

Boundary Work and Religious Authority among Ordained Buddhist Women in Contemporary Japan

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This paper explores how ordained Buddhist women define and implement their clerical role within the context of a secularized society, and the indeterminacy of the clerical lifestyle in contemporary Japan. Ordained women may live a monastic life or head a temple, or they may also live “secular” lives, married or not. How do they claim religious authority and legitimize their agency under these conditions? I argue here that boundary work, or the creation, contesting, bridging, and dissolving of boundaries, is an important means to this end. On the one hand, boundaries such as those of gender are often experienced as having strongly constraining and even discriminating effects. On the other hand, actively drawing or bridging boundaries from male clerics, other ordained women, or lay Buddhists is a means of creating solidarity, elevating women’s contribution to the clerical role, and legitimizing various actions and appearances as conforming to that role.

Keywords: female priest, nun, women’s agency, Japanese clericism, contemporary Buddhism, boundary work

Introduction

In contemporary Japanese Buddhism, the religious authority of clerics is contested in various ways.¹ First, they are confronted with a highly secularized society.² In modern Japan, urbanization and individualization, declining birthrates and an aging society, as well as a negative image of Buddhism, have contributed to the dissolution of the traditional ties between households and family temples (*dannadera* 檀那寺, *bodaiji* 菩提寺). As a result, the

1 I draw on Bruce Lincoln’s concept of authority as an “aspect of discourse” (Lincoln 1994, p. 2). Irrespective of whether someone is “‘in authority’ (e.g., political leaders, parents, military commanders)” or “‘an authority’ (e.g., technical experts, scholars, medical specialists),” authority is “the effect of a posited, perceived, or institutionally ascribed asymmetry between speaker and audience that permits certain speakers to command not just the attention but the confidence, respect, and trust of their audience, or—an important proviso—to make audiences act *as if* this were so” (Lincoln 1994, pp. 3–4). Religious authority, therefore, refers to communicative interaction in which one person’s statements are regarded as truthful, based on an acknowledgement of his or her religious expertise.

2 The particular characteristics of “secularization” in Japan and the applicability of this term to the modernization of Japan have been discussed in special issues of the *Journal of Religion in Japan* (January 2012) and *Japan Review* (2017). See Rots and Teeuwen 2017.

demand for Buddhist rituals and interest in Buddhist practice in general are decreasing, and many Buddhist temples have lost the income from their parishioners.³

Second, the practice of clerical marriage and the system of intrafamilial temple inheritance have led to the laicization of clerical status and a diversification of lifestyles. In particular, for someone not born into a priest's family, ordination in a Buddhist school does not necessarily lead to a clerical position in a temple. These conditions have a strong impact on ordained men and women's self-understanding and agency. In this paper, I focus on ordained women and the diverse ways in which they embody their clerical role based on these particular conditions.

As a consequence of these developments, ordained women's social contexts are widely different, thus providing diverse structural conditions that simultaneously restrict and enable their clerical agency. For example, a nun living in a convent is able to follow the monastic rules of her school, whereas this is impossible for an ordained temple wife. Within this framework of diverse life circumstances, boundary work is a primary tool for legitimizing individual agency and claims on religious authority, in accordance with each woman's immediate social context and the repertoire of skills, attitudes, meanings, and patterns of behavior that are accessible to her within the given context. Closely related to boundary work as a means of agency is the felt impact of other social agents' boundary work with regard to gender, the distinction between clerical and lay status or ways of living, and differentiations among ordained women. Negotiations of exclusion and inclusion are the focus of this paper, which explores how ordained women perceive the effects of these boundaries, and how they actively refer to them in their ideas about the clerical role.

Terms

In this paper I use the term "ordained woman" as an equivalent to *josei kyōshi* 女性教師, an umbrella term for all women who have acquired the "status of a religious instructor" (*kyōshi shikaku* 教師資格). This status designates those who have accomplished the full ordination. That is, not only have they received the initial ordination (*tokudo* 得度) which is required to be registered as a cleric. They have also successfully accomplished practical ritual and ascetic training (*shugyō* 修行) in the respective training centers of each Buddhist school (see Schrimpf 2014, 82; 2015, 191–195). Only then do they possess the right to perform rituals, head a temple, and teach disciples. The term "ordained woman" therefore comprises all celibate nuns (*nisō* 尼僧), female priests (*josei kyōshi*, *josei sōryo* 女性僧侶) (women who head a temple, live in a convent, or are employed as a cleric in a temple), ordained temple wives, and ordained women living "secular" lives who have acquired the status of *kyōshi*. Although these terms are widely used, the categorizations they imply are problematic. For one thing, these roles often overlap because they partly rest on the distinction between celibate and non-celibate ways of living, and partly on organizational positions within Buddhist institutions: a female priest can also be a nun or a temple wife. Furthermore, these categories do not necessarily coincide with social groupings, nor do they reflect the diversity and flexibility of distinguishing criteria that are relevant for the women I talked to. For example, for nuns, the distinction between an ordained woman with a family

3 Reader 2012, pp. 16–20; Covell 2005, pp. 32–34; Nelson 2012.

and one who lives a world-renouncing life may be essential, whereas those who are not affiliated with a temple tend to emphasize the difference between themselves and those who run temples, irrespective of marital status. On this emic level, boundaries between Buddhist women are constantly being created, blurred, and even dissolved, as they are ascribed with different values and hierarchies. This is one reason why boundary work is a useful tool that allows a glimpse into the individual taxonomies that are effective among ordained women.

Ordained women who live outside temple Buddhism or occupy inferior positions in temple life have largely been ignored in research. Although there are as many life stories as there are ordained women, they often share similar constraints, namely limited or no access to ritual practice, and limited visibility as clerics. If they do not work in or run a temple and do not wear the garb of a Buddhist cleric, they cannot partake in the religious authority of either a religious site or religious dress, nor can they perform the “work” of a cleric. This paper considers both ordained women who hold positions within temple Buddhism and those whose lives take place primarily outside the system of temple Buddhism.

Structure and Data

After briefly introducing my data, I will proceed to illustrate some of the conditions mentioned above, namely the gendered structures of Japanese clericism, which are especially visible in attitudes concerning the custom of clerical marriage, and the various ways in which the clerical role is embodied. Next, I introduce the concept of boundary work before turning to examples of how the gender boundary and the differences between clerical and lay ways of living impact on ordained women’s agency and self-conceptualizations. My aim is to outline specific forms of boundary work and to exemplify them using data acquired through interviews with six ordained women of various Buddhist schools, plus participant observation, and through publications by ordained women. The data are backed up by fieldwork and about thirty interviews that I conducted between 2013 and 2018 with ordained women from various Buddhist schools who occupy a variety of positions.⁴ The six women mirror this diversity: two are head priests in Sōtōshū 曹洞宗, one in Tendaishū 天台宗 and Nichirenshū 日蓮宗 respectively, another is a scholar and employed in a Nichiren Buddhist temple, and the sixth is a Shingon 真言 Buddhist not officially affiliated with a temple at all. Most of them are in their forties or fifties, with the exception of Sōtōshū headpriest Aoyama Shundō 青山俊董, who is in her late eighties. I focus on these women because their boundary work is exemplary of my data: that is, their opinions can also be found in my interviews with others.

Clerical Marriage and the Diversity of Lifestyles

As mentioned above, the religious role of a Buddhist cleric, male and female, is fulfilled in various ways; it is not strictly determined by the religious precepts that are conferred in the ordination ceremony (*tokudo*). Since 1872, Buddhist clerics have legally been allowed

⁴ My sincerest thanks to all the ordained and non-ordained Buddhist women who openly shared their thoughts and experiences with me and allowed me a glimpse into their lives. I am deeply grateful for each encounter and everything I learned about what it means to be a female cleric in contemporary Japan. All the women who agreed to my using their names in print or have published under their own names themselves are mentioned using their full names.

to marry, eat meat, and dress like laypeople.⁵ This is in direct opposition to the official Buddhist precepts, which in most Buddhist schools prohibited (and still prohibit) sexual intercourse and required the wearing of clerical garb. The situation is different in Jōdo Shinshū 浄土真宗, where clerical marriage has been the custom since the time of its founder Shinran 親鸞 (1173–1263).

Nowadays, the majority of male Buddhist priests are married, and the practice of intra-familial temple inheritance (mostly by sons) is widespread.⁶ This inherent contradiction in acquiring the status of a “world renouncer” (*shukkesha* 出家者) upon ordination while having to provide a son or daughter as a temple successor has been labeled as “fictitious celibacy” (*kyogi no shukke shugi* 虚偽の出家主義) or “fake world-renouncerism.”⁷ It raises problems for both the priest and his wife.⁸ Due to the legally indeterminate status of a temple priest’s wife (*jizoku* 寺族, *jitei fujin* 寺庭婦人, *bōmori* 坊守) in most Buddhist schools, the privileges and duties of her position are not officially acknowledged, and often her residence rights are dependent on her husband’s status.⁹ This means that when a husband dies, his wife and children are not allowed to remain on the temple grounds if they are unable to assume his priestly duties. Avoiding this risk is one incentive for many temple priests’ wives to become ordained themselves.¹⁰ In Zen Buddhist Sōtōshū, temple wives used to obtain a “temple wife ordination” (*jizoku tokudo* 寺族得度).¹¹ Seno Misa has described this status as “quasi-nun” (*minashi niso* 見做し尼僧) to emphasize that this ordination did not include clerical rights such as heading a temple, but it allowed the ordained to “fill in” by performing minor rituals if required.¹² Since 2015 temple wives are registered in the *jizoku* register (*jizokubo* 寺族簿) and receive a Buddhist name (*anmyō* 安名).¹³ Furthermore, being registered as a *jizoku* excludes one from registration in the clerical register.

5 These rights were granted in two decrees issued in May 1872 and January 1873 by the Grand Council of State, the Dajōkan 太政官, in an attempt to eliminate clerical privileges. They aimed at the laicization of the clerical status, and were complemented by the requirements to adopt surnames and register in the new government household registration system. See Jaffe 2001, pp. 70–78.

6 Jaffe 2001, pp. 1–2.

7 See respectively Kawahashi 2012, p. 72, and Covell 2005, p. 118.

8 Kawahashi 2012, pp. 71–74; Covell 2005, pp. 109–139. See also Kawahashi’s recent discussion of this problem in Sōtōshū, in Kawahashi 2017.

9 Note that, although the term *jizoku* originally refers to all people living within a temple precinct, including those who are not ordained, it is generally used in Sōtōshū to designate the wife of a temple priest. See Kawahashi 2017, p. 58.

10 See Ōshima 2016 for the example of a Jōdoshū 浄土宗 temple wife who was ordained when her husband and father-in-law fell seriously ill. In 2012, Kōyasan Shingonshū 高野山真言宗 reduced the clerical training period for women from one year to six months in order to enable temple wives to acquire clerical status. The spokesperson of the administrative headquarters stated that the purpose was to allow the widowed temple wife to keep the temple running until a successor is found. The Women’s Association (Fujinkai 婦人会) of the Buddhist school welcomed this change. See Jimon Kōryū 2012a.

11 This kind of ordination was introduced in 1944 in order to enable temple wives to run the temple should their husbands die in the war. Their role as temple priests was considered temporary, that is, either until their sons could take over or until a new head priest was appointed. See Seno 2019, pp. 46–49.

12 Seno 2019, p. 49. Since 1984, the “Regulations for *jizoku*” (*Jizoku kitei* 寺族規定) clearly state that the term designates “those who live in the temple precincts and are not clerics.” Seno 2019, p. 54.

13 Seno 2019, pp. 61–62. The definition of *jizoku* in Sōtōshū as of 2015 reads, “*Jizoku* are those who believe in the doctrines of our school, who live in a temple and are registered in the *jizoku* register.” Seno 2016, p. 49. Their tasks are defined in the “Regulations for *jizoku*”: “*Jizoku* believe in the doctrines of our school, they cooperate with the head priest, and together they must work for the prosperity of the temple, the education of the head priest’s successor, and the teaching of parishioners and believers.” Seno 2016, p. 51.

Although both male and female temple priests are legally allowed to marry, female priests are often expected to remain unmarried and to take on the appearance of a traditional Buddhist nun, with a shaved head and Buddhist clothes.¹⁴

The fact that most male priests in world-renouncing Buddhist schools give up their bachelor status and marry, while female priests are expected to remain single and unmarried, is often due not only to the fact that they commit proudly to world renunciation, but also due to a double standard in relation to gender. Male priests are expected to marry and entrust various tasks to their wives in order to spread the teachings. However, if a female priest has a husband and children, isn't the general tendency to think that she will favor housework and childraising over the priestly functions?¹⁵

The laicization of the clerical status through marriage has led inevitably to a diversification of the living environments of ordained men and women. Whereas temple priests are usually recognized as endowed with ritual authority, the situation is different for those who are not head priests (*jūshoku* 住職) or assistant priests (*yakusō* 役僧). The religious authority deriving from clerical status is contested by the "secular" lives and appearances of those who do not live in a temple and are married to laymen or laywomen, raise children, and/or are employed outside Buddhist institutions. For men and women who are not the sons and daughters of temple priests, it is especially difficult to attain the position of a priest within a temple. Possible alternatives are adoption into a temple, establishing one's own temple, taking over particular tasks within one's Buddhist school (such as overseas missions), employment in the administrative institutions of one's Buddhist school, or offering ritual services—for example, at funerals—without belonging to a temple.¹⁶

These conditions affect men and women differently. Clearly, male and female head priests have to deal with similar issues such as maintenance of the temple, interactions with parishioners and other believers, and relationships with other temples. Yet parishioners and believers have different expectations of ordained men and women, for example, with regard to combining the priesthood with parenthood. Since mothers typically assume the primary responsibility for childcare, it is easier for men to combine the role of a head priest with parenthood.

Many of the women I interviewed consider themselves neither feminists nor the victims of a patriarchal system, yet they acknowledge that gender plays a decisive role in their clerical agency. Gendered education and perceptions of social roles, the expectations they encounter as women, as mothers or wives, the experience of having a different standing from that of their ordained male counterparts—these and other gendered experiences influence how they perceive themselves both as women and as clerics, and how they combine these two roles. Various studies of temple wives, female monastics, and female priests have provided valuable insights into the everyday lives, social contexts, discourses,

¹⁴ Jaffe 2001, pp. 1–2, and Niwa 2019, pp. 3–4.

¹⁵ Kawahashi 2012, p. 118. All quotations from Japanese references are my translations.

¹⁶ Mokuseisha 2005, pp. 166–175. This manual for aspiring monks and nuns was written by representatives of the administrative headquarters of Tendai, Shingon, and Nichiren schools: 真言宗豊山派, Jōdoshū, Sōtōshū, and Nichirenshū, see p. 174.

and experiences of Buddhist women in different positions.¹⁷ Most recently, Niwa Nobuko 丹羽宣子 has discussed gender and clerical self-images and activities in her study of Nichiren Buddhist female priests. She analyses how female priests in the “man’s world” (*otoko shakai* 男社会) of Japanese Buddhist clericism redefine and embody their clerical role in ways that reconcile notions of priestliness and femaleness.¹⁸

Individual Interpretations of the Clerical Role

It is impossible then to talk about ordained women’s agency without considering the diversity of structural conditions that frame a woman’s agency. The way in which an ordained woman lives her clerical role is strongly influenced by individual knowledge, skills, and behavior patterns rather than by objectified role-specific norms of acting. Often, non-ritual expertise, such as artistic, scholarly, or parenting skills, are seen as a way for the cleric to enact her religious role.

The women I interviewed were often ambivalent about the conditions that determined the frame of their clerical agency. As Anthony Giddens has pointed out, social and physical structures not only provide a preexisting and restrictive frame, they are simultaneously the conditions that enable action. Hence, they can be described in a negative sense as material and structural constraints, or in a positive sense as “tool kits,” that is, habits, skills, meanings, or linguistic repertoires that are available to actors in their respective social contexts.¹⁹ For example, not being the head priest of a temple or not participating regularly in a temple’s religious life may be experienced as a lack and a disadvantage; these same conditions are also conceived as allowing a certain freedom in deciding how to live, what to do, and how to look. For Ann Swidler, individual and collective actors develop strategies of action by selecting from cultural repertoires and interpreting their actions in specific ways: “[T]o construct such a strategy means selecting certain cultural elements (both such tacit culture such as attitudes and styles, and, sometimes, such explicit cultural materials as rituals and beliefs) and investing them with particular meanings in concrete life circumstances.”²⁰

These processes of selecting and interpreting affect the kinds of action ordained women perceive as conforming to their religious role. The women I spoke with often explained their role or function (*yakume* 役目) as clerics in terms of various actions invested with religious meaning, including those that reflect personal skills and are compatible with other social roles. For example, Gotō Asuka 悟東あすか is a Shingon Buddhist ordained woman and manga artist in her late fifties or sixties, married and with an adult daughter. She is not a resident priest or employed in a temple, but occasionally participates in funerary rites, *goma* rituals, and other Buddhist services.²¹ To her, the general role of a cleric is to help people realize and cultivate their close connection to Buddhas, Bodhisattvas, and gods. In addition, she describes her individual calling as making use of her skills as an illustrator

17 See Heidegger 2006 and 2015; Starling 2013a, 2013b and 2019; Kawahashi 2003 and 2017; Seno 2012 and 2019 on temple wives; Arai 1999; Seno 2016 on nuns; Kuroki 2011; Rowe 2017 and 2019; and Niwa 2019 on female priests.

18 Niwa 2019.

19 Giddens 1984, pp. 174–179. See also Swidler 1986, p. 283.

20 Swidler 1986, p. 281.

21 *Goma* rituals are those in which wooden sticks inscribed with the donor’s wishes are burnt.



Figure 1. Daihōin (Nichirenshū), Tatebayashi.

to fulfill this purpose. She has published several illustrated books, as well as cards, in which she introduces Buddhas, Bodhisattvas, and gods in terms of the many benevolent ways they are interwoven into everyone's life.²² Since she is a mother and wife, she also advises other wives on family-related problems as part of her agency as an ordained woman.

Kusano Myōkei 草野妙敬 is the daughter of a temple priest and lived as a mother and wife until some years ago she was ordained and took over Daihōin, a small Nichiren temple without a parish in Tatebayashi, Gunma Prefecture. She is in her forties, divorced, and has two adult children. In her view, a cleric's role cannot be reduced to performing rituals. Rather, all clerics should find their individual ways of realizing the Buddha's teachings within their lives.

K: I think my role is to first of all do what only I can do. It's easy to tell people what is written in the scriptures, but if a cleric's task were only to convey the teachings, well, in a sense it would be reduced to mere work. Personally, I think a cleric's role, a cleric's way of living (*arikata*), should be like an example [of a Buddhist life]; it is great if we become role models.

M: Do you think so?

K: Otherwise, I think it's a lie.

[...]

M: So you think a cleric's role is not only to conduct ceremonies, rites, and funerals, but more in their everyday actions and approaches?

K: Yes. Many clerics think it's enough to conduct memorial rites, and many will come to perform a funeral when they are called. But being aware of what only you can do,

²² Gotō 2011, 2017, 2018.



Figure 2. Main hall of Daihōin.

realizing it in your way of living and conveying what you consider important, that's what I call a Sangha.²³

Kusano Myōkei has created a set of “Lotus Cards” that interweave short quotes from the *Lotus Sutra* with an interpretation of the quotes' meaning for everyday life.²⁴ As she explained to me, she was directed by Nichiren 日蓮 (1222–1282) to follow this idea when she “channeled” him to find out how to maintain her temple.²⁵ As these cards are in line with her interest in the so-called “spirit world” (*seishin sekai* 精神世界), including channeling, they are her way of spreading the Buddhist teachings as expounded in the *Lotus Sutra*.

Satō 佐藤 M., also an ordained Nichiren Buddhist woman, is unmarried, in her forties, works in a temple in Tokyo, and conducts postdoctoral scholarly research on Nichiren Buddhist doctrines and history. She sees the cleric's role as listening and responding to anything a person brings up without leading the conversation. As a passionate scholar, however, she defines her individual task as researching Nichiren's writings and the history of Nichiren Buddhism.²⁶

A different understanding of the role of the cleric is expressed by Aoyama Shundō 青山俊童, head of the Sōtō Zen Buddhist convent, Aichi Senmon Nisōdō 愛知専門尼僧堂 in Nagoya. Now in her eighties, Aoyama is one of the best-known nuns in Japan besides Setouchi Jakuchō 瀬戸内寂聴 (1922–2021). She considers the role of nuns to involve transmitting the world-renouncing monastic life demanded by the Sōtō Zen tradition:

The contemporary Buddhist world in Japan has declined, but we cannot give up the original teaching of Shakyamuni. We must turn to America and Europe and transmit the correct Buddhist law to those who seek it there, as well as here in Japan. I wonder

23 Interview, November 2018. All interviews referenced in this article were conducted in Japanese and translated into English by the author.

24 Kusano 2018.

25 “Channeling” is a term in New Age religiosity that refers to practices that allegedly establish contact between a medium, the “channel,” and a transcendent world, from which the medium is said to receive messages. See von Stuckrad 2006.

26 Interview, November 2013.

who can do this if not nuns who do not have families and are seriously engaged in Buddhism? This is why, in these times, in the declining age of present-day Japanese Buddhism, we will not surrender. I think it is we nuns who can take the responsibility for conveying the original form [of Buddhism] to Europe and America, and to the next generation.²⁷

Three of these four women define the clerical role without referring to ritual tasks. Only for Aoyama does it revolve around a monastic way of living. The others emphasize the need to activate their personal skills, be they academic, artistic, or “spiritual,” in order to spread Buddhist knowledge and support others. Their statements reflect how individual social contexts, structural constraints, such as the lack of regular access to ritual practice or to a temple parish, and individual abilities influence conceptualizations of the clerical role.

Boundary Work

Boundary work, that is, the creation, maintenance, contesting, bridging, and dissolving of boundaries, is an important tool in the construction of individual and collective identity, as well as of hierarchical social relationships. Boundaries create in-groups and out-groups; they define the social positions of others, as well as one’s own position in relation to others.²⁸ They regulate access to “resources (material and nonmaterial) and social opportunities,” and create a sense of belonging to an in-group. Lamont and Molnár define “social boundaries” in contrast to “symbolic boundaries” as “objectified forms of social differences.”²⁹ For example, the distinction between a cleric and a lay Buddhist constitutes a social boundary because the cleric’s status provides rights (such as conducting rituals) that a lay Buddhist does not have. The complementary term “symbolic boundaries” denotes “conceptual distinctions made by social actors to categorize objects, people, practices, and even time and space.”³⁰ The main difference between symbolic and social boundaries is that the former “exist at the intersubjective level whereas the latter manifest themselves as groupings of individuals.”³¹

The distinction between clerics and lay Buddhists is a symbolic boundary because of the different qualities ascribed to each, such as the alleged spiritual superiority of clerics, or their erudition with regard to Buddhist scriptures.³² Being a cleric gives one access to resources such as ritual expertise, offering rituals, receiving remuneration for services rendered, and embodying a specific social status. Ordained people who are not affiliated with a temple belong to the same social group of clerics but have only limited or no access to these resources, nor do they partake in the religious authority that derives from these resources. Instead, they must emphasize the relevance of other resources that *are* accessible to them. For example, personal closeness to laypeople enables the cleric to reach out beyond a temple, and spread Buddhist knowledge at the grassroots level.

27 Interview, February 2014.

28 Lamont 2001; Lamont and Molnár 2002.

29 Lamont and Molnár 2002, p. 168.

30 Lamont and Molnár 2002, p. 168.

31 Lamont and Molnár 2002, p. 169.

32 A different ascription is the accusation that priests are greedy, and exploit their clerical role in funerals financially.

For ordained Buddhist women, it is difficult to belong to an in-group as defined by the role of a cleric. Although they have the status of religious instructor within their respective schools, there is no unified social grouping called “female priests” or “ordained women” with shared patterns of behavior and a sense of belonging either within or beyond their Buddhist school. To be sure, many Buddhist schools have associations of nuns, for example the Sōtōshū Nisōdan 曹洞宗尼僧団 or the Nichirenshū Nisō Hōdan 日蓮宗尼僧法団.³³ But they address only one category of ordained woman, and consequently reinforce feelings of exclusion among others.

Various groups of ordained women, however, are created discursively in the women’s narrations: “nuns” (*nisō*), a term which mostly refers to those who are celibate and maintain religious precepts; “temple daughters” (*o-tera no musume* お寺の娘), or those from a “temple background” (*o-tera shushin* お寺出身), and those “from a lay background” (*zaike shushin* 在家出身). Depending on a woman’s position, these terms may be used in either an appreciative or a critical sense. For example, “nuns” may be viewed either as clerical role models, or as an elitist and exclusive group of ordained women.

Shifting boundary work creates temporary in-groups and out-groups by means of which the interviewee excludes herself from alleged in-groups (for example, by emphasizing that she has a marginal position in the clerical organisation), includes herself in other, sometimes newly created in-groups (of, for example, Buddhist women rather than Buddhist clerics), or emphasizes the singularity of her actions. Each of the interviews I conducted revealed a particular structuring of the field in which boundaries are constructed, made permeable, or dissolved. These boundaries not only delineate different types of ordained women, they also distinguish clerics from lay Buddhists, men from women, and Japanese Buddhism from Buddhism in other Asian countries.

Social boundaries in contemporary Japanese Buddhism are created by ordination, clerical rank, and gender. However, they are also subject to individual and collective symbolic boundary work, which may support or undermine inherent hierarchies, reframe boundaries, give them new meanings, and even dissolve them. The following sections will present examples of how this kind of symbolic boundary work is performed with regard to distinctions between genders, and those between clerics and the laity.

The Restrictive Frame of Gender

In contemporary Japanese Buddhism, gender is a social and symbolic boundary experienced by many ordained women as a mechanism of exclusion and marginalization. As mentioned above, ordained women are a minority among the Buddhist clergy. According to the annual statistics of the Agency for Cultural Affairs in the Ministry for Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (Monbukagakushō, MEXT), in 2019 the ratios of fully ordained men and women (*kyōshi*) were 3,642 males to 322 female clerics (8.8 percent) in Tendai-shū, 5,278 to 806 (15.3 percent) in Kōyasan Shingonshū, 3,324 to 195 (5.9 percent) in Shingonshū Chisan-ha 真言宗智山派, 2,851 to 332 (11.6 percent) in Shingonshū Buzan-ha, 9,665 to 955 (9.9 percent) in Jōdoshū, 14,388 to 2,757 (19.2 percent) in Shinshū Ōtani-ha

33 The Sōtōshū Nisōdan was founded in 1944 as Sōtōshū Nisō Gokokudan 曹洞宗尼僧護国団 and renamed in 1945, Seno 2018, pp. 62–63. The Nichiren Buddhist Nisō Hōdan was founded in 1951; it was most influential between the 1950s and the 1980s, see Majima 2006.

真宗大谷派, 16,423 to 2,782 (16.9 percent) in Jōdo Shinshū Honganji-ha 浄土真宗本願寺派, 3,207 to 88 (2.7 percent) in Rinzaishū Myōshinji 臨濟宗妙心寺, 15,114 to 449 (2.9 percent) in Sōtōshū, and 6,996 to 877 (12.5 percent) in Nichirenshū.³⁴ In Zen Buddhist schools the percentage of ordained women is the lowest, while the two Jōdo Shinshū schools rank at the top. One reason for this is that Zen Buddhist clerical training takes several years during which trainees live in a temple, whereas in the Ōtani and Honganji sects of Jōdo Shinshū the doctrinal and practical aspect of the training can be done in a condensed form before ordination.³⁵ Therefore, it is easier to integrate the latter's clerical training into family and/or work life.

A dominant form of unequal gender-related treatment is the exclusion of women from ritual practice, in particular with regard to funerary rites, the main ritual domain of contemporary temple Buddhism. Some parishioners do not want women to perform the rites for fear they might be ineffective.³⁶ One explanation for this was offered by Ms. O., a Tendai Buddhist priest in her forties who runs a small temple she founded herself in Chiba Prefecture. Ms. O., who is unmarried, wants her temple to be a bright place where people bring their children or pets to talk about their concerns. In her eyes, there is a general tendency to prefer male to female priests:

O: Yet families who ask for a funeral, they feel safer with a male priest. If the priest is a woman, they think it's a bit strange; for the people around here, it feels different ... To them there's a difference. After all, elder male head priests have a high rank, and that's why people feel grateful [for their services]. Nuns, they don't fit the image of who a priest should be; for the people here, a priest is a man.

M: And that even though there have been nuns since ancient times?

O: Yes, there have been nuns in the past, but still, in people's minds, men's work differs from women's work. Nowadays we have equality, so there are male nurses and female fire fighters, but, you know, in people's minds, there is still women's work and men's work. In the past, there were times when women were not allowed in temple compounds; it was a very restricted [Buddhist] world, so people feel comfortable and thankful with male priests.³⁷

Female priests are also often treated as inferior within the clerical communities of their respective Buddhist schools. Iijima Keidō 飯島恵道, head priest of a small nun's temple (*amadera* 尼寺) of the Sōtō school in Nagano Prefecture, has written about her experiences.³⁸ She was adopted into the temple by the female headpriest who became her mother, and grew up with her mother, her adopted grandmother, that is the previous headpriest, and her adopted sister. After working as a nurse, she took over the temple in 2011. For Iijima, who is

³⁴ Bunkachō 2020, pp. 66–79.

³⁵ Mokuseisha 2005, pp. 123–125; Jimon Kōryū 2012b, p. 51.

³⁶ See Schrimpf 2015, p. 196; Starling 2019, p. 111.

³⁷ Interview, April 2016.

³⁸ Iijima 2004, 2015, 2018, and 2019. Like many nun's temples in Sōtōshū, Iijima's temple does not have parishioners (*danka* 檀家) but is affiliated with a greater temple which it is expected to support with its ritual services. Typically, she performs the *o-tsuki mairi* お月参り, monthly memorial rites in the homes of the main temple's parishioners; see Iijima 2015. See her temple, Tōshōin, in Matsumoto: <https://tousyouji.com> (Accessed 2 December 2021).



Figure 3. Iijima Keidō as young girl with her sister.

married and in her late fifties, gender-related inequalities are typically manifest in everyday interactions between male and female clerics.³⁹ For example, at local rituals (*hōyō* 法要) that include male and female clerics, ordained women frequently prepare and serve tea, and during the chanting they are often seated in the back rows.⁴⁰

Iijima also cites the example of *sutra*-chanting at Sōtō Zen funerals, where women are usually only permitted to perform such tasks as beating the *mokugyō* 木魚, a wooden drum. Very rarely do they lead the chanting of *sutras* because their voices are perceived as not matching those of the male priests.⁴¹ The issue of the female voice and its “disturbing” effect in joint chanting was recurrent in my conversations with ordained women. Iijima recounted the following conversation:

Recently, I said I wanted to play the *kitō taiko* 祈祷太鼓.⁴² I said I wanted to take my turn when the drum [used in a joint ritual] rotates. The answer was, “You may play the drum, but being the leading voice, that’s a different thing.” Here is the reason I was given: “When a woman takes the lead in chanting, the keys [of male and female voices] do not match. It is not dignified.” What?? Of course they do not match. But don’t we always recite *sutras*, no matter whether the keys match or not? Besides, do we nuns not always adapt to the male voices? Why can’t male priests adapt to our voices? And there’s no dignity? What’s that supposed to mean?⁴³

39 For the development of the legal status of nuns in Sōtōshū from the Meiji era to present-day Japan, see Seno 2018.

40 Iijima and Kawahashi 2015, p. 40. The same observation was made by many of the ordained women I interviewed.

41 Iijima 2018, p. 100.

42 This is a drum used in rituals.

43 Iijima 2018, p. 100.



Figure 4. Iijima Keidō performing a memorial rite under Corona conditions.

In interviews, I often heard of similar experiences from ordained women in other Buddhist schools.⁴⁴

Another case of structural inequality is the exclusion of women from high-ranking positions within Buddhist schools. For example, ordained women in Nichirenshū cannot become *shuhosshi* 修法師 (a specialist in ascetic practice) because this kind of clerical specialization requires the successful completion of the “one hundred days severe ascetic practice” (*hyakunichi daiaragyō* 百日大荒行), a practice that is not open to women.⁴⁵

In these examples, gender is a very effective symbolic boundary which restricts access to religious practice and consequently to prestige, material benefits, and ultimately political influence within a Buddhist school. It is clear that gender relations in Japanese society shape interactions between male and female priests. The gender boundary thus provides the context or frame for situating the agency of ordained women.

Reinterpreting the Gender Boundary

How do women make use of boundary work in order to maintain religious authority? Some ordained women I talked to claimed to contribute uniquely to the clerical role precisely on

44 See, for example, the female Jōdoshū vice-head priest who was told that for men it is difficult to adapt their chanting to the pitch of women’s voices. She was subsequently asked by male colleagues to chant in a low voice. Ōshima 2019, p. 30.

45 See Honkōji Annai Hyakunichi Daiaragyō 本光寺案内百日大荒行. Official information about the “one hundred days severe ascetic practice,” 2020: <https://www.honkouji.com/info/jusyoku/aragyou> (Accessed 7 March 2021). According to the head priest of Onjuin, Toda Nisshin 戸田日辰, this practice is not open to women because it is considered physically too demanding. See Niikura Rieko 新倉理恵子, Hyakunichikan no daiaragyō wa sōryo no kokoro o migaku: Onjuin Toda denshi ni kiku 百日間の大荒行は僧侶の心を磨く: 遠壽院 (おんじゅいん)・戸田伝使に聞く. Interview with Toda Nisshin, head priest of Onjuin temple: <https://myoukouji.or.jp/taeback/backnumber/201603/02.html> (Accessed 7 March 2021). However, other clerical specializations in Nichiren Buddhism, such as *shōmyōshi* 声明師 (specialist in ritual chanting) or *fukyōshi* 布教師 (specialist in propagation) are open to both men and women.

account of their gender. They mentioned gender-specific character traits, patterns of action, or experiences to explain why and how they fulfill social functions different from ordained men. In these cases, they reinterpret the gender boundary as something that emphasizes women's strengths, and transforms ordained women from a marginalized out-group into an in-group of clerics with particular skills. This argument is used in a self-affirmative way, and often entails a critique of gendered behavior patterns, in particular of what is perceived as a male priestly habitus. Let us look at some examples.

In the following quote, Nichiren Buddhist Satō M. emphasizes women's supportive and caretaking role:

What can nuns do, other than use strong words and lead people? I think the most important attitude an ordained woman should have is to make people feel that they are not alone, that there is someone who they can turn to in need; there is someone by their side, that is, to be open and accepting.

Men, they push their way in; they get angry, so I think they should leave it to us, because women can, when someone comes to them and needs to talk, create a feeling of safety, a feeling that someone is there for them.⁴⁶

Ms. Satō's differentiation between male and female behavior is based on personal observations. It is both a generalized appraisal of ordained women's social skills and a critique of the lack of empathy expressed by ordained men. An open and accepting attitude is her ideal for all clerics, irrespective of gender. In a later interview, she pointed out that gender-specific clerical functions often result from hierarchical gender images in Japanese society.

The people who come to the temple, well, they want male priests to chant. They say it's better if men do it. The idea that men are superior to women, that men are able and women inferior, this way of thinking is still strongly rooted in Japan ... The image still exists that men act with all their strengths, powerfully, and that women should not try to do what men do.⁴⁷

Ms. O., the Tendai Buddhist head priest, draws another distinction between male and female behavior. She also claims that, while ordained women and men share the same ritual and social tasks, they also have different functions due to their gender and the gendered expectations of their surroundings:

Some things only men can do, and others only women can do. It's the same with male and female priests: their roles differ, and the people around them approach them differently in their respective position. But it is also true that there are things only male priests can do nowadays, and that only male priests are allowed to do.

... Loving, not as in romantic love, but unrewarded love, the compassionate caring of the Buddha, this kind of love, or the kindness our mothers gave us—if male priests

⁴⁶ Interview, November 2013.

⁴⁷ Interview, October 2018.

approached female believers like a mother, that would be awkward. But because nuns are of the same sex, they are accepted easily, and it's easy to talk to them. On the other hand, male clerics, they are strong, they are vigorous, and they can make people feel safe.⁴⁸

The gender-specific roles alluded to here seem to reflect the parental model of a strict father and an understanding, caring mother, justified by the perception of different character traits.

Other women suggest a differentiation of men's and women's functions on the basis of the latter's experiences. For Ms. Gotō, all clerics have the same responsibility to make people realize their close connection with Buddhas or gods. Yet there is something ordained women can do because they are women, namely listen to "women's sufferings":

There are sufferings about which women don't want to talk to men, you know. In that case they come to me because I'm a nun. For example, when a child has died in the womb and there was a miscarriage, or in cases of sexual problems. These are things they don't want to talk about to a man. Many people prefer to ask advice from a nun. And these sufferings, like all sufferings, they can be dissolved by connecting to [the Buddhas and gods] above. I want to make them understand this in a way appropriate to each case, in a way that's easy to understand and to feel, so they realize, "Right, that's it!"; this is how I want them to connect. And I think especially nuns can do this with regard to women's sufferings. Like problems in the family, or when there are tensions between bride and mother-in-law, men tend not to understand these things.⁴⁹

Here gender is maintained as a boundary, yet interpreted in a way that endows it with a particular competence. The gender boundary serves to emphasize the particular value of ordained women in contemporary clericism due to their social skills, as well as their experiences as women.⁵⁰ This attitude is also reflected in a 2004 survey of Nichiren Buddhist ordained women, many of whom emphasized their contribution as mothers and wives in supporting other women.⁵¹

The emphasis on women's special contributions or skills also reflects gender images within Japanese society that are manifest in the different ways in which female and male priests are approached by laypeople. Nearly all the ordained women I interviewed acknowledged that female clerics are considered easier to confide in than male clerics.⁵² Yet this difference is also seen critically. For example, Iijima points out that the approachability of female clerics due to their gender at the same time creates a lack of reverence towards them:

48 Interview, April 2016.

49 Interview, October 2018.

50 See also Schrimpf 2015, pp. 199–204.

51 Nichirenshū Gendai Shūkyō Kenkyūsho 2004; Niwa 2019, pp. 28–44.

52 The same observation has been made by Starling in her study of Shinshū temple wives. See Starling 2019, p. 109.

That's right; I believe there's a difference in how people approach a male and a female head priest. If it's a male head priest, somehow, people are careful to be polite, not to upset him. They flatter him. But with a female head priest, because it's easier to have a casual, everyday conversation, they treat us in a very friendly way, and I am happy about this. But, well, it would also be nice to be treated a bit more like a male head priest, like someone superior, to be approached more carefully.⁵³

Another critical voice is raised by a Nichiren Buddhist ordained woman introduced by Niwa Nobuko. She disapproves of gendering the role of a priest because it risks reducing the priestly functions of ordained women:

Another time, A-san said: "Personally, I don't like emphasizing that I am a woman, that I can do something because I am a woman. If we end up imposing a frame on the practices of ordained women, then I am afraid there'll be a backlash and the frame will become quite narrow." She thinks that, "Of course our skills as women are important, but first, there's my temple and my parishioners."⁵⁴

As these examples demonstrate, boundary work serves a self-affirmative purpose. At the same time, it also reveals that gender images prevalent in Japanese society influence the different ways in which ordained men and women are approached.

Creating Solidarity on the Basis of Gender

The discriminatory effects of the gender boundary are one reason for the creation of networks among Buddhist women. For example, members of the nonsectarian Tōkai Network for Women and Buddhism (Josei to Bukkyō Tōkai Nettowāku 女性と仏教東海ネットワーク) and Kantō Network for Women and Buddhism (Josei to Bukkyō Kantō Nettowāku 女性と仏教関東ネットワーク), founded in 1996 and 1997 respectively, include women of all Buddhist schools, ranging from temple wives to ordained women to "ordinary Buddhist women who do not belong to a particular temple." As Kawahashi insists, "No matter how different in position and perspective, what all women share is their individual decision to live a life that is related to Buddhism or a temple."⁵⁵

In this network, boundaries between ordained and lay Buddhist women, and among ordained women of different schools, are bridged by the women's shared experiences of unequal treatment and their need for solidarity and collaborative action. Kawahashi Noriko and Kobayashi Naoko explain the networks' agendas in the following way:

These networks are engaged in rereading conventionally androcentric Buddhist history and doctrine in light of the members' own experience as women and their aim is to present a reimagined vision of Buddhism. In this sense, their activities align in part with the cooperative efforts by Roman Catholic, Protestant, and Jewish women in the feminist theology movement to overcome traditional gender discrimination

53 Interview, October 2018.

54 Niwa 2019, p. 82.

55 Kawahashi 1999, p. 14.

in Judeo-Christian religions. The women gained awareness in themselves that the gender discrimination they experience directly as present in their everyday lives is not something separate from the institutions they deal with, but is structured as part of those institutions. This is the recognition, well-known in the history of feminist movements, that the personal is political. The women came to realize the importance of linking together and voicing their protests themselves in order to resolve this issue of discrimination.”⁵⁶

The de-emphasis on ordination as a boundary in these networks is accompanied by the founding members’ aim of creating a collective identity as Buddhist women, rather than as ordained women or temple wives. At meetings and in publications, network participants discuss their own experiences as Buddhist women, introduce recent developments concerning the legal status of women in Japanese Buddhism, or present their academic research on women (or attitudes toward women) in Buddhist history. I attended study group meetings of the Kantō network between 2013 and 2018. They were characterized by strong feelings of friendship and solidarity, by respect for each other’s authority as cleric, scholar, temple wife, or lay Buddhist, and by mutual support. They also brought together a vast amount of doctrinal and historical knowledge.

The creation of such an in-group based on the same gender counters individual experiences of being an outsider within the system of temple Buddhism for reasons of gender. Gender here is a boundary that fosters appreciation, support, and solidarity, with the ultimate goal of overcoming gender distinctions and inequalities.

Lifestyles: Clerical vs. Lay as a Boundary

In all Buddhist denominations, full clerical ordination endows the ordained with the right to conduct rituals and head a temple, thus creating a clear social boundary from lay Buddhists. As we have seen, not all ordained women acquire these privileges, and in some cases an ordained married woman’s life mirrors that of a lay Buddhist. As a consequence, many Buddhist women perceive a disparity between ordained women living in or running a temple and those who do not. How does this disparity relate to a woman’s self-perception as an ordained woman? Is a way of living that does not permit the regular performance of Buddhist rituals or becoming the head of a temple perceived as a threat to an ordained woman’s authority?

A strong argument in favor of the family life of married ordained women was made by the respondents to a survey of ordained Nichiren Buddhist women conducted in 2004.⁵⁷ Many of the respondents argued that their experiences as wives and mothers enabled them to address young mothers, wives, and women who take care of their parents or in-laws, and show them how to integrate Buddhist doctrines, values, and practices into their family lives.⁵⁸ These women demand appreciation of their value as ordained women *because of* their lay lives. In her recent study of Nichiren Buddhist ordained women, Niwa Nobuko

56 Kawahashi and Kobayashi 2017, p. 5. See also the three major publications of the network: Josei to Bukkyō Tōkai Kantō Nettowāku 1999, 2004, and 2011. The ongoing activities are documented in the many articles by Buddhist women published in the network’s journal, *Onnatachi no nyoze gamon* 女たちの如是我聞.

57 Nichirenshū Gendai Shūkyō Kenkyūsho 2004.

58 Nichirenshū Gendai Shūkyō Kenkyūsho 2004, pp. 23–24.

introduces several married temple priests who make use of their experiences of marriage, raising children, and caring to convey to parishioners the importance of religion in family life.⁵⁹

The opposite attitude is expressed by Aoyama Shundō. To her, the Buddhist law can only be maintained and transmitted by “real” world renouncers:

I believe that for a genuine, determined world renouncer to run a temple having a family is wrong ... Your children are dear to you, you care about the family, about yourself, about the children, and once financial questions come to predominate, the Buddhist law cannot be practiced in a real sense ...⁶⁰

She believes that female clerics, especially those in her convent, are those who uphold the ideal of world renunciation:

Actually, someone who is married cannot be a world renouncer, yet in present-day Japan’s Buddhist world, being married has become normal. There is nothing we can do about it, but that’s why only nuns are able to maintain the original ideal of a true world renouncer.⁶¹

Aoyama’s view that the norm of clerical marriage among male temple priests compromises their religious authority reflects public discourse. In his study of contemporary temple Buddhism, Stephen Covell concludes that the lay life of priests contributes to their damaged public image:

The relaxing of precepts leaves little to distinguish priest from laity. Furthermore, the moral authority derived from maintaining a strict code of conduct is lost ... Rather than entering the temple as an act of leaving home (renouncing the world), the priest now views the temple as his household.⁶²

In addition to these opposing attitudes towards the family life of a cleric, Niwa’s study introduces female clerics who combine notions of “priestliness” (*sōryo rashisa* 僧侶らしさ) with those of “femaleness” (*josei rashisa* 女性らしさ), for instance, by offering activities for women and children in their temples, such as baby massage classes. A major issue in this context is the decision whether they grow their hair or shave their heads.⁶³

59 Niwa 2019, p. 43.

60 Interview, February 2014.

61 Interview, February 2014.

62 Covell 2005, p. 79.

63 For example, an ordained woman in Niwa’s study grew her hair before she took over the temple as head priest because she wanted her children and friends still to see her as a woman. With her investiture as head priest, she changed to the tonsure as a symbol of her determination to embody this new role. See Niwa 2019, pp. 107–110.

Outward Appearance as a Boundary Marker

Outward appearance is an important means of both drawing and concealing the boundary between the ordained and the laity. A shaved head (*teihatsu* 剃髪) and *samue* 作務衣 (Buddhist work clothing), or *koromo* 衣 (Buddhist robe) are visible markers of clerical status. As kinds of religious dress, they signal that the wearer holds a particular Buddhist role, whereas letting one's hair grow (*ubatsu* 有髪) and the wearing of ordinary clothes hide this religious affiliation and commitment.⁶⁴ Clerical dress sets the wearer apart from lay Buddhists and implies possession of religious authority deriving from status, expertise, and privilege. It shapes interactions, depending on whether the interaction partner relates in a positive or a negative way to this religious authority.⁶⁵

At a Buddhist ceremony, for example, the dress of ordained men and women is generally acknowledged as a precondition for the effectiveness of their ritual practice. Many ordained women told me that they encounter different expectations and attitudes towards them depending on how they dress. For Ms. Satō, for example, wearing clerical dress in public raises expectations of dignified conduct, adherence to precepts, and a compassionate attitude. She describes how, when she goes to a supermarket in clerical dress, other customers will closely scrutinize what she buys (presumably expecting her to buy neither alcohol nor meat).

The ordained women I met ascribe various meanings to the tonsure, as integral to Buddhist practice, as symbol of the monastic life, and as marker of the boundary between cleric and layperson. In their assessments, they either emphasize its symbolic relevance or its effect on interactions. For Aoyama Shundō, for example, the tonsure is proof of a woman's sincere resolve to follow the Buddhist path:

Those who come here because they want to, they are real world renouncers ... If a woman shaves her head, even more than if a man does, well, she wouldn't do it if she weren't serious. And without the serious determination to follow the Buddhist path (*honki hosshin* 本気発心), real religious practice (*shugyō* 修行) is not possible, and the Buddhist law will not be mastered. That's a fact, isn't it?⁶⁶

To her, the shaved head is inextricably linked to the practice of monastic life, and not merely a symbol. It is an inherent part of Buddhist practice itself. By contrast, the value assigned to the shaved head by women shifting between lay and clerical roles tends to be situation-dependent. In general, however, this value is judged according to the effect it has on interaction. This is most obvious in cases where ordained women have young children who have a difficult time connecting with their mothers when they shave their heads and/or are wearing traditional robes.

When Ms. Gotō, who is not a temple-based priest, performs rituals, engages in public talks, or provides Buddhist counseling, she has a shaved head and wears a robe, thus

⁶⁴ In accordance with Lüddeckens's (2013, p. 38) definition of "dress" as the product of "dressing," that is, "actions undertaken to modify and supplement the body," I understand religious dress to include hairstyle and other alterations to the body that are motivated by a concept of one's religious role. See also Lüddeckens 2013, p. 57.

⁶⁵ Lüddeckens 2013, pp. 63–69.

⁶⁶ Interview, February 2014.

emphasizing her clerical status. Apart from these occasions, she dresses casually or wears a *samue*, often with a cap to cover her shaved head. Ms. Satō, on the other hand, works at the reception desk of a temple. She has shoulder-length hair and wears a *samue* when at work in the temple, and non-religious clothes outside the temple grounds. Both have changed their hairstyle at a particular point: Ms. Gotō let her hair grow (though cut short) while her daughter was young, and changed to a shaved head some years ago after her daughter had encouraged her to do so. Ms. Satō had a shaved head while she worked as a priest performing ritual tasks in a previous temple; in her present job, she has let her hair grow and rarely takes on ritual assignments. Both describe the effects of shaved heads and Buddhist dress on their social relationships, as they create a distance between themselves and lay people that makes them less accessible. Ms. Gotō finds that people do not dare to talk to her about minor issues, nor to express critical views of Buddhist priests:

Well, personally, I like the shaved head very much; it really feels good. But well, there's this distance from other people, like, you know, because my head is shaved it's difficult for people to talk to me; it feels as if there's a wall. This is what I have been told, and why I put on a cap.

... The perception that I am someone you can easily talk to, it really disappears. People think, "That's too trivial; I can't ask this," and turn away. Only when my hair has grown back do people ask me about minor matters, like "It's not a big thing but I would like to ask." Or if people have some kind of resentment towards temples, or Buddhism, or if they have doubts, they only tell me if I don't have a shaved head.⁶⁷

Similarly, Ms. Satō explains that, in the temple where she works, many people talk to her about their problems rather casually; for some of them it seems important that she does not look like a cleric:

I really like shaving my head and wearing a *samue*—really! But among the people who come to the reception desk, some are only able to open their hearts to me because I am a woman who doesn't look like a priest. Sometimes, while drinking a cup of tea, they say to me: "You know, I cannot talk like this to those priests over there," and I say "Is that so?" and listen to them. But when I want to act as a nun, rather than a researcher, I will shave my head.⁶⁸

Both women suggest that a head of hair creates a closeness to "ordinary" people that provides an opportunity to offer support with everyday problems. However, the distance created by the visibility of their clerical status is also a source of religious authority. Ms. Gotō explains that, when she is recognizable as a priest, people seek her advice on serious matters:

On the other hand—how can I say this?—when someone is in serious trouble and wants help, if your head is shaved, well, they approach you straightaway, feeling "I

⁶⁷ Interview, April 2016.

⁶⁸ Interview, November 2013.

want to ask a priest,” because a priest is someone you can turn to, it’s like a trademark. That’s what I realized when I shaved my head. People who come to talk to me when I have a shaved head and those who come when I have my hair grown, they are very different.⁶⁹

In these examples, outward appearance is a boundary marker applied selectively by the women to create various kinds of social relationships.⁷⁰ Ms. Gotō and Ms. Satō emphasize the value inherent in this diversity, namely that they can approach people on different levels. By emphasizing or de-emphasizing the boundary between themselves and lay people, they make use of both their clerical role and their lay role in order to support people. They adopt two strategies to justify different kinds of counseling: first, visibly marking their religious status in order to be seen and approached as an authority figure; and second, consciously blurring the boundary between themselves and laypeople in order to be seen as similar and approachable. Even in the latter case the boundary is not really dissolved, however, because, as Ms. Gotō insists, their counsel still rests on their religious expertise.

Conclusion

As we have seen in this paper, boundary work differs significantly according to social position and subsequent discursive and practical conditions. In addition, the meaning ascribed to boundaries depends upon the situation and the role an ordained woman takes on. In interaction with laypeople, the boundary between lay and cleric may be perceived as a hindrance, and thus its permeability as essential. However, in ritual practice or in counseling in times of crisis, the impermeability of the boundary is crucial. Therefore, it is difficult to determine trends or group-specific types of boundary work. The examples introduced here serve rather to highlight the diversity of boundary work, as exemplified in the following concluding statements:

The *gender boundary* is relevant in various ways. The women and Buddhism networks point to the discriminatory effects of this boundary in order to create a collective identity based on shared experiences and common interests. They use the gender boundary to foster awareness of being a Japanese Buddhist woman rather than a Jōdo Shinshū temple wife or a female cleric of Tendaishū. By means of this awareness, they aim to strengthen solidarity among women, and gender becomes a means to counter experiences of discrimination and ultimately to overcome the limitations and marginalization resulting from gender inequalities in the Buddhist world.

The same mechanism of creating an in-group is at work when Aoyama Shundō states that the transmission and survival of Buddhism depend upon monastic nuns. By distinguishing between ordained men and women with regard to their religious commitment, she prioritizes monastic nuns and invests them with the authority to represent actual Buddhist practice. In both cases, drawing a boundary between men and women

⁶⁹ Interview, April 2016.

⁷⁰ This does not mean that they constantly shift between shaving their heads and letting their hair grow again. Rather, they change their outward appearance by wearing either conventional clothes, a *koromo* or *samue*, and in the case of Ms. Gotō by hiding her tonsure under a cap.

serves to create gender-specific collectives and foster solidarity in order to strengthen their members' position in the field of contemporary Japanese Buddhism.

Another strategy with regard to the gender boundary makes use of this distinction in order to value women and their particular contribution to the clerical role. For example, respondents to the Nichiren Buddhist survey reinterpret that role in a way that emphasizes the social functions of the cleric rather than ritual practice, while stressing women's predisposition to fulfill these social functions. Although not consciously designed to counteract the negative effects of gender, reevaluating gender as a symbolic boundary in this way has an empowering effect, as it affects ordained women's self-perceptions, and shapes discourses about women in Buddhist clericism. It must be kept in mind, however, that this gendered conception of the clerical role often mirrors the gendered ways in which male and female priests are approached by parishioners or believers. As some women pointed out, gendering the role of a cleric reflects the gender hierarchies prevalent in Japanese society, and implies the risk of reducing women's clerical functions and reputation.

Discourses about the *boundary between lay and clerical* often revolve around the lay and clerical lifestyles of ordained women. For nuns living in a convent, the distinction between a monastic life and clerical marriage or a lay life is the basis on which they rest their religious authority. In contrast, women who combine clerical roles *and* lay roles claim authority on the basis of their ability to cross this boundary, depending on their experiences and their outward appearance. Because these women can blend into the secular realm, they are able to fulfill their clerical task of supporting others beyond the temple and in everyday conversations.

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