The outside panels on the left side of the composition display courtly scenes of Queen Vaidehi, imprisoned by her evil son, entreati

ont Sakyamuni Buddha for salvation from her plight. Along the right border, panels continue this narrative and display Sakyamuni explaining to Queen Vaidehi how she can achieve rebirth in the Pure Land. The right panels subsequently follow the narrative found in The Contemplation Sutra. Of the sixteen objects of visualization that Queen Vaidehi is instructed to contemplate in order to be reborn in the Sukhavati, thirteen can be seen on these right side panels. Visualization of the sun, clear water, lapis lazuli earth, jeweled trees, jeweled lakes, jeweled pavilions, jeweled lotus throne of Amida, Kannon, and Seishi, Amida and Kannon appearing to those with visualization power, Seishi, oneself being born in the Pure Land, and finally the various forms of Amida. Most of these different visualizations are grouped together in the same manner as they appear in the Larger Sutra and so are divided into nine distinct images. Along the bottom are the final three visualizations, the nine degrees of rebirth as they are

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28 Ten Grothenhuis. 20.
described in the *Visualization Sutra*. In short, there are three major divisions of superior, intermediate, and inferior. Each of these ranks further subdivided to make nine. In the *Larger Sutra*, devotees to Amida are reborn in these different ranks in accordance with the degree of their devotion during their earthly life. The amount of time that it will take to achieve Buddhahood in the Pure Land is contingent on the practitioner’s stage of rebirth.

The architectural representation of space generates a quasi-3D sense of receding space as if to draw the viewer into the Pure Land. The central scene derives its iconography from the *Larger Sutra*, and it is primarily focused on rendering Amida in the glory of the landscape of the Pure Land and its inhabitants. The visual iconography that composes important objects such as the architecture and beautiful features of *Sukhavati* are taken directly from the text of the *Larger Sutra*. Amida Buddha, by far the largest anthropomorphic form in the composition, resides in the center of the Taima Mandara, beneath a jeweled canopy and atop a jeweled lotus. Amida is flanked by Bodhisattvas Kannon and Seishi, together they compose a common Amida triad. Around the lotus pedestals of the triad are lesser Bodhisattvas. In the air above the tiled platform, musical instruments, religious texts, birds, and deities fly overhead. Between the viewer and the main platform there is a pond where Pure Land devotees are being reborn in lotus leaves. Even closer to the viewer are corner platforms, each with a similar arrangement of an Amida triad and Bodhisattva entourages. This includes seating and standing variations of Amida on either side which welcome in the incoming devotees. Just behind the corner platforms are jeweled trees covered in jeweled nets. The background is occupied by pavilions which stretch out into the sky, festooned with smaller Amida Triads and Bodhisattvas.

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29 Ibid. 15
30 Ibid.
The organization of the space and the ordering of lotus petals bearing reborn devotees followed by platforms, bridges and manifestations of Amida generate a composition that generates a sense of welcoming, of pulling the viewer in and sequentially introducing her to the splendor of the Pure Land. The viewer is invited to move from outside the composition in, towards Amida and his haloed congregation. The sensorial grandeur of the Pure Land is on full display, the sweet scent of food and fruit, the visual richness of jewels and palaces and of course the proximity to Amida create an enticing view of paradise. Moreover, the addition of the panels on the left, right, and bottom link the composition to the Visualization Sutra, and further, remind the devotee how rebirth in the Pure Land can be attained. In this sense, the way in which the Taima Mandara reaches out to the viewer is multivalent, it speaks to her in its visual enchantment and promise, and also in a prescriptive, didactic, and intertextual sense. These elements form the basis of Pure Land visual culture and serves as a sort of formula for addressing Pure Land concerns through visual media. The Taima Mandara depicts the soteriological reward of Amidist practice in all of its visual grandeur. The Taima Mandara became an incredibly influential archetype for Pure Land iconography. Although the richness of the Taima Mandara is not present in the more stripped down composition of the komyo honzon, the promise and splendor of Sukhavati has been flattened and is implicitly conveyed via iconographic markers. It is through an analysis of these markers that allows for a mikkyo Pure Land interpretation of the komyo honzon.
CONTEXTUALIZING PURE LAND AESTHETICS: RAIGO

This composition also relates to the raigo 来迎 (welcoming descent) image.\textsuperscript{31} Fusae Kanda notes the profound influence that the Tendai monk Genshin (942-1017) had in developing the concept of raigo in the 10\textsuperscript{th} century. Raigo has its origins in Genshin’s writing on the visualization of Amida and bodhisattvas in order to attain rebirth in Sukhavati. This visualization meditation was established, a visual representation to aid this practice appeared shortly after.\textsuperscript{32} The Cleveland Museum of Art’s 14\textsuperscript{th} century raigo image (Figure 3.) exhibits many of the iconographic features of the Taima Mandara in a more refined, less overwhelming composition. Amida Buddha is central here, complete with a halo that emanates rays of light that extend to the edge of the composition. Kannon and Seishi are present here as well, Kannon extends a lotus pedestal to the viewer, a reference to the devotee’s rebirth within a lotus petal in the Pure Land. The flying figures and instruments found in the Taima Mandara are here interpolated into a band of musicians. The clouds-as-vehicles seen in the Taima Mandara are also present, and serve as the mode of transport for this heavenly retinue. The standing form of Amida is reminiscent of the welcoming manifestations present in the corner platforms of the Taima Mandara. The raigo image then, can be understood as a well-developed interpretation of the visual grammar of the Taima Mandara into a new form. It serves to convey the devotee from the moment of death to

\textsuperscript{31} Ten Grotenhuis. For the purposes of Grotenhuis, the rays of light which extend outward from the central invocation are an important iconographic element in that Grotenhuis speculates that this form was also present in Honen’s sesshu-fussha, an icon which result in his exile in how it described soteriological exclusivity that reached Pure Land practitioners but was not available to Tendai and Shingon monks. Although this incident outlines the doctrinal differences that Honen apparently saw between his doctrine and mikkyo and mikkyo-influenced cultic-centers. It is important to note that the Tendai pressure that resulted in Honen’s expulsion was not for heresy so much as it was for how it antagonized other cultic centers. Honen’s crime was not for holding the wrong religious beliefs and perhaps it could be said that his beliefs, and the soteriological power of Amida in Honen’s doctrine were understood to be valid but antisocial.

\textsuperscript{32} Kanda, “Honen’s Senchaku Doctrine and His Artistic Agenda.” 5.
the Pure Land. Therefore, this representation is not a depiction of the Pure Land, but an
interaction of that transcendent realm with this mundane world. The markers of the Pure Land
are present, but the space itself cannot itself be transposed onto this one. Instead, the Amida triad
and their entourage meet the devotee. The visual form of raigo was created before the inception

Figure 3.
of the *komyo honzon* but nevertheless, the *komyo honzon* emerged in a religious environment that was no doubt was influenced by the fields of Pure Land visual vocabulary. It makes sense then, to view the *komyo honzon* in this context. The vertical line of the calligraphic invocation, exhibiting all the iconographic signifiers of Amida can perhaps be understood as taking on the significance of *raigo* as well. Understanding this invocation as a welcoming descent, as a manifestation of Amida in this mundane world is a small, if not implicit, ontological jump to make when considering that these two visual forms were circulating in the same communities who shared the same beliefs about Pure Land soteriology. Finally, by interpolating Pure Land monks into the *raigo* framework, the True Pure Land sect was able to assign validity and prestige to their doctrine by transposing this significance visually, through this intertextual, inter-visual religious space.

An important aspect of both the *Taima Mandara* and the *raigo* are their visualization component. In the tale of Queen Vaidehi in the Pure Land sutras, Sakyamuni instructs her in visualization of *Sukhavati* in order to eventually secure her rebirth in the Pure Land where she will able to attain enlightenment. The *Taima Mandara* acts as an aid to just such a practice, assisting the practitioner in the visualization of the Pure Land. Likewise, *raigo* has a visualization association in that the composition was used to aid in the visualization of Amida welcoming a practitioner on the verge of death. This visualization element transposes onto these compositions a ritual and experiential significance that transcends their material form.

It can be said, then, that the influence of both the *Taima Mandara* and *raigo*, as established forms in the Pure Land visual canon are linked to the *komyo honzon*; and further, that such a connection has enfolded in it a resonance in the ritual experience of the *komyo honzon*. Through the dual modes of vision and visualized, the splendor of the Pure Land, and the salvific
The power of Amida are encoded into these visual forms which inform the composition of the *komyo honzon*.

**AJIKAN: ESOTERIC ARCHETYPE**

The *komyo honzon* can be understood as an iconographic form influenced by *mikkyo* as well, and is the focus of my visual analysis of *mikkyo* Pure Land. Although the *komyo honzon* is clearly Pure Land in its iconographic content, the way in which these Pure Land ideas are expressed is influenced by visual concerns that were established by artists familiar with *mikkyo* precepts. The *Taima Mandara* arrived in Japan around the same time that Kukai was active in importing esoteric texts and materials from the Asian mainland, but the *Taima Mandara*—propelled by the teachings of Honen—did not see widespread replication and dissemination until well after *mikkyo* had become an established part of the Japanese Buddhist milieu. Thus, many of the ways in which Esoteric Pure Land of Japan can be understood is in terms of how Pure Land practices necessarily became understood as part of a religious dialectic that was deeply entrenched in *mikkyo* ideas. One notable locus that Proffitt and van der Veere have examined Esoteric Pure Land textual and aural cultures is in their close relation to the other via the practice of the *nenbutsu*.33 For van der Veere in his analysis of the Shingon monk Kakuban, the *nenbutsu* is adopted into the *mikkyo* framework, though its efficacy is explicitly understood as inferior to the esoteric precepts.34 The way in which I propose to elucidate an area of *mikkyo* Pure Land is in

34 van der Veere.
the relationship between the *komyo honzon* and the *Ajikan* (*A* syllable visualization) iconographic form. I contend that this visual relationship allows us to imagine a *mikkyo* Pure Land.

The *Ajikan* image is an esoteric icon used to aid meditation that originated from the Shingon tradition, though it has its origins in Vedic or even pre-Vedic practices in India.\(^{35}\) The image correlates to the practice of *Ajikan* which is a ritualized visualization of and mediation on the Sanskrit syllable *A* (अ). *Ajikan* is derived from the practice of mantra, a Vedic or possibly pre-Vedic form of ritual recitation, specifically, it is a *bija mantra*, a form that is composed of a single “seed” syllable.\(^{36}\) Recitation and ritual meditation upon *bija mantra* is significant in that, as the form transitioned from the Vedic *stobha* type, which had no special meaning, to its Tantric form, it assumed profound meaning and became a foundational practice in esoteric Buddhism in mainland and East Asia. The Tantric understanding of the *A* syllable is rooted in Sanskrit linguistics. Payne explains, “First, it is the initial element of the Sanskrit syllabary. Second, each of the syllables of Sanskrit is pronounced with the *A* as the vowel component. Third, *A* serves as the negative prefix.”\(^{37}\) Thus, *A* as foremost, fundamental, and negating can be understood as representing the absolute nature of reality in Hindu and Buddhist Tantra. Similar linguistic reasoning influenced Kukai in his writing on *Ajikan* practice. For Kukai, phonological transformations of the original *A* syllable correspond to different stages in the attainment of enlightenment. Thus contextualized as a part of Kukai’s religious dictum, *Ajikan* can be understood for my purposes as a fundamental part of the *mikkyo* tradition, and importantly, one that is characterized by an esoteric linguistic heritage. The importance of *Ajikan* for my purposes

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\(^{36}\) Ibid. 222.

\(^{37}\) Payne, “Ajikan: Ritual Meditation in the Shingon Tradition.”
is how this practice, which is so indebted to a rhetoric of linguistic power, manifests itself as a visual icon and how a relational thread can be drawn between this form and the *komyo honzon*.

To contextualize the *Ajikan* form further, the development of *dharani* allows us to understand how aural practice and calligraphic divinity are deeply embedded into *mikkyo* culture. As a genre of magical spells that were invoked through ritual recitation, *dharani* provide the earliest extant examples of Sanskrit letters in place of anthropomorphic Buddhist figures atop of lotus pedestals and certainly informed the *mikkyo* tradition. The association between different Buddhist deities and their corresponding ritual objects and mudras developed as a way of systematizing rituals to respond to worldly ailments and was not associated yet with a more cosmic soteriology. As the esoteric teachings continued to develop throughout Asia, the focus of esoteric Buddhism turned away from solving this-worldly problems and became more concerned in defining the nature of reality. This naturally rendered the *A* syllable as particularly potent for its theological history as a cosmological origin; such a concept was easily transposed onto Kukai’s writing.

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38 Payne, 222
Since its introduction by Kukai, the form of Ajikan has remained essentially unchanged in the main iconographic forms that compose it. Most productions of the Ajikan image are portable scrolls and are used as visualization aids for use by a single practitioner. The image is composed of the A syllable which rests upon a lotus pedestal enclosed by a “moon disc,” a luminous circle. Ajikan compositions share with the komyo honzon the lotus pedestal, a central icon represented as script, and a representation of light surrounding the central icon. The result is a striking
similarity though the iconographic logic surrounding the composition of *Ajikan* reflects a different tradition entirely. First, it is important to note that *Ajikan* does not include any anthropomorphic forms, and the composition itself is static, with no implicit movement or implied depth, and thus it is incorrect to claim any similarities to *raigo* composition beyond the shallowest aesthetic similarities. The significance of the each of the visual elements is steeped in esoteric meaning expounded originally by Kukai; *Ajikan* scrolls have been used in ritual mediation by the Shingon school and are the subject of commentaries by esoteric masters since its conception.  

As they are generally understood, the central Sanskrit *A* syllable is conceptualized as the Dharma world, the nature of reality which is originally unborn and so is identified with the *Dainichi Nyorai*, the central Buddha in Shingon doctrine. The meaning of the lotus and the moon disc are interpreted as representing corporeal and incorporeal mind, truth and wisdom, and the duality/unity of the Womb and Diamond mandala depending on the commentator and their affiliated internal tradition within the Shingon school. Accordingly, there are slight variation of the composition, at times the lotus is contained within the disc and at times it is separate, reflecting these different interpretations.  

The iconography of *Ajikan* share some basic similarities with the *komyo honzon* they are clearly concerned with different religious ideas. Despite this, the shared iconographic rhetoric points towards common understandings that can be said to exist in the religious sphere of *mikkyo* Pure Land.

An iconographic rendering of *Ajikan* is important in that it helps us characterize the visual identity of *mikkyo*, but also important in an analysis of this form is how the practitioner interacts with it. *Ajikan* is first and foremost a practice associated with visualization, the name of

39 Yamasaki, *Shingon Japanese Esoteric Buddhism*.
40 Ibid.
the practice roughly means a syllable visualization. Because the A syllable encapsulates the meaning of the originally unborn and thus all other mantras are based upon it as a seed syllable mantra, the visualization, vocalization, and mediation upon it is thought to be especially efficacious in allowing the practitioner to achieve Buddhahood in this life.\footnote{Yamasaki. 194} In Shingon thought, practice is divided into the body, speech, and mind of the Buddha are embodied by the practitioner, they achieve union with Dainichi Nyorai and become the Buddha. Within this theology, Ajikan provides one practice that allows for union through speech of the Buddha. That is, through the contemplation of the implicitly aural A syllable, and its recitation, the practitioner is able to achieve a union with Dainichi. Accompanied by rituals that invoke mudra (hand and body gestures) and through enlightened understanding of the nature of the unborn original nature of the world. This is possible through the proper execution of the ritual practices associated with the Ajikan ritual scrolls. Although the syllabic iconography of Ajikan visual is able to encapsulate a part of the significance associated with the totality of Ajikan ritual, the physical, mental, and vocal aspects of the practice are of dire importance and must have also diffused into the larger medieval Japanese ritual corpus. It is the environment of cultic centers that Ajikan formed and spread, serving as a multivalent ritual and aesthetic construct from which later forms developed.

It is in the careful consideration of both of the visual traditions from which the komyo honzon and the Ajikan I draw a novel connection. Although the soteriologies and ultimately the religious frameworks that surround these two traditions are different, I believe that a thread between these two traditions can be traced in the embodied realm of ritual practice. To do this, further background on these aesthetic forms in the context of ritual practice is required. Because
Ajikan predates Shinran and the komyo honzon we can expect the visual grammar of the komyo honzon to be conversant with mikkyo visuality. As a monk trained in the Tendai tradition at Mount Hiei, Shinran was undoubtedly influenced by esoteric ritual and doctrine in his creation of the komyo honzon. Saicho (767-822), the monk responsible for revitalizing the Tendai sect in Japan, was heavily influenced by the work of Kukai and so it would stand to reason that an initiate in the Tendai sect would be familiar with the iconography of the Ajikan. The iconographic form intrinsically carries with it the ritual traditions that preceded it and these must be considered as well, as it adds another layer of significance in the visual transposition that we find at this locus. In the case of the Ajikan, the efficacy of mantra practice is enfolded into the icon. Thus, a Buddhist in medieval Japan, aware of the esoteric precepts, would be able to appreciate the komyo honzon for its references to esoteric mantra practice. In a sense, such a rendering makes the komyo honzon esoteric for the embedded theology it wields in its iconography. It makes a shift from a composition that resides safely within the confines of Pure Land teachings of faith and salvation, to something that references the magical tradition of dharani, lending a similar magical force present in the nenbutsu. Such a transformation would make ritual nenbutsu practice with the komyo honzon more palatable for esoteric practitioners and would allow laity and those uninitiated in the relatively inaccessible esoteric doctrine participate in a magical tradition in its participation in esoteric aesthetic forms. Additionally, the importance of visualization in both the mikkyo and the Pure Land tradition can also be understood as a shared space of ritual practice that brings the doctrinal worlds of these two traditions into the same visual sphere.

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42 Payne, “Ajikan: Ritual Meditation in the Shingon Tradition.” 221
With these concepts in mind, I claim that the composition of the *komyo honzon* is directly influenced by *Ajikan*, and thus is a visual example of my term *mikkyo* Pure Land. The placement of a calligraphic form on a lotus pedestal, is a reiteration of an iconographic form of the *bija mantra*. This form, as *Ajikan*, was a part of the *mikkyo* Buddhist tradition and was subsequently adopted by Shinran’s True Pure Land. Similarly, the aural aspect of the calligraphic form, that is, the ritual invocation or meditation upon this calligraphic form is also interpolated in the *komyo honzon*. The *A* syllable as the magico-linguistic unborn origin and the *nenbutsu* as the gracious salvific phrase are both rendered to reflect the practice of the devotee. Moreover, the shared element of visualization present in both the *Ajikan* and the *komyo honzon* generates a connection not only in the visual modality of the compositions but in the ritually experienced visualization practices associated with these forms. Although the *komyo honzon* represents the soteriological concerns of Pure Land doctrine, it is manifested in a visual and ritual vocabulary that is conversant with *mikkyo*. Thus, I suggest that the *komyo honzon* is directly engaged in the conceptual framework of *mikkyo*. This claim is important not only in the way that it engages this previously understudied form, but in that an analysis in this framework allows for the possibility of further visual analyses in identifying the polyvalent domain of *mikkyo* Pure Land.

**Conclusion**

I have argued in this thesis that medieval Japan’s religious environment is best understood as a network of cultic centers, established and emerging traditions came into close contact and generated novel aesthetic forms as a result of these converging traditions. In the case for Kakuban, who provided *mikkyo* commentaries on the *nenbutsu* and integrated the practice into *mikkyo* theory by conceptualizing Amida as an emanation of *Dainichi Nyorai*, the practice
of nenbutsu was clearly not in and of itself incompatible with mikkyo ideas. Although the komyo honzon and the Ajikan scrolls represent different Buddhas and speak to different notions of what ideal practice is, the visual language that they use to convey these ideas stems from a dialogue between these two ostensibly distinct sects. In understanding the world in which such a dialogue was possible, it would seem that medieval Buddhism was not a battlefield of reformation and rejection, but rather that religious culture was able to generate subtly syncretic forms that shared a visual language. Further we can posit that this dialogue was less of a binary defined by opposing religious traditions, but rather a dynamic and sustained conversation between those conversant in the breadth of Buddhist ritual and culture in medieval Japan. This is not to impose such a model of fluidity and flexible interchange indiscriminately to all interactions but only to introduce greater complexity in a vibrant environment. There are other instances where Buddhist visual culture was the site of traditions encountering each other that benefit from such a framework. It was in the same religious environment that Honen was banished to Shikoku for his creation and dissemination of the sesshu-fusha mandala as a result of Tendai pressure on the ruling shogunate. No copies of this mandala exist today, but it was criticized for how it specifically depicted Tendai and Shingon practitioners as being exempt from the salvific powers of Amida. The sesshu-fusha mandala apparently depicted rays of light emanating from Amida that reached Pure Land practitioners of the nenbutsu, but left Tendai and Shingon monks in darkness. Clearly, tensions still arose out of these sectarian differences, but it is notable that the reason for the Tendai school’s protest was not an opposition to Amidist soteriology itself, but rather that it specifically targeted the cultic centers of Mount Hiei and Mount Koya. Rather than refuting the potency and significance of Amida’s salvific power, such Pure Land ideas existed

43 Ibid. 125
within the religious consciousness of esoteric Buddhism on their own terms. The response of the Tendai sect could perhaps even be interpreted as validating or taking for granted the validity of the soteriology of the Pure Land School. It is clear, then, that in this network of cultic centers, religious ideas and practices in medieval Japan were not necessarily mutually exclusive and rather were understood simply as different methods of practice.

The Tendai school’s opposition to Honen’s *sesshu-fusha* is perhaps better understood as an example of cultic competition in which imagery was deployed to assert specific positions and ideologies. The strong response from the Tendai school, itself indicates recognition of the power of visual imagery in the generation of religious worldviews. The Tendai school’s opposition to Honen’s *sesshu-fusha* is not a response to an improper visual language, but rather to how a shared visual language was abused. Importantly, this was a language that was in constantly in flux. The environment of the medieval Japan set the stage for exactly this kind of visual language to flourish between what were in later scholarship understood as ostensibly different sects. With the onset of *mappo*, Pure Land theology and the practice of *nenbutsu* recitation gained popularity for its accessibility and potency. However, this did not mean an end to esoteric Buddhism as an out-of-touch institution accessible only to aristocrats. As we have seen with Dobbins’ concept of cultic centers, the Old and New did not so much butt heads as enter conversation with each other. It is through an analysis of visual materials that a reconstruction of some of these conversations is possible. As a result, doctrinal and aesthetic forms, sourced from continental Asia and subsequently adapted for Japanese audiences, exchanged doctrinal ideas and iconography in accordance to shifting concerns. The precedent that *Ajikan* set as a powerful ritual practice that invoked a syllable as the divine, imported a tradition of magical practice that was easily transposed onto the practice of *nenbutsu*. The use of character as deity in the *komyo honzon*
reflect that the True Pure Land sect was aware of the nenbutsu’s potential to take on this esoteric character and created a new media form that spoke to Pure Land practitioners in a visual rhetoric that was apologetic to esoteric sensibilities.

By reconceptualizing the komyo honzon as a visual example of mikkyo Pure Land, I have provided evidence for the notion that Pure Land Buddhism and esoteric Buddhism in medieval Japan were not strictly differentiated from each other. By looking for manifestations of Esoteric Pure Land (or mikkyo Pure Land) through a visual approach we are able to make connections where there may not be explicit textual evidence for an interaction between these two traditions. Another further area of exploration is in the realm of religious experience. If the Pure Land and mikkyo understand their ritual materials with the same terms or in the terms of the other, is it not possible then that the way in which medieval Japanese Buddhists understood their own religious experience could be similarly polyvalent? This notion is touched on in the work of Proffitt but the experiential sphere of Esoteric Pure Land has room for expansion and deeper exploration. As a project in the study of religion, my work in this paper offers a way of approaching syncretism. By challenging dichotomies, and reading between the lines by way of visual analysis, more nuanced conceptualizations can be posited of religious materials and the experiences and doctrines that inform them.
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