

The Buddhist Ritual Use of Linked Poetry in Medieval Japan

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Introduction

IN THE WEST, renga or linked poetry has long been a neglected and misunderstood poetic form. In *The Classical Poetry of the Japanese* (1880), Basil Hall Chamberlain dismissed all poetry after the Heian period in Japan, saying that by the Middle Ages “real poetry was already defunct, poetastering having taken its place.”¹ Renga was among the poetic forms relegated to oblivion by this high-handed judgment. By 1911, however, Chamberlain mentioned renga for the first time in print, but only to summarily dismiss it again as a dismal failure since there was “no continuous sense” in the sequence.² Having faulted renga for having no plot or narrative continuity, Chamberlain asserted that this was due to the fact that “the Japanese mind of that age . . . obstinately refused to lend itself to any but the shortest flights.”³ Chamberlain was in fact suggesting nothing less than that the Japanese were constitutionally incapable of sustained, logical, intellectual activity. As a race they suffered from a chronic lack of attention span!

Needless to say, since Chamberlain’s time Western scholarship has made great strides in the study of Japanese literature, while the study of renga itself has experienced something of a boom in recent years, most notably with the publication of two full-length works by Earl Miner.⁴ One might

¹ London: Tubner & Co., 1880, p. 22.

² *Japanese Poetry* (London: John Murray, 1911): 162.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Earl Miner, *Japanese Linked Poetry* (Princeton, 1979) and with Hiroko Odagiri, *The Monkey’s Straw Raincoat and Other Poetry of the Bashō School* (Princeton, 1981).

well expect, then, that Western scholars have long since learned to avoid that grievous error of imposing a foreign aesthetic or interpretive structural criteria, such as narrative sequence or continuous voice, on a genre to which they are not only alien, but, as I will show below, precisely those things which the form seeks to abolish.

Most Western interpretations and presentations of renga, however, suffer from an unbalanced historical perspective in that: 1) they fail to take into serious consideration the intimate relationship of poetry and religious ritual throughout Japanese history (i.e., to locate the texts in context); and 2) they exhibit a kind of textual elitism, by which I mean an over-reliance on texts from the elite sectors of medieval Japanese society, texts deeply colored by the courtly waka tradition, while largely ignoring or denigrating the popular level and the oral tradition. This preponderant reliance on texts with a "courtly aura" results in a close alignment of renga with the waka tradition, so that renga is made to appear as almost a "natural development" in Japanese literary history. This also obscures the uniqueness of the renga form and does not really go far at all towards explaining why renga appeared and flourished when it did.⁵ No one would deny that the potential for linked verse existed in the waka tradition, but literary scholars have not yet addressed the question of the social—and more especially the religious—milieu or context that gave birth to the renga form. In this paper I propose, then, to proceed on the assumption that there must have been some reason or intention behind the appearance of the renga form and that this intention may be found in the form itself and its original uses.

Below I propose to present an introduction to the renga form and a suggestion of the potential for ritual use found in it by some Buddhist poet-priests in medieval Japan. I will argue that only by exploring the ritual origins, intentions and uses of renga can we properly understand it as a literary form, while, on the other hand, only by careful attention to the literary form and performance can the ritual elements be fully appreciated. Renga is only one of many poetic forms in Japan associated with religious ritual. It is incumbent upon historians of religions to uncover the ritual uses of poetry in Japan and thereby to show in so far as possible what the

⁵ Ramirez-Christensen makes essentially the same point in a review of Miner's work. See "The Essential Parameters of Linked Poetry," *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies* 41, 2 (December 1981): 555–56.

poetry meant—and did—for the Japanese at any given period in history. It is high time that historians of religions answer Chamberlain, who, alluding to Ki to Tsurayuki's famous Japanese preface to the *Kokinshū*, wrote:

. . . when (the Japanese) tell us of their verses making heaven and earth to tremble, and bringing tears to the eyes of the very demons, we ask, but ask in vain, to be shown any masterpieces that might warrant statements even far less enthusiastic.⁶

Renga: The Form and Its Ritual Uses

The practice of renga was known in Japan as *Tsukuba no michi*, the Way of Tsukuba. As a *michi*, renga participated in the tradition of arts as salvatory ways or paths; one thinks of the ways of tea, *nō*, waka or *kadō*, etc. The appellation *Tsukuba no michi* itself refers to the traditionally-designated origin of renga in chapter 84 of the *Kojiki*.⁷ Renga is a verse form composed and performed by three or more poets. (I ignore for the moment *dokugin* renga or individual renga and the *ryōgin* or sequence by two, which are variants.) The opening link or *hokku* of 17-syllables in 5-7-5 form is composed by the first poet; the second poet then adds a link of 7-7 syllables to make a new verse of 31-syllables. As it stands this is, in effect, a waka. The essence of renga, however, has nothing to do with this new poem, but rather comes into play only with the third link. It must always be borne in mind that the most basic rule of renga—a rule that can never be abrogated—is that while two links make one poem, or one might say a literary “scene,” “world” or “universe,” any given link has a semantic relationship to only the immediately preceding and immediately following link, and that only one at a time. Links one and two form a discrete poem (scene, universe), but when the third link is added the first link disappears; it is no longer of any semantic relevance. As the world or scene composed by links one and two dissolves, a new one is simultaneously created by links two and three. Likewise, when verse four is added, the universe of the two-three link is replaced by that of three-four.

It may be helpful at this point to pause to look at a few links of a linked verse sequence in order to get a better idea of how renga works. The follow-

⁶ *The Classical Poetry of the Japanese*, pp. 20–21.

⁷ See Donald Philippi, trans., *Kojiki* (Tokyo University, 1968): 242.

ing is from a *kasen* or thirty-six link *haikai no renga* composed by Bashō and two of his disciples. While it is thus a very late example, it is sufficient for my immediate purposes. It has been chosen because the changes in scene are more dramatic than in many sequences and is therefore easier to use for demonstrative purposes. It should be recalled, though, that the basic form or process of composing/reading haikai is exactly the same as renga. Here I am interested only in revealing the potential religious significance inherent in the linked verse form itself and not with the different aesthetic canons, styles, etc., in renga and haikai. The *kasen* is the *hanami no maki* or flower-viewing chapter of the *Hisago* collection.⁸ The opening verse or *hokku* by Bashō is:

ko no moto ni	under the cherry tree
shiru mo namasu mo	the soup and fish
sakura kana	in petals

It is spring and a family, perhaps, is having a picnic in the traditional manner under the cherry blossoms. These blossoms which last only a few short days are, of course, the most famous symbol of the ephemeral nature of beauty and all things in the material world. Even as the picnickers prepare their lunch, the blossoms begin to fall. This is the “scene” in the opening verse.

The second link presents the time of the blossoms’ scattering—late afternoon. The cause of the blossoms’ falling is unclear—a sudden breeze? a passing shower? These two links together now form one world or scene:

ko no moto ni	under the cherry tree
shiru mo namasu mo	the soup and fish
sakura kana	in petals
nishibi nodoka ni	in the westward sun serenely
yoki tenki nari	the weather’s fine

These two links alone, however, do not reveal the full meaning and essence of renga. This comes only with the third transformative link. The addition of the third link dissolves the picnic scene or universe; verse one is gone.

⁸ For complete translations of this sequence, see *The Monkey’s Straw Raincoat*, pp. 81–95 and Hiroaki Sato and Burton Watson, *From the Country of Eight Islands: An Anthology of Japanese Poetry* (Seattle: University of Washington, 1981): 297–300.

EBERSOLE

nishibi nodoka ni	in the westward sun serenely
yoki tenki nari	the weather's fine
tabibito no	a traveler moves on
shirami kakiyuku	scratching louse bites
haru kurete	as spring ends

A new character is introduced—a traveler, obviously a scruffy type since he is louse-bitten. Note that the season changes too; that is, time passes and the new scene is in early summer. This element of continual change or flux in the world was central to renga as we shall see. With link four there is a narrowing of focus as the scruffy traveler now seems to be a poor samurai, possibly a young man wearing his sword for the first time.

tabibito no	a traveler moves on
shirami kakiyuku	scratching louse bites
haru kurete	as spring ends
haki mo narawanu	not used to wearing
tachi no hikihada	the scabbard of a long sword

With link five a radical change is effected, for time, person and place all change.

haki mo narawanu	not used to wearing
tachi no hikihada	the scabbard of a long sword
tsuki machite	waiting for the moon
kari no dairi no	the <i>tsukasameshi</i>
tsukasameshi	of the temporary imperial place

No person is explicitly introduced, but with the dissolution of link three, the poor samurai is suddenly transformed into a young courtier in the imperial palace, perhaps surrounded by others waiting for the autumn moon. The scene is only suggested, so that the individual listener/reader must fill in the details in his own imagination. The audience, then, participates in creating meaning, while the authorial intention becomes secondary or, better, is effectively abolished. Both the moon and *tsukasameshi*, the autumn promotions, are *kigo* (seasonal words) for autumn.

This, perhaps, is enough to indicate how renga works; time passes and not only do universes come into existence and disappear, but characters too. A samurai in one world can be an imperial prince in the next, or

perhaps a woman, thus demonstrating that nothing is permanent, that the world is characterized by constant flux and change. For these reasons renga proved to be a “natural” demonstration of *mujō*, transience or ephemerality, and *hikarakuyō*, “whirling petals and falling leaves.” The Buddhist essence of renga, then, is not to be located in the universes or scenes (Miner calls them “mini-plots”) created by the semantic relations posited between two links by the poets and the listener/readers, but in the space between the linked poems—that is, in the dissolution of the literary universes. Nijō Yoshimoto (1320–1388) in a famous passage wrote:

In renga the thought of a moment does not remain in the moment that follows. The realms of glory and ruin, of happiness and grief lie side by side, the one slipping into the other in a manner no different from the condition of the floating world. While we think it yesterday, today has come; while we think it spring, it has become autumn; while we think of flowers, the leaves have colored—is it not to contemplate the truth of the “whirling flowers and falling leaves” (*hikarakuyō*)?⁹

Taken in context, it is clear that in this passage Yoshimoto is making claims for the composition of renga as a meditative practice:

The point is that *the experience of a renga session is akin to no less than the contemplation of mutability and our own ephemeral existence*. . . . Yoshimoto uses this point to draw a significant contrast between renga and waka, and (this passage) is part of his reply to the question of whether renga can be a cause for Buddhist enlightenment (*bodai no innen*).¹⁰

One can only fully appreciate the religious ritual dimension of renga by paying careful attention to *the experience of a renga session* as the passage from Yoshimoto suggests. There are some important methodological implications involved here, for I am suggesting that renga was a ritual performing art and not solely a textual form. Ogata Tsutomu has argued this

⁹ This translation is by Ramirez-Christensen, pp. 585–6. Compare this with Miner’s translation, *Japanese Linked Poetry*, p. 21.

¹⁰ Ramirez-Christensen, p. 586, emphasis added. For the original, see *Rengaronshu*, *Haironshu*, ed. Kidō Saizō and Imoto Noichi, Nihon Koten Bungaku Taikei (NKBT), Vol. 66 (Iwanami, 1961), pp. 82–83.

point convincingly and included renga among the forms of *za no bungaku*.¹¹ Reading the spaces between the individual verses and the linked poems means performing a phenomenological reconstruction—and deconstruction—of the renga session, including the experience of radical discontinuity. I will return to this point later.

Yoshimoto is often pointed to as the individual who elevated renga to an art form. Surveys of renga often do not go back beyond Yoshimoto, whom Miner calls the last of the major renga poets born to the upper ranks of the old nobility and an heir to the waka tradition. Yet Yoshimoto was anything but an original religious thinker and one must suppose that his statement on *hikarakuyō* quoted above and similar remarks scattered throughout his renga treatises were gotten from his renga master Gusai (1284–1372?; also read Kyūzai, Kyūsei, Kusei). For my immediate purposes, it is important to note that Gusai was a *hana no moto* renga poet, that is, a lay monk who originally composed renga under the cherry blossoms in temple and shrine grounds.¹² It is this *hana no moto* or *jige renga* connection that must be followed up, I suggest, if one wants to discover the ritual uses of renga in Japan.

The age of renga is often declared to be the 13th–19th centuries, though there are records of sequences earlier. One of the oldest extant renga sequences is from 1241 and was composed in the monks' quarters of Tōdaiji in the southern capital. The participants were priests associated with Tōdaiji and included at least one high-ranking priest. Because of the developed style of the sequence, Okuda Isao surmises that a group of renga poets had been centered in Tōdaiji for some time prior to the composition of this sequence.¹³ The Tōdaiji locus is interesting when one recalls that the monk Chōgen had been appointed by the shogun, Yoritomo, in 1181 to rebuild this temple which had been destroyed by fire in the Gempei War. Chōgen was, like the famous Gyōgi, a *hijiri* or itinerant lay monk to whom the political authorities had to turn when they needed to rally broad popular support for their building projects. Originally trained in Shingon Buddhism, Chōgen was converted to Pure Land Buddhism by Hōnen. As the director of the re-building of Tōdaiji, Chōgen organized *kanjin hijiri* and *bessho*

¹¹ Cf. *Za no bungaku* (Kadokawa, 1973).

¹² For an evaluation of Gusai's poetry and his place in the history of renga, see Ramirez-Christensen, pp. 576–8.

¹³ Okuda Isao, *Rengashi* (Hyōronsha, 1976): 56. Recently two sequences have been discovered from the 12th century, but I have not seen them.

hijiri who traveled throughout the country soliciting funds. It is significant that Pure Land *hijiri* were both at Tōdaiji and associated with it at this time. Moreover, almost all of these *hijiri* adopted *amigō* or Amida-names, a practice later adopted by Ippen and the Jishū. It is a well-known fact that most early renga poets had Amida-names, as did Kan'ami and Zeami, the nō playwrights, who belong to the same tradition.

Various claims have been made for the origins of renga in the Jishū or Jisei sect of Buddhism, one of the most notable being that put forward by Okami Masao some thirty years ago.¹⁴ However, if by the Jishū one means the sect founded by Ippen (1239–1289), then these claims are impossible to maintain—the Tōdaiji sequence of 1241 and Ippen's dates make this abundantly clear. I suggest, however, that one should not then dismiss Okami's insights as utterly baseless or useless. Rather, I would suggest that the "Jishū connection" precedes the formal sect of that name and that the ritual origins of renga are to be found among similar types of religious figures, the *tonseisha* or itinerants who had cast off the world and even the orthodox ecclesiastical structure, living in *sōan* or grass huts in the mountains or wandering the countryside. The life-style of the *tonseisha* was that later adopted by the Jishū *hijiri*. Contemporary maps in the 13th century, for example, show eighteen *sōan* around the Shijōdō of the Konrenji near Kyoto, a Jishū center after Ippen's death. The term *tonseisha* is used in the *Taiheiki* to refer to *dengaku* musicians, *sarugaku* courtesans, *shirabyōshi* (female dancers), *yamabushi*, etc., strongly suggesting a close identification in popular imagination between these types and the *hijiri*.

First Okami and more recently Hirosue Tamotsu¹⁵ have argued that much of the cultural creativity of early medieval and medieval Japan came from the itinerant *yūgyō*-types and the *kawara mono*. It is a well-known fact that nō, kabuki and bunraku all originated among these groups and that only later, through the interest and patronage of wealthy and powerful figures like Yoshimoto, were they adopted into aristocratic circles and adapted there. In light of this pattern, it is possible to argue that the commonly-held view of renga as originally a form of courtly amusement, a kind of parlor game, before it was elevated to the status of literature and

¹⁴ "Tonseisha—Jishū to rengashi," *Kokubungaku ronsō* 13 (1950): 10–28; and "Mono—dashimono, monogi, hana no moto renga," *Kokugo kokubun* 24, 2 (February 1955): 31–6.

¹⁵ Cf. *Henkai no akusho* (Heibonsha, 1973) and "Yūgyō-teki naru mono," *Bungaku* (Iwanami, 1970): 250–301.

only later was carried into the provinces where it filtered down (perhaps “trickled down”) to the lower classes is distorted.¹⁶ Almost forty years ago, Tsuji Zennosuke argued that while Buddhism was originally introduced to Japan by the aristocratic elements of society and then filtered down to the masses, from the Kamakura period on the reverse was true—the lower (sometimes new) classes were the creative loci and their religious and artistic innovations were later appropriated and adapted by the aristocracy.¹⁷

In an important essay, Hamachiyo Kiyoshi has argued that:

The idea that renga could also be a means to enlightenment was found even before Yoshimoto among the *jige* renga masters, and there is a significance in this that cannot be dismissed as being something secondary . . . and this is because it can be seen that from the Kamakura period on this kind of thought connected with Buddhism became the motivating force behind the popularity of *jige* renga.¹⁸

Hamachiyo goes on to argue that there were two parallel traditions of renga with different social bases and intentions: “Courtly renga was associated with waka; *jige* renga was associated with Buddhism.” Yoshimoto was speaking out of the courtly renga tradition when he said that “renga

¹⁶ Cf. *Japanese Linked Poetry*, pp. 11–12: “By extending renga beyond a capping stanza, poets gave it a social reason for existence, and that reason ensured a potential for serious development. . . . This practice seems to have been well established in the capital and to have been welcomed when it was introduced elsewhere. The dispersion of renga was further promoted by the upheavals around the capital and the political chaos brought on by the Ōnin War (1467–1477). On numerous occasions anyone who could do so left the capital. Among those leaving were the priests and nobles who favored renga. They communicated their fervor to military protectors and other parties on whom they found themselves relying. Soon commoners caught the enthusiasm. Japanese like to be up-to-date, and it must have seemed agreeable to be doing what those arbiters of taste in the capital had lately thought up.” In this passage (and Miner’s work as a whole) there is the implicit assumption that renga could only have originated and developed into an art among the courtly elite. For him renga seems to have been little more than an excuse for members of the elite class to get together and this “social reason for (its) existence” is the only reason it became a “serious” art form. Needless to say, by ignoring the religious dimension in the origin and practice of renga, Miner misses a much different serious development.

¹⁷ Cf. *Nihon bunka to bukkyō* (Dai Nihon, 1943): 152–62.

¹⁸ “Renga to butsudō,” *Bukkyō bungaku kenkyū* 4 (1966): 261–83. Quotation from p. 262.

is one of the many forms of waka,"¹⁹ while his passages on *hikarakuyō*, on the other hand, seem to come, as I have said, from his mentor's *hana no moto* tradition or *jige*-Buddhist renga. And Yoshimoto himself possibly bears witness to the a priori existence of the *hana no moto* tradition in his work *Tsukuba mondō* where he gives a list of poet-priests who used to compose renga under the blossoms. The relevant section says:

Many people called such names as Dōshō, Jakunin, Mushō, etc., would gather under the blossoms of the Bishamondō and Hōshōji and compose renga each spring. After that many well-known provincial gentlemen came, too.²⁰

There are clear indications here that the original *hana no moto* renga poets were itinerants or *tonseisha* who gathered and composed renga in public. Only later because of the interest they aroused (and, one suspects, the crowds they drew) did they attract high-ranking secular figures who sought to participate.

In addition to Dōshō, Jakunin and Mushō, mention must also be made of the poet-priest Kyōgetsu. All of these *hana no moto* renga poets were lower-ranking priests from the Kiyomizu-dera area and Mt. Washino-o, one of the thirty-six peaks of Higashiyama. A Jishū temple, the Shōbō-ji, still stands there. While it is difficult to pinpoint the origins of *hana no moto* renga, from the extant sources it is obvious that already by the early thirteenth century some priests were engaged in renga as their occupation. Ton'a, another *hana no moto* renga poet-priest, for example, notes in his *Seiashō* that Fujiwara Tameuji (1222–1280) composed renga with Mushō at the temple of Risshin-shōnin in Fukakusa. Okami asserts that by Zen'a's time (d. 1312?) even men of rank in Kyoto could no longer ignore *hana no moto* renga because it had grown so popular. It is known, for example, that the head of the Nijō school of waka poetry, Fujiwara Tameyo (1250–1338), composed the opening link for a renga sequence at the Shōbō-ji, and even the ex-emperor visited *hana no moto* renga sessions on Washino-o.²¹ What was the source of this popularity?

It is my contention that one can only properly appreciate the origins, development, ritual use and meaning of renga by bearing in mind the

¹⁹ NKBT 66: 36.

²⁰ Ibid., p. 78.

²¹ See Okami Masao and Hayashi Hisaburo, eds., *Nihon bungaku no rekishi*, Vol. 6 (Kadokawa, 1967): 78–103.

magico-religious efficacy ascribed to poetry throughout the Japanese religious tradition and how fully poetry, *dharani* (mantras), and the recitation of sutras were equated in medieval Japan. Ki no Tsurayuki's statement in his preface to the *Kokinshū* that poetry had the power to move the kami, pacify angry warriors, etc., was no hyperbole on his part, but a clear statement of the prevalent religious beliefs. All things in the world make poetry. The wind in the trees, the cries of the birds and insects, the reflection of the moon, etc., are all potential poems. The poet merely facilitates the transition from potential to actual poetry or, better perhaps, translates it into the poetry of words. This the poet does by feeling deeply, by feeling the *hon'i* or essence of that which he finds in nature, in the passage of time, etc. It is this understanding which informs Sōgi's famous dictum:

The essence of renga is to give a mind (*kokoro*) to that which lacks a mind, to give speech to that which cannot speak.²²

A late fourteenth-century treatise, the *Renga shotai hidenshō*, says in part:

. . . contemplating deeply the vicissitudes of life of man and body, always keep in your heart the image of transience (*mujō*), and proceeding to the mountains or the sea, feel the pathos (*awaremi*) of the karma of sentient beings and non-sentient things. Give feelings to those things without a heart (*mushintai no mono*) and through *ushintai* express *yūgen* in a delicate form. Through the four seasons of the plants and trees feel *hikarakuyō*, being enlightened by the changes of birth, old age, illness and death. . . .²³

The identification of poetry with *dharani* was widespread and found throughout the centuries and at all levels of society. Shinkei (1406–1475), for example, wrote:

The way of poetry has been from the beginning the *dharani* of Japan. When a man dismisses poetry as an embroidery of delusions, even his study of the sutras and commentaries and his practice of meditation amount to nothing but self-deception.²⁴

²² Cited *Japanese Linked Poetry*, p. 39.

²³ Cited Hamachiyo.

²⁴ *Sasamegato* I: 44, trans. Dennis Hirota, "In Practice of the Way: Sasamegato, An Instruction Book in Linked Verse," *Chanoyu Quarterly* 19 (Kyoto, 1977): 41.

From a more popular level one need only turn to something like Mujū's *Shasekishū*, a *setsuwa* or folktale collection (c. 1279–1283):

When we consider *waka* as a means to religious realization, we see that it has the virtue of serenity and peace, of putting a stop to the distractions and undisciplined movements of the mind. With a few words it encompasses its sentiment. This is the nature of mystic verse, or *dharani*. The gods of Japan are Manifest Traces, Transformation Bodies of the buddhas and bodhisattvas; and the god Susa-no-o initiated composition in thirty-one syllables with the "Eightfold Fence of Izumo."

Japanese poems do not differ from the words of the Buddha. The *dharani* of India are simply the words used by the people of that country which the Buddha took and interpreted as mystic formulas. . . . Had the Buddha appeared in Japan, he would simply have used Japanese for mystic verses. . . . Though *dharani* employ the ordinary language of India, when the words are used as *dharani*, they have the capacity to destroy wickedness and remove suffering. Though Japanese poetry also uses the ordinary words of the world, when we use *waka* to convey our spiritual intentions, there will surely be a favorable response. And should it embody the spirit of the Buddha's Law, there can be no doubt that it will be a *dharani*.²⁵

Since *renga* resembled the 31-syllable *waka* form in terms of any two combined links, it was easy for *renga* poets to appropriate the prestige of the *waka* tradition unto themselves. In many *renga* treatises one finds esoteric interpretations of the poetic form itself along the lines of the following from Sōgi's *Renga hidenshō* (The Secret Teachings of *Renga*):

Now, *renga* is a miscellaneous form of *waka*. *Waka* is thirty-one syllables. This symbolizes the thirty-two marks of the Buddha, (for) adding the one total form of the verse to the thirty-one syllables give the thirty-two marks. Then, too, adding the threesome of the sun, moon, and stars to the twenty-eight stations makes thirty-one syllables. Dividing this internally into five lines, one gets the five elements—wood, fire, earth, metal and water—and the five Confucian virtues (i.e., benevolence, justice, courtesy, wisdom and

²⁵ *Shasekishū* 5A: 12, cited Morrell, "Muju Ichien's Shinto-Buddhist Syncretism: *Shasekishū*," *Monumenta Nipponica* 28, 4 (Winter 1973): 453.

sincerity). This also reveals the teaching that in one Buddhist age there are five divisions. This waka (form) divided into two parts becomes renga. Waka is the ritual form of the living Buddha and the Buddhahood of all humanity. When one divides it into two, yielding renga, it is the ritual form of discriminating the Buddha nature and all living beings from the one body of the living Buddha.²⁶

One should not be misled by this type of statement, however, into believing that renga is indeed merely a “miscellaneous form” of waka. This sort of statement represents, rather, an attempt to appropriate the prestige of waka and its sacral uses unto the renga form itself. As a poetic form having ritual uses, renga participated in an important stream of the Japanese religious tradition, of poetry (*chōka*, waka, etc.) as power, possessing magico-religious efficacy, but it also had, as I will show below, a thoroughly Buddhist aspect and intent. Nevertheless, renga as a ritual form did participate in the Shinto-Buddhist syncretism of the medieval period, serving some of the same magico-religious purposes waka did. Okami suggests that *hana no moto* renga was originally connected with the *chinkasai odor*i, a ritual dance held at blossom time to appease and pacify the spirit of Gyōyakushin, the kami of the plague, and *hana shizume*, a ritual of pacifying the falling blossoms. The cherry trees under which renga sequences were performed seem to have been *shidare zakura*, weeping cherry, also popularly known as *Saigyō zakura*. Even today this special variety of tree is found in Jishū temple grounds.

Renga sequences were often composed and offered to temples and shrines, since few poets doubted that poetry indeed had the power to move the kami, calm anger, gain another’s affection, etc. Donald Keene has commented briefly on this religious use of renga:

The religious aspect of renga composition, irrespective of content, is apparent from the frequency with which sequences were offered to temples and shrines. Renga sequences were composed by way of prayer for recovery from illness or for victory in war. In 1471 a hokku offered by Sōgi to the Mishima Shrine in Izu was credited with having effected the miraculous cure of a child; and in 1504 Sōchō offered the same shrine a renga sequence in a thousand links in order to assure the victory of the daimyō he served. The elevation

²⁶ Cited Hamachiyo, p. 277.

of the “dignity” of renga from the level of an after-dinner entertainment to an art credited with miraculous powers was largely the work of Buddhist monks who readily found parallels between renga and the teachings of the Buddha.²⁷

In the opening sentence of this passage Keene comes close to recognizing part of the religious significance of renga when he says that such significance was there “irrespective of content.” In other words, the religious significance of renga and its use as a ritual form did not lie in the semantic content or in the poetic style. Rather, renga sequences were offered to shrines and temples as the equivalents of *dharani* and prayers and they were believed to have the same efficacy as the recitation of sutras, mantras, etc. There was a widespread belief, for example, wherein the thirty-one syllables of a linked verse were equated with the thirty-one chapters of the *Dainichi-kyō* (Mahavairocana Sutra). Thus, composing a link was the equivalent of a sutra recitation. Many individuals made vows to compose a thousand-link (*senku no ketchigan*) or ten-thousand link sequence in praying for various things—cures, success in business or war, etc.

Renga as a literary art form no longer is practiced today. What is less well-known, however, is that it does still survive as a ritual form. On the 25th of every month, for example, *tsukinami renga* is performed at the Tenman-gū for Kitano Tenjin in Kyoto. Anyone who visits the shrine on this day may add a linked verse on *kaishi* (tissue paper), while covering his/her face. This is then recited in a loud voice. Formerly known as *hōraku renga*, this ritual composition is clearly related to the tradition of *kami yōgō*, a “showing” or hierophany of a kami-Buddha. Simply put, the composition and recitation of a linked verse is a form of entertainment, calling down the deity. At the Kitano Shrine, however, the *tsukinami* or *hōraku renga* is not held under cherry trees but pines, since the practice is related to the shrine legend that miraculously one-thousand pines appeared overnight at the shrine. Nevertheless, the practice is clearly connected to the *hana no moto* tradition.

Similar ritual uses of linked poetry from the Muromachi period were found in the *kasagi renga* at the Someda Tenman-gū in Yamabe-gun, Nara, and the Ōyamatsumi-jinja in Omishima. Here, too, on the 25th of each month shrine visitors or pilgrims, with their sedge hats (*kasagi*) still

²⁷ “The Comic Tradition in Renga,” in *Japan in the Muromachi Age*, ed. John Whitney Hall and Toyoda Takeshi (Berkeley: University of California, 1977): 252–3.

on, would add a verse to the linked sequences. Similar renga ritual composition was held up until recently at the Tenman-gū in Kyushu and even today at the Imai Susa-jinja in Yukuhashi-shi in Fukuoka, where from July 15-August 3 three hundred linked sequences are composed.

One final example must suffice to suggest one aspect of the religious ritual significance of renga composition as a means of communication between man and the deities. In the Gion festival, a festival cart bearing the deity tours the city. Before the tour begins, however, in the moonlight the masters auspiciously compose a renga sequence atop the cart. As soon as the sequence is completed, they get down, gongs and drums are beaten rapidly and the cart begins to move, indicating that the kami has been called down.

These examples clearly indicate the syncretic ritual use of renga. There was, however, another specifically Buddhist intention and ritual use of the form which I want to return to. The renga poet Shinkei was well aware of the difference between Buddhist renga and the earlier ritual uses of waka, though this seems to have been lost on some of his contemporaries, as he hints in the following passage:

At the wellsprings of form and content in this art (i.e., renga) lie the awareness of transience of things and the expression of one's most serious concerns. In renga, men speak to one another of that which touches them most deeply; thus it has the power to move the hearts of even the most ferocious and demonic of warriors, and to awaken us to the truth of our fugitive world. Nevertheless, even when people have chanced on the opportunity to come together in a session, there are those who, engrossed in their pleasures and rejoicing in fame, only declaim "a thousand ages," "a myriad generations," cranes, tortoises, and "the joy of fortune"; it is appalling. Where is the man who, proposing such felicitations, has lived out a hundred years? Who has thus lasted a millenium? Those who flourished yesterday lapse today into ruin, and men we see in the morning become pyre's smoke at dusk. Our joys and sorrows run their course in what time it takes to turn the palm. Thus the old poets made the expression of their inner thoughts and their vision of impermanence the center of their art.²⁸

²⁸ *Sasamegoto* I: 13, trans. Hirota, p. 33.

Whereas in the Manyō period poetry had been used to pray for long life, for the rule of a thousand years of the sovereign, and so forth,²⁹ with the growing Buddhist influence in medieval Japan one can sense a major shift. For the Buddhist renga poet the power of poetry is not only that of magico-religious efficacy, of incantation, but rather is used to mirror the world, to reveal the impermanence at the heart of it and to put the lie to the dreams of the Manyō poets. It is a truly Buddhist vision and intention one finds here, and Shinkei was one of the most thoroughly Buddhist of the renga poets.

Renga was an ideal form or vehicle for concentrating upon *hikarakuyō*. Moreover, the act of performing renga was what was important, not the resultant poetic sequence. As Hamachiyo notes:

Due to the fact that (the participants) were priests and that what one might well call the *hana no moto* renga "demonstration shows" were held within temple grounds, one can see that the idea that renga, too, could be a means to enlightenment (or Buddhist salvation) was actually enacted. Thus the *jige* renga masters did not try to present the religious use or efficacy of renga to the common people in theory but in actuality. . . . On this point there is a clear difference, I think, from the courtly renga.³⁰

For the *hana no moto* or *jige* renga poet-priests the composition of renga (*Tsukuba no michi*) was above all a religious practice with various dimensions and uses. For the audience it was a "demonstration show;" for the participants it was a meditative practice. A report of a sixteenth-century renga session in which Miyoshi Nagayoshi (Chōkei, 1522–1564) participated describes him sitting immobile and silent like a corpse (*katashiro*). The renga poet was at once so absorbed in the world, so engrossed in contemplating the change which characterizes it (*hikarakuyō*) that he was apparently dead to the world. In the *kaiseki*, the renga session, the poet was in the world but not of it, lost in reverie as worlds were created and dissolved in his mind and verse. According to Shinkei, "The mind of the true poet is not caught upon existence or nothingness, upon *shinku* or

²⁹ Cf. the introduction in Ian H. Levy, *The Ten Thousand Leaves* (Princeton, 1981) and my "The Religio-Aesthetic Complex in *Manyōshū* Poetry with Special Emphasis on Hitomaro's *Aki no no* Sequence," *History of Religions* 23, 1 (August 1983).

³⁰ Hamachiyo, p. 263.

soku, but is like the mind-field of the Buddha.”³¹

In order to more clearly understand how renga compositions could serve as a Buddhist meditative practice for the participants, as well as a demonstration of Buddhist concepts like *mujō* and *hikarakuyō* for the audience, it is necessary to return to the poetic form itself. By paying careful attention to the renga form itself and to scattered comments in various *renga ron* it is possible to reconstruct what happened (ideally) in a ritual renga performance. That is, by reading renga properly and by turning one's attention to the act of reading itself rather than the meaning (the semantic content) of the words themselves, a phenomenological reconstruction of the ritual use of renga is possible. Attention must be diverted to what happens in the act of reading/listening, to what a renga sequence *does* rather than what it *says*. Having done this, the historian of religions will be better able to appreciate those ritual uses of renga still found in Japan today.

Here the historian of religions can profit by being aware of and using techniques developed recently in literary criticism. I am referring to studies which concentrate not on the relationship of an author to his/her text, but more importantly on “the reader in the text” or the audience, on questions not so much of what a text says, but what it does.³² Let me pause a bit to explain. The literary critic Stanley Fish writes that he believes that:

. . . reading is an activity, and that meaning, insofar as it can be specified, is coextensive with that activity, and not, as some would hold, its product. For the questions “what is this work about?” and “what does it say?”, I tend to substitute the question “what is happening?” and to answer it by tracing out the shape of the read-

³¹ Cited Hirota, p. 43, who notes that “Shinkei has in mind here *shinku*-close linkage—in which the connection between two renga links turns upon diction or some conscious process of reasoning. This contrasts with *soku*-intuited, remote linkage . . . *shinku* is like the verbal teaching, which guides through form and concepts, while *soku* is like meditation in which the highest truth, transcending all conceivability, is realized.” Cf. “Sasamegoto”, NKBT 66: 187–88.

³² Two useful collections of essays on this approach, with extensive bibliographies, are Susan R. Suleiman and Inge Crosman, eds., *The Reader in the Text: Essays on Audience and Interpretation* (Princeton, 1980) and Jane P. Tompkin, ed., *Reader-Response Criticism: From Formalism to Post-Structuralism* (Baltimore: John Hopkins, 1980). See also Stanley Fish, *Is There a Text in This Class?* (Cambridge: Harvard, 1980).

ing experience, that is by focusing on the mind in the act of making sense, rather than on the sense it finally (and often reductively) makes.³³

If one substitutes “listening” for “reading” in this passage, (assuming ritual renga to have been a performing art), then Fish’s approach seems to be quite promising if applied to renga for, as I have said, the Buddhist meaning of renga was found in the act of composition and not in the semantic content or meaning of the words and the links. When Fish counsels trying to find out what is happening in the act of reading/listening “by focusing on the mind in the act of making sense, rather than on the sense it finally (and often reductively) makes,” he has, without knowing it, offered a necessary corrective to the approach to reading renga found in most studies.

It must be noted that *the primary intent of Buddhist renga is not to create meaning, but to abolish it*. That is, among other things renga sets out to undermine the reader/listener’s confidence in language and its ability to carry any permanent, fixed semantic content or meaning. While the words (*kotoba*) of any one link are shared (that is, the words or syllables themselves do not change) in the poems formed by the relationship to the immediately preceding and the immediately following links, the *meaning* of those words can—and often does—change radically. Meaning in renga is primarily a function of context; it has no permanent (and certainly no ontological) status whatsoever. It exists in any given linked verse of thirty-one syllables to be sure, but the effect of renga is to immediately dissolve that meaning. There is, to repeat, no continuous presence of a relating voice. Rather, while a renga poet who offers a link may have some idea of what he/she means (that is, while there may be some element of authorial intention), the following poet is in no way constrained to accept this as determinative (i.e., as giving *the* meaning). In fact, precisely the opposite is the case: the next poet is free—or more correctly, perhaps, compelled—to reinterpret the words or syllables, to give them perhaps new semantic content by altering the context with his own link. And even then the ambiguity of the language (so highly regarded and cultivated in renga and in Japanese poetry in general) makes several variant “readings” possible.

This aspect of renga has led Ogata Tsutomu to argue, quite rightly I

³³ *Self-Consuming Artifacts: The Experience of Seventeenth-Century Literature* (Berkeley: University of California, 1972): xi–xii.

think, that in renga each participating poet *and* every member of the audience is simultaneously a “reader”/author of the sequence. Rather than a continuous relating voice, then, there is a multiplicity (potentially infinite) of consciousnesses informing the sequence. Moreover, this process of breaking down the authorial or narrative voice has the effect of dissolving the poets’ individual identities and egos for the individual links are subsumed to the sequence as a whole—a sequence without an author. Furthermore, in renga the ideal is that no individual link should stand out from all the rest because, apart from various aesthetic considerations, offering such a link would be showing off, an expression of ego, suggesting that the poet had not yet cut his ties to the world, was still enamoured of acclaim, etc. This is what Shinkei meant when he said, “The supreme renga is like a drink of plain boiled water. It has no particular flavor, but one never wearies of it, no matter when one tastes it.”³⁴

Renga has long been characterized as merely a pleasurable pastime, but unless the religious ritual significance of renga is taken into consideration, one cannot appreciate statements like the following from Nijō Yoshimoto:

If poets do not enjoy themselves, (the sequence), no matter how correct, will be little more than a dull piece. As such (renga) is like *dengaku* or *sarugaku*. Because renga, too, has interest only during that immediate session (*ichiza*), the only essential thing is to enjoy the place.³⁵

Or this from Bashō:

Haikai exists only while it is on the *bundai* (a desk used for a haikai session). Once it is taken off from it, it should be regarded as a mere scrap of paper!³⁶

That there are few manuscripts of *jige* renga extant, then, should not be surprising, for as a ritual form renga was, to borrow Stanley Fish’s phrase, “a self-consuming artifact.” Once a sequence had been performed, ideally it should have been destroyed or alternatively offered to a temple or shrine.

³⁴ Quoted in Donald Keene, *Some Japanese Portraits* (Kodansha, 1978): 29.

³⁵ Cited Okuda, *Rengashi*, p. 44.

³⁶ From Kyoroku’s *Hentsuki* in *Shōmon hairon haibunshū*, annotated by Ōiso Yoshio and Ōuchi Hatsuo in *Koten haibungaku taikēi*, Vol. 10 (Shueisha, 1970): 184.

As a self-consuming artifact, moreover, renga participates in the literary genre of what Fish calls "dialectical presentation."

A dialectical presentation . . . is disturbing, for it requires of its readers (in renga the audience as listeners) a searching and rigorous scrutiny of everything they believe in and live by. It is didactic in a special sense; it does not preach the truth, but asks that its readers (/listeners) discover the truth for themselves, and this discovery is often made at the expense not only of a reader's opinions and values, but of his self-esteem . . . a dialectical presentation succeeds at its own expense; for by conveying those who experience it to a point where they are beyond the aid that discursive or rational forms can offer, it becomes the vehicle of its own abandonment.³⁷

Anyone who is familiar with renga might well wonder whether this passage had not been written with it in mind. Renga sought to bring into question the distinction of reality and illusion³⁸ by raising a host of epistemological questions which the poets and audience not only faced, but experienced as the sequence unfolded.

The creation and dissolution of literary universes as a renga sequence unfolded, the passing of time and seasons, the panorama of the constant flux in the world, etc., all served this end. One must never forget Shinkai's words cited earlier, "At the wellsprings of form and content in (renga) lie the awareness of transience of things. . . . Thus the old poets made the expression of their inner thoughts and their vision of impermanence the center of their art."

It is not generally realized that renga also served special ritual functions for samurai or warriors and that it was sometimes performed on battlefields as well. Keene has alluded to this in recounting the fascinating tale of a renga sequence held under Akechi Mitsuhide's auspices in 1582.

In 1582 (Mitsuhide) assassinated his master Nobunaga at the Honnōji in Kyoto. A few days earlier he has joined in a one-

³⁷ Fish, pp. 1-2, 3.

³⁸ See the excellent introductory essays on the subject of this blurred distinction earlier in the Japanese religious tradition by Joseph M. Kitagawa, "Reality and Illusion: Some Characteristics of the Early Japanese 'World of Meaning,'" *Journal of the Oriental Society of Australia* 11 (1976): 3-18; and "'A Past of Things Present': Notes on Major Motifs of Early Japanese Religions," *History of Religions* 20, Nos. 1-2 (August-November 1980): 27-42.

hundred-link renga sequence with Jōha, Shōshitsu, and other poets, ostensibly by way of prayer for victory in an attack over the Mōri family. Renga was attributed with the power to move the god to grant victory in warfare and similar benefits, and Mitsuhide no doubt desired such assistance in the assassination he was contemplating. He opened the session with the lines:

toki wa ima	Now is the time
ame ga shita shiru	To rule all under heaven—
satsuki kana	It's the fifth month!

The point of the verse was the pun on *toki*, meaning “time,” but also Toki, the clan name of Mitsuhide’s family; one meaning of the words was, therefore, “The Toki are about to take control of the country.”³⁹

The close relationship between poetry and way can also be seen in Sōgi’s statement that

... Sumiyoshi is the special patron of the arts of literature and war, which are like the two wheels of a carriage, and I think that any who would govern the Empire should meditate on the heart of this god and seek inspiration in him.⁴⁰

One practiced poetry, then, not only as a literary pastime but as statecraft and a part of military strategy as well. In the *Taionki*, the renga poet Matsunaga Teitoku (1571–1653) attributes the following saying to Miyoshi Nagayoshi: “Those who call waka and renga dull cannot handle the *azusa* bow either.”⁴¹ Okuda takes this as an indication that in the Sengoku period all warriors in Japan were adept at renga to some degree or other.

Renga was, it seems, used by the samurai as a kind of religious meditative practice to aid in the disciplining of both mind and body. In the seventh *maki* of the *Taiheiki* there is a passage which can only be properly understood by bearing this in mind. It tells of the famous siege of the Chihaya Castle where the troops of Kusunoki Masashige, protecting the

³⁹ Donald Keene, “Jōha, A Sixteenth Century Poet of Linked Verse” in *Warlords, Artists and Commoners*, ed. George Elison and Bardwell Smith (Honolulu: University of Hawaii, 1981): 126.

⁴⁰ Eileen Katō, “Pilgrimage to Dazaifu: Sōgi’s Tsukushi no Michi no Ki,” *Monumenta Nipponica* 34, 3 (Autumn 1979): 346.

⁴¹ Cf. NKBT 95 (Iwanami, 1974): 71–93.

emperor Go-Daigo, were vastly outnumbered, but put up a valiant defense. During a lull in the battle *hana no moto* renga masters were called in and a ten-thousand link sequence was performed. Are we to believe, as so many commentators would have it, that the warriors merely wanted to pass the time? Was there not a deeper sense in which they sought to *kill time*, to overcome time by overcoming the distinction between life and death? Okuda suggests, rightly so I think, that among other things renga was used to demonstrate that life and death are interchangeable. The creation and dissolution of worlds and meaning as the renga sequence unfolded, the essence of *hikarakuyō*, would have served to soften the despair and fear of the troops, many of whom faced certain death in the upcoming battle.

Both here in this passage from the *Taiheiki* and in portraits of renga poets/nembutsu priests among the dead and dying on battlefields one can perhaps glimpse elements of continuity and change in the Japanese religious tradition. Poetry still served a ritual function of pacification of the spirits of the dead (and of those who must die), but this was no longer a ritual recalling of the spirits of the dead, but the Buddhist dissolution of time, of history, of life and death in the cosmic whirl of petals and falling leaves.