

JAPANESE POEMS AS MAGICAL FORMULAS:  
UNVEILING THE CONNECTION  
TO FEMALE PHYSIOLOGY

This paper discusses classical and pseudo-classical Japanese-style short poems *tanka* (henceforth referred to as *waka*),<sup>1</sup> exploring their reinterpretation, occasional alteration, and utilization as magical formulas. While there have been numerous studies on magical aspects of *waka* poems, they have focused on other applications rather than specifically addressing female physiology<sup>2</sup> or they have dealt with language theories underlying their supernatural powers.<sup>3</sup> This study aims to investigate two representative pieces of *waka* that pertain to the removal of impurity caused by menstrual blood and the regulation of the menstrual cycle in women. It focuses on magical verses transmitted by the means of talismans (*gofu* 護符)<sup>4</sup> that most probably were in use from the eighteenth to the nineteenth centuries. By shedding light on the supernatural qualities of these poetic forms in relation to female physiology, this essay contributes to a deeper understanding of this specialized area of *waka* literature.

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<sup>1</sup> *Waka* 和歌 (signifying a Japanese-style poem or a poem in Japanese, as opposed to Chinese poems) originally encompassed several poetry genres, including *tanka* 短歌 (short poem), *chōka* 長歌 (long poem), and *sedōka* 旋頭歌 (head-repeated poem). However, with the compilation of the *Kokin wakashū* [Collection of Ancient and Modern Japanese Poems], the imperial anthology, in the early tenth century, *tanka* gained significant prominence. This led to *waka* effectively becoming synonymous with *tanka*, while the term *tanka* fell into disuse. Therefore, I will use the term *waka* exclusively to refer to what was originally called *tanka*: a traditional form of Japanese poetry, characterized by its fixed syllable pattern of 5-7-5 7-7 and its focus on expression of emotion, often covering themes of love, nature, and personal experience.

<sup>2</sup> Hideo Hanabe, *Juka to setsuwa: uta, majinai, tsukimono no sekai* [Magical Poems and Legends: The World of Poems, Magic and Evil Spirits], Miyai Shoten, Tōkyō 1998; *idem*, *Mukashibanashi to juka* [Folk Tales and Magical Poems], Miyai Shoten, Tōkyō 2005; *Kōto denshō: tonae, uta, kotowaza no sekai* [Oral Tradition: The World of Incantations, Poems and Proverbs], eds. Akira Fukuda, Masahiro Manabe, Miyai Shoten, Tōkyō 2003.

<sup>3</sup> R.K. Kimbrough, *Reading the Miraculous Powers of Japanese Poetry*, “Japanese Journal of Religious Studies” 2005, vol. 32, no. 1, pp. 1–33.

<sup>4</sup> Selected terms and titles of primary sources, which may be otherwise difficult to identify, have been presented in *kanji* characters.

To provide a contextual background for the discussion, it is essential to examine the Buddhist understanding of menstruation. Within the framework of Japanese Buddhism, women were often regarded as possessing inherent mental defects. Their minds were believed to be tainted by ignorance, greed, and anger, commonly referred to as the “three poisons” (*sandoku* 三毒), occasionally accompanied by a fourth – jealousy. A respected and influential source in this field puts the matter thus: “Generally speaking, women, even the ones of royal and noble birth, have no devotion to pure faith (*jōshin* 淨信) and Buddhist practice (*bongyō* 梵行). [In women] only feelings of greed and jealousy run deep. For this reason their sinful deeds (*zaiigō* 罪業) form menstrual blood (*keisui* 經水), which drips little by little every month (...).”<sup>5</sup>

This passage is taken from *Yūkoku yoin* 幽谷余韻 [Echoes from Dark Valley], a work published in 1824 by Senjō Jitsugan, a Zen monk known for his translation into classical Chinese of “*Ketsubonkyō*” *engi* 血盆經緣起 [The Origin of “Bloody Pond Sutra”] from Shōsen Temple. A similar idea can be traced in other sources. For instance, [*Shōtoku*] *taishi den* 太子伝 [The Life of Prince [Shōtoku]] of Kawarayzen Temple copied in 1466, refers to menstrual blood as the “blood of five desires and three poisons” (*goyoku sandoku no chi* 五欲三毒ノ血).<sup>6</sup> *Tenkaijō* “*Ketsubonkyō*” *dangishi* 天海藏血盆經談義私 [Sermon on the “Bloody Pond Sutra” from Tenkai’s Own Notes] in a copy from 1599 explains menstrual blood as the tears shed by buddhas and bodhisattvas residing on a lotus throne within a woman’s heart. Initially as pure as “pearls of dew”, these tears become tainted by earthly desires (*bonnō* 煩惱), especially by ignorance (referred to as *guchi* 愚痴 or *chi* 痴), turning into menstrual blood with defiling properties, just as crystal-clear water turns red when mixed with cinnabar. Statements like these make it evident that in Japanese Buddhism female blood was indeed perceived as a source of impurity. However, it is crucial to emphasize that this impurity was attributed to the manifestation of a woman’s poisoned mind rather than resulting solely from a physiological process.

Next *waka* used for ritualistic purposes for women will be discussed. *Moto yori chiri ni majiwaru...* – probably one of the best known pieces – should be labelled as a pseudo-classical poem, because, despite its attribution to Izumi Shikibu<sup>7</sup> (or, in more recent tradition, to Ono no Komachi<sup>8</sup>), it made its first appearance in *Fūga*

<sup>5</sup> Jitsugan Senjō, *Yūkoku yoin*, vol. 5, Ryūshiken Ogawa Tazaemon, Kyōto 1824, p. 30.

<sup>6</sup> Kazuo Makino, *Chūsei no setsuwa to gakumon* [Medieval Anecdotal Stories and Knowledge], Izumi Shoten, Ōsaka 1991.

<sup>7</sup> *Nikkō-san Rinnō-ji zō Keichō yonen Shaku Shuntei sha “Ketsubonkyō” dangishi ryaku kaidai narabi ni honkoku* [Sermon on the “Bloody Pond Sutra” from Tenkai’s Own Notes from Nikkō-san Rinnō Temple Copied by Shaku Shuntei in the Fourth Year of Keichō Era], eds. Kōdate Naomi, Kazuo Makino, “Jissen Joshi Daigaku Bungakubu Kiyō” 2000, no. 43, pp. 20–21.

<sup>8</sup> Izumi Shikibu (976–1031), Japanese poet and court lady during the Heian period. She is best known for *Izumi Shikibu Nikki* [The Diary of Izumi Shikibu], as well as individual poems

*wakashū* 風雅和歌集 [Collection of Refined Japanese-style Poetry], an anthology compiled around 1349, approximately 300 years after Shikibu's death)<sup>9</sup>. It survived in several later versions (examples of which will follow), but *Fūga wakashū* gives the following account:

もとよりも塵にまじはる神なれば月のさほりも何かくるしき

*Moto yori mo chiri ni majiwaru kami nareba tsuki no sawari mo nanika kurushiki*

I am a god who has originally mingled with the [worldly] dust. Why would I be harmed by [your] monthly impediment?

Circumstances of the poem's composition are given in a *kotobagaki* (prose statement):

When Izumi Shikibu was visiting Kumano<sup>10</sup> and due to [monthly] hindrance (*sawari*) could not give offerings (*hōbei* 奉幣), she composed a poem:

晴やらぬ身のうき雲のたなひきて月のさほりとなるそかなしき

*Hareyaranu mi no ukigumo no tanabikite tsuki no sawari to naru zo kanashiki*

Do not clear up, floating clouds that hang over my body. How sad to be cursed with my monthly impediment.

[Afterwards] as she was sleeping, in a dream [the Kumano deity]<sup>11</sup> gave her this revelation.<sup>12</sup>

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recorded in *Konkin wakashū* [Collection of Ancient and Modern Japanese Poems], *Shūi wakashū* [Collection of Gleanings of Japanese Poetry] and others.

<sup>9</sup> Ono no Komachi, a renowned Japanese court poetess and symbol of beauty, lived during the ninth century. Komachi is celebrated for her emotionally evocative verses, which often explored themes of love and personal experiences. Like Izumi Shikibu, she is the subject of numerous legends and literary works, further cementing her prominent status in the world of poetry.

<sup>10</sup> A number of scholars, including Yanagita Kunio and Segawa Kiyoko, claim *Shokusen-zai wakashū* 続千載和歌集 [Continued Collection of Thousands of Short Poems] (completed in 1320) to be the first anthology to record the poem (see: Kiyoko Segawa, *Onna no minzokushi: sono kegare to shinpi* [Ethnographical Description of Women: Their Impurity and Mystery], Tōkyō Shoseki, Tōkyō 1980, p. 99). I have not been able to locate the relevant passage in the given source and I am now inclined to think that the claim is based on a passage *Izumi Shikibu kuyōtō* 和泉式部供養塔 in an early nineteenth century *Kii zoku fudoki* 紀伊続風土記 [Continued Description of Kii Province]. This cites the poem *Morotomo ni chiri ni majiwaru kami nareba tsuki no sawari zo nani ga kurushiki* もろともに塵にまじはる神なれば月のさほりぞ何かくるしき and mistakenly gives *Shokusen-zai shū* (an abbreviated title of *Shokusen-zai wakashū*) as its primary source. See: *Kii zoku fudoki*, *Dai 3 shū*, ed. Nanyō Niida, Teikoku Chihō Gyōsei Shuppanbu, Tōkyō 1911, p. 186.

<sup>11</sup> A region in Japan known for its sacred mountains and spiritual significance, often associated with pilgrimage routes and Shintō-Buddhist syncretism.

<sup>12</sup> The Kumano deity does not appear in the original, but because of the use of honorific speech (*tsugesasetamanu*), its authorship of the poem can be inferred from the context.

Setting aside the issue of the historical accuracy of the Kumano pilgrimage itself, the undeniable truth is that the poetical dialogue mentioned above, in whole or in part and with various adaptations over the centuries, has served as a purifying spell for women, propagated through the use of talismans.

Regarding the reception of this episode in Buddhist literature, Shōyo Ganteki's extensive commentary on the *Bloody Pond Sutra* (*"Ketsubonkyō" waga 血盆経和解*, published in 1713) is noteworthy. Ganteki's commentary refers to the so-called *tsuki no sawari* [*no*] *uta* (poems on monthly impediment) and describes the encounter between Izumi Shikibu and Kumano Gongen during her pilgrimage. In the poem exchange, Izumi Shikibu laments her monthly impediment, and Kumano Gongen, appearing as an old man, assures her that it does not harm him. The encounter leads Izumi Shikibu to continue her visit to the Kumano Mountains:

Izumi Shikibu went on a pilgrimage to Kumano. She was at the foot of the mountain when suddenly her monthly flow started. Wanting to set off on her return journey to Kyoto, she composed a poem:

How miserable! Clouds of five hindrances<sup>13</sup> do not clear up. How sad to be cursed with my monthly impediment.

浅間敷也五障乃雲能晴也羅亭月乃障登成楚悲

*Asamashi ya gosho no kumo no hare yarate. Tsuki no sawari to naru zo kanashiki*

Kumano Gongen appeared before her in the form of an old man and replied with a poem:

振古茂塵丹雜留我奈礼半月乃障輪苦賀羅滿志<sup>14</sup>

*Moto yori mo chiri ni majiwaru ware nareba tsuki no sawari wa kurushikaramaji*

I am the one who has originally mingled with the [worldly] dust.<sup>15</sup> Why would I be harmed by [your] monthly impediment?

<sup>13</sup> *Fūga wakashū* [in:] *Nijūichi daishū*, vol. 8, ed. Taiyōsha, Tōkyō 1925, p. 449.

<sup>14</sup> Through Kumarajiva's translation of *Lotus Sutra*, the term *gosho* (five obstacles/obstructions) took deep roots in literary tradition of Japan as a conventional phrase to describe a woman. It was widely understood as an inability to attain five states, i.e., of Brahma, Indra, Māra, a universal monarch and a buddha. In a previous translation of the *Lotus Sutra* by Dharmaraksha, the term "five states" (*goi* 五位) is used instead. As some scholars point out, sutra merely states that so far no woman has attained the five states, rather than teaching that a woman is permanently incapable of doing so. Kazuhiko Yoshida, *Ryūjō no jōbutsu* [in:] *Josei to bukyō: Sukui to oshie* [Women and Buddhism: Salvation and Teachings], vol. 2, eds. Kazuo Ōsumi Kazuo, Junko Nishiguchi, Heibonsha, Tōkyō 1989, p. 89.

<sup>15</sup> The most striking feature that differentiates this version from the ones cited below is the fact that it is phonetically transcribed with *kanji* characters. The same form of writing (but with different characters) is used in *Tsūzoku bukyō hyakka zensho* 通俗仏教百科全書 [Popular Encyclopedia of Buddhism, 1891], an encyclopedia of Pure Land Buddhism. See: *Tsūzoku bukyō hyakka zensho*, vol. 3, ed. Jōkun Nagaoka, Kaidō Shoin, Tōkyō 1891, p. 230. This mode of expression possibly emerged from the widespread notion dating back to the thirteenth century that *waka*, in general, achieve their supernatural powers because they are the *dhāraṇi* (Buddhist incantations) of Japan. *Dhāraṇi* would often be transliterated, rather than translated, as figure 4 shows. Ganteki, in another part of his commentary, states that they should be deliberately left untranslated (*fubon*

As a result, Izumi Shikibu continued her pilgrimage to Kumano Mountains. (...) The true form (*honji* 本地)<sup>16</sup> of Kumano Gongen is that of Buddha Amida.<sup>17</sup>

The poetical dialogue's most apparent interpretation stems from a double meaning of *tsuki*, which can signify both the moon and menstruation. However, an examination of moon symbolism in Buddhism, particularly its esoteric tradition, reveals a potentially deeper significance. The moon represents wisdom, truth, and enlightenment. Moonlight falls evenly on all sentient beings. However, in the case of women, it is obscured by clouds in the form of five obstacles (*goshō*). Another crucial aspect to consider is the setting where the poems were exchanged, namely the Kumano Mountains, particularly Hongū. This can be inferred from the fact that the Shintō deity Kumano Gongen (Ketsumiko), worshipped in Hongū, was identified as a local manifestation of Buddha Amida. Therefore, the overall message that Kumano Gongen (identical to Buddha Amida) conveys in his poem is that even in a state of impurity, Izumi Shikibu was welcome to visit his temple.

At the time, not all sacred mountains were accessible to women, as Shōyo Ganteki writes in another part of his commentary:

(...) [A monastery on] Japan's Mount Kōya was founded by Kōbō Daishi. Although the five wisdoms of the full moon illuminate all things evenly, a woman [burdened] with five obstacles (*goshō*) is not allowed to visit.<sup>18</sup>

In this case, Dainichi Nyorai (Mahāvairocana), the main Buddha of the esoteric pantheon worshipped at Kongōbu-ji on Mount Kōya, embodies five wisdoms. Unlike Dainichi Nyorai, Kumano Gongen, who is identified with Buddha Amida – the object of veneration at Hongū Temple – was willing to embrace in his compassionate light everybody, even women. The aforementioned passage from “*Ketsubonkyō*” *wage* was in all probability influenced by “*Muryōjukyō*” *shaku*, an early exposition of *The Sutra of the Buddha of Immeasurable Life* by Hōnen. Hōnen stresses the significance

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不翻) to preserve their hidden meaning. See: Ganteki Shōyo, *Bussestu daijō shōgyō* „*Ketsubonkyō*” *wage*, ed. Naomi Kōdate, Iwata Shoin, Tōkyō 2014, p. 46.

<sup>16</sup> Part of their employment of skillful means (*bōben*), buddhas and bodhisattvas were believed to manifest themselves in the human world in more familiar forms. In order not to blind sentient beings with their full radiance, they “softened their light and mingled with the worldly dust” (*wakō dōjin* 和光同塵).

<sup>17</sup> In Japanese beliefs, *honji* (本地) refers to deities taking earthly forms while retaining their true essence in higher realms. Kumano Gongen, appearing as an old man, demonstrates its ability to connect with devotees in a more accessible and relatable form while embodying the true form of Buddha Amida.

<sup>18</sup> A central figure in Pure Land Buddhism, a widely followed Japanese Buddhist sect. It represents enlightenment and compassion, with devotees seeking rebirth in the Pure Land realm.

of Amida's thirty-fifth vow, in which Buddha pledged to lead to rebirth in the Pure Land all women who utter his name:

The peaks (*mine* 峰)<sup>19</sup> of Mount Kōya [are surrounded by] a boundary (*kekikai* 結界) established by Kōbō Daishi, it is the ground, where the supreme vehicle of *shingon* (true words) flourishes. Even though the moon of three mysteries (*sanmitsu* 三密)<sup>20</sup> shines universally, it does not illuminate the darkness of women with their incapacity to attain buddhahood (*nyonin biki* 女人非器). Even though water of wisdom (*chisui* 智水) from five bottles<sup>21</sup> is poured evenly, it does not wash away impurity and dirt (*ke* 垢穢) from the female body.<sup>22</sup>

As Ganteki states in the closing part of his commentary on Izumi Shikibu's pilgrimage:

The two pieces of *waka* were transmitted orally as a secret matter (*keketsu* 口訣) as part of Shintō initiation ceremonies (*shintō kanjō* 神道灌頂). Thus, they must not be treated carelessly. They were also transmitted as oral teachings (*kuden* 口伝) and placed on talismans for menstruation (*tsukimizu no mamori*) (...).<sup>23</sup>

Such ceremonies, imitating their counterparts in esoteric Buddhism, were performed for lay people as early as in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. Talismans for female participants are reported to have been bestowed in the initiation ceremony of Miwa-ryū (a branch of Shintō associated with the Ōmiwa Temple).<sup>24</sup> *Gessui daiji* [Secret Formula for Menstruation] is explained as the most powerful formula for women throughout their lives, one that prevents them from committing a sinful deed (*tsumi*) when they suddenly incur impurity by menstrual blood while visiting a temple (fig. 1).<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> Ganteki Shōyo, *Bussestu daijō shōgyō*..., p. 249.

<sup>20</sup> Mount Kōya is often preceded by the descriptive phrase *hachiyō no* 八葉の "of eight petals". It refers to its lotus-like shape. The main temple, Kongōbu-ji, is situated in the middle and is surrounded by eight peaks corresponding to the eight petals of a lotus flower.

<sup>21</sup> The "moon of three mysteries" in esoteric Buddhism symbolizes the interplay of three fundamental aspects of Buddha's nature: Dainichi Nyorai embodies the Dharmakaya, Kongōkai represents all-encompassing compassion, and Taizōkai signifies Buddha's wisdom. This concept reflects the highest truth and enlightenment sought through esoteric Buddhist practice, involving rituals and meditation.

<sup>22</sup> An allusion to the initiation ceremony of esoteric Buddhism, in which water from five bottles, corresponding to the five wisdoms of Buddha Mahāvairocana, is poured on a student's head.

<sup>23</sup> Hōnen, "Muryōjūkyō" *shaku* [in:] *Nihon Shisō Taikei* [Corpus of Japanese Philosophical Works], vol. 10, ed. Shunnō Ōhashi, Iwanami Shoten, Tōkyō 1971, p. 144.

<sup>24</sup> Ganteki Shōyo, *Bussestu daijō shōgyō*..., p. 322.

<sup>25</sup> *Miwa-ryū shodaiji keketsu* [Various Oral Teachings and Secret Formulas of Miwa Branch of Shintō], [in:] *Shingon shintō*, vol. 2, ed. Shūichi Murayama, Shintō Taikei Hensankai, Tōkyō 1992, p. 20.

Figure 1 is an example of *Gessui* (or *gassui*) *no daiji*, as the title on its envelope reads. Based on the caption printed inside: *Nibongi shinju kanjō gessui (no) daiji*, it was meant for an initiation ceremony where secret commentaries to *Nibongi* [Records of Japan] were transmitted. The name of the master and the date of the ceremony remain blank which leads me to believe that it has not been used. A large portion of the talisman is occupied with the poems originally associated with Izumi Shikibu; her name,<sup>26</sup> however, is nowhere to be found:

昔乃五障乃雲モ晴「ヤラテ月乃障ト成曾悲シキ

Even clouds of five hindrances from distant past have not cleared up. How sad, that I was cursed with my monthly impediment.

本ヨリモ塵ニマシワル神ナレ八月ノ障リモクルシカラマシ

I am the god who has originally mingled with the [worldly] dust. Why would I be harmed even by [your] monthly impediment?

There are some additional, unrelated formulas:

With tree saps from the times of mighty gods I purify my body covered with mud

Originally, a lotus opens to the light and with its same body it bears a fruit.

This is the most powerful and superlative method for eliminating sins of a woman.

Different variations of the episode involving Izumi Shikibu and Kumano Gongen, written in retrospect, continued to develop over time. One striking difference which should be noted is that, as shown in the history of the Kōkoku Temple in Iwaki Ishikawa in Fukushima Prefecture (its oldest written version dates back to 1831), a single episode was incorporated into a narrative illustrating how Izumi Shikibu's poems in general could produce supernatural effects. For example, they could cause a dead pine tree to revive or a painted cuckoo to sing. According to legend, she was the very first woman to successfully complete the pilgrimage to Kumano. Because of her gift, which went beyond mere literary talent, she was capable of furnishing women who followed in her footsteps with a powerful spell to protect them from impurity. Shikibu embarked on her trip in 1006:

When she was on her way from Nachi to Hongū and was just passing by Mitarai – Ah, that female fate! – Her monthly impurity started. “How regrettable, that even though I came such a long distance, the local deity abandoned me and my bond with the teachings of Buddha is so fragile”. She expressed [her feelings] in a poem:

古への五障の雲の晴やらで月の障りとなるぞ悲しき

Clouds of five hindrances from remote times have not cleared up. How sad, that I was cursed with my monthly impediment.

Another record says that she composed in Kumano the following poem:

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<sup>26</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 400.

晴やらぬ身にうき雲のたなひきて月の障りと成るぞ悲しき

Do not clear up, floating clouds that hang over my body. How sad to be cursed with my monthly impediment.

As she was about to return, in a miraculous way the temple shook, and Gongen replied with a poem:

もとよりもちに交はる神なれ八月のさわりは苦しかるまじ

I am a god who has originally mingled with the [worldly] dust. Why would I be harmed by [your] monthly impediment?

A harmonious voice responded to her, to which Izumi Shikibu bowed in gratitude. A monument was erected at the site, which still remains to this day. She then went on a pilgrimage from Miidera in [the Province of] Kii through all thirty-three miracle-famous sites [of Kannon]. (...) Since then, many women have undertaken this pilgrimage. Before her, only men made it.<sup>27</sup>

Another major change in the narrative that can be observed in more recent sources is the replacement of Izumi Shikibu with Ono no Komachi in a very similar context. An example is *Ono no Komachi okina banashi* 小野小町翁噺 [Old Man's Tale on Ono no Komachi], copied in 1813 by Sanshi Bairyūken from Oshikatsu 雄勝散士梅流軒. Overwhelmed with loneliness following the death of General Fukakusa, Ono no Komachi returned to her hometown in present-day Akita Prefecture to pray for his salvation. She then decided to embark on a pilgrimage across the country:

When she was about to abandon her hometown once again, she just happened to pass by [the temple of] Medicine Buddha (Yakushi 薬師). Wanting to pay him a visit to express her gratitude for everyday blessings, she stopped by Mitarashi Pond where she purified her body. Upon entering the temple, she experienced menstrual bleeding. Komachi despaired. "What a regret! How miserable! Oh! How miserable, that as a result of my past deeds I was born as a woman!". (...) She composed a poem:

先の世のこせうの雲のはれやらて月のさわりとなるそかなしき

Clouds of five hindrances, [the effect of] previous lives, do not clear up.

Having read the poem she lamented for a while. As she was about to leave, the temple shook viciously and a voice spoke anew:

元よりも塵に交る神なれば月の障りも苦しかるらん

I am a god who has originally mingled with the [worldly] dust. Why would I be harmed by [your] monthly impediment? Such was the miraculous revelation she received (...).<sup>28</sup>

<sup>27</sup> Kōichi Yoshida, *Iwaki Ishikawa ni okeru Izumi Shikibu Densetsu to Koseki: Kinsu-zan Kōkoku-ji Yurai Engi* [Legends and Historical Sites of Iwaki Ishikawa Related to Izumi Shikibu: The History of Kinsu-zan Kōkoku Temple], "Heian Bungaku Kenkyū" 1986, no. 75, pp. 56–57.

<sup>28</sup> Hitoshi Nishiki, *Akita-ken nanbu no denshō shinsiryō: honkoku to kōsatsu. Mokuren, Jikaku, Komachi ni kan suru mono hachibu* [New Materials from Nanbu in Akita Prefecture: Transcription and Analysis. Eight Pieces of Materials on Mokuren, Jikaku and Komachi], "Akita Daigaku Kyōiku Gakubu Kenkyū Kiyō: Jinbun, Shakai Gakka Bumon" 1991, no. 41, p. 56.



All the details surrounding the composition of poem have been altered, except for its ability to provoke a wondrous response. This, at least to some extent, can be justified by the fact that the poem circulated at the time as an inscription on talismans and its detachment from the original context enabled the text to be absorbed by a new context<sup>29</sup>.

Another example of reproducing part of the poetical dialogue on a talisman is *Anzan [an]sui fu* (fig. 2). As its name suggests, it served a dual function: it was meant to facilitate safe childbirth and menstruation. It includes a variation of the poem-response: “I am a god who has originally mingled with the [worldly] dust. What is [to me] a monthly impediment?” To reinforce its protective properties, the poem has been supplemented with a sequence of nine protective signs (*kuji* 九字), expressed explicitly by *kanji* characters: *rin* (attack), *pyō/byō* (army), *tō* (battle), *sha/ja* (man), *kai* (all), *jin* (position [of the army]), *retsu* (row), *zai* (existence), *zen* (front), and symbolically by a mesh in which protruding ends of the lines correspond to the respective characters, and the characters in turn correspond to certain buddhas or bodhisattvas. The origin of the talisman is unknown but this feature suggests that it was crafted in a Shugendō<sup>30</sup> or esoteric Buddhist temple.

A final example is the *Tsukimizu jōka no mamori* [Talisman to Purify Fire During Menstruation] (fig. 3). It was issued by Mount Kōya (as the red stamp indicates) and possibly other Shingon sect temples. It contains the poems in question with some minor spelling mistakes (*shō* 障 written with 章) and a different choice of words (*chiri* [dust] has been rephrased as *akuta* [dirt]):

古ノ五章雲の晴ヤラテ月ノ障ト成ソカナシキ Clouds of five hindrances form remote times have not cleared up. How sad, that I was cursed with my monthly impediment.

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<sup>29</sup> The same tendency can be traced back to the fourteenth century. According to *Shintōshū* [Collection of Shintō Texts], when the consort of emperor Takakura went to Kumano and in a place called Fujishiro her monthly flow started, in despair she composed a poem: 本ヨリモイツエノ雲ノ厚ケレ八月ノ障トナルソ悲シキ (From the beginning I have been covered with five thick clouds. How sad, that I was cursed with my monthly impediment), to which an elderly monk responded to her in a dream: 天下り塵ニ交ル我ナレハ月ノサワリハナニカ苦シキ (I am the one who descended from the sky to mingle with [worldly] dust. Why would I be harmed by [your] monthly impediment?) Her monthly flow stopped right away, so she could continue with her pilgrimage. This version of the poems did not appear on talismans I have studied. *Shintōshū: Tōyō Bunkobon* [Collection of Shintō Texts: Version Owned by Tōyō Archives], ed. Yoshihiro Kondō, Kadokawa Shoten, Tōkyō 1959, p. 162.

<sup>30</sup> A Japanese spiritual practice that combines elements of Shintō, Buddhism, and Taoism. It involves esoteric rituals and ascetic mountain training to attain enlightenment and harmony with nature.

元ヨリモ芥ニマジワル神ナレハ月ノ章モナニクルシキ I am a god who has originally mingled with the [worldly] dirt. Why would I be harmed by [your] monthly impediment?

The second subject of my analysis *Naniwazu ni saku ya*... This classical *waka*, composed by Wani, is particularly well-known as a poem urging Prince Ōsazaki to ascend to the throne, as stated in the *Kokin wakashū* [Collection of Ancient and Modern Poems, 905]. Despite its ancient origin, it survived as a magical formula until the beginning of the twentieth century. Ethnographic sources demonstrate that women who wished to protect themselves from impurity caused by unexpected menstrual flow before embarking on a trip wrote the following on a piece of paper: *Naniwazu ni saku ya kono hana fuyugomori* (At Naniwa Bay, how this flower blooms, after being closed up all the winter). Afterwards, they needed to swallow the paper to suppress menstrual flow. To reverse the process (for example, once the trip was over), they recited aloud the remaining part of the poem: *Ima wa harube to saku ya kono hana* (Now as the spring has come, the flower is in bloom).<sup>31</sup> Women could use this method individually, without needing to seek assistance from Buddhist temples.

The same *waka* remained in use in a strictly ritualistic setting. Until the twentieth century, in the Zen Sōtō sect, it played a role in ceremonies of bestowing precepts (*jukai-e*). As Nagahisa Gakusui states in *Zenmon jūshoku gyōjigaku zenshū* 禪門住職行持学全集 [Complete Manual for Zen Priests on How to Perform Ceremonies], published in 1952, the ceremony took place over the course of seven days. The fifth day was dedicated to repentance (*zange*), meant to purify the mind of an adept in preparation for ascending to the altar (*tōdan*). Female participants were offered an additional measure of purification: they were given pocket-size copies of the *Bloody Pond Sutra*. Nagahisa Gakusui in his detailed day-to-day explanation, advised fellow Zen monks to prepare copies of the sutra beforehand. If the sutra was not readily available, he advised them to use talismans for eliminating impurity (*fujōyoke* 不浄除) instead. They were instructed to write in a circular shape: *Naniwazu ni saku ya kono hana fuyugomori* and in the middle put the invocation: “I sincerely depend upon merciful bodhisattva Kannon (*Namu daihi Kanzeon*)”.<sup>32</sup>

In this case, the flower should be read as a metaphor for menstruation. I am going to provide grounds for such an interpretation based on a talisman of the *Bloody Pond Sutra* presented below (fig. 4). In all likelihood, it was crafted for the purpose of such a ceremony of bestowing precepts. The title on the envelope reads: *Nyonin ōjō “Ketsubonkyō”* [“Bloody Pond Sutra”, the Sutra on How a Woman Was Reborn in Pure Land], while the title on the page inserted inside reads: *Gekkasui [no]*

<sup>31</sup> Nobutoshi Tsukada, *Gessui gofū no kenkyū* [Study on Talismans for Menstruation], Suikodō, Tōkyō 1937, p. 60.

<sup>32</sup> Yūshin Nakano, *Sōtōshū ni okeru “Ketsubonkyō” shinkō* [Beliefs Relating to “Bloody Pond Sutra” in Sōtō Sect] (part 2), “Sōtōshū Shūgaku Kenkyūjo Kiyō” 1994, no. 7, p. 124.

*daiji* 月華水大事. This can be roughly translated as: *Secret Method for [Transforming] Monthly Water [Menstrual Blood] into Flowery Water*, in which “flower” (*ka* 華) alludes to the title of *Kegonkyō* 華嚴經 (skt. *Avatamsaka sūtra*) [Flower Garland Sutra]. Despite what the title might suggest, it does not contain the text of *Bloody Pond Sutra* itself. Its content consists of *dharani* of *Bloody Pond Sutra* phonetically transcribed with Chinese characters and the verse of repentance *zangemon* 懺悔文, specifically its shortened version *ryakuzangemon* 略懺悔文, a passage found in the chapter 40 of *Flower Garland Sutra* (in the translation by Prajñā). The verse reads: “All the evil deeds I have committed, from the distant past without beginning, as a result of greed, hatred and ignorance, and which I have committed with body, speech and mind, I hereby repentantly confess!”. It was meant to purify a woman participating in the ceremony of bestowing precepts, from three poisons enumerated here. This brings us back to the Buddhist understanding of monthly flow (explained at the beginning of this paper); it was viewed as a manifestation of a poisoned mind.

Another point to be considered is what made this particular *waka* so powerful. Classical pieces of *waka* recorded in the imperial anthology *Kokin wakashū* were subject to secret transmission as part of initiation ceremonies (*waka kanjō*). Secret commentaries, produced in a vast number, contributed to the idea that *waka* conveyed esoteric teachings with strong Buddhist overtones.

*Waka kanjō shidai himitsushō* 和歌灌頂次第秘密抄 [Excerpts from Secret Transmission of Waka], copied in 1357 (attributed to Fujiwara Ietaka), provide some Buddhist insight into the meaning of this particular poem. Although Ki no Tsurayuki states that in *Kanajo* [The Japanese Preface] there are six poetic principles (*rikugi* 六義) and gives *Naniwazu ni saku ya...* as an exemplification of the first one: *soe uta* ぞへ歌 (suggestive, allegorical), according to *Waka kanjō shidai himitsushō*, it was the first poem to incorporate all six of them. This number also holds symbolic meaning: six principles correspond to six syllables of invocation (*rokuji myōgō*):

風	賦	比	興	雅	頌
<i>fū</i>	<i>fu</i>	<i>hi</i>	<i>kyō</i>	<i>ga</i>	<i>shō</i>
南	無	阿	弥	陀	仏
<i>Na</i>	<i>mu</i>	<i>A</i>	<i>mi</i>	<i>da</i>	<i>butsu</i>

(I sincerely depend upon Amida).<sup>33</sup>

Hence, reciting or contemplating this poem could be substantially equated with reciting the sacred name of Buddha Amida.

*Kokinshū kanjō* 古今集灌頂 [Initiation into Collection of Ancient and Modern Poems], a fifteenth century manuscript, on the other hand, provides an

<sup>33</sup> Masatane Miwa, *Ietaka katakusbo no kentō: “Waka kanjō shidai himitsushō” o megutte* [Introduction on Writings Attributed to Ietaka: On “Excerpts from Secret Transmission of Waka”], “Ōsaka Furitsu Daigaku Kiyō” 1979, no. 19, pp. 46–47.

interpretation rooted in esoteric Buddhist thought: “*Naniwazu ni saku ya kono hana hiraki ya* (At Naniwa Bay, how it blooms! How this flower has opened!). It means a closed lotus (*tsubomeru renga*). It represents Dainichi Nyorai (Mahāvairocana) of the Diamond Realm (Kongōkai). ... *Ima wa harube to sakuya kono hana* (Now, as the spring has come, the flower is in bloom) says, that he has attained a perfect buddhahood (*bukka enman* 仏果円満) and became the highest of buddhas.”<sup>34</sup>

The wording of the poem has undergone slight alterations, possibly intended to allude to the name of Dainichi (Great Sun) by incorporating the syllable *hi*, signifying the sun. The imagery of the flower is well-founded in Buddhist literature, but for our purposes the most relevant notion is the idea that its state of growth correspond to stages on the path to enlightenment. In the case of women, it was believed that developmental defects in the flower hindered their spiritual liberation. According to *Tenkaisō* “*Ketsubonkyō*” *dangi shi*, while the lotus always grows upward in men, it grows downward in women, preventing the flower from blooming. This leads buddhas and bodhisattvas residing within women’s eight-petal-shaped hearts to shed tears, which manifest themselves as menstrual blood.<sup>35</sup> A similar idea has been expressed in *Tokiwa monogatari* 常盤物語 [Story about Tokiwa, 1625]: in man’s chest grows a lotus with eight petals, whereas the lotus in a woman’s chest has only seven petals and it never blooms. The food she consumes does not nourish the karma-infused worms residing within her body. They weep bloody tears that take the form of menstrual blood.<sup>36</sup> This understanding of the flower further solidified the connection between *Naniwazu ni saku ya*... and female physiology.

In conclusion, this essay has discussed the process of reinterpreting *waka* poems within a Buddhist context, transforming them into potent purifying formulas for women. These *waka* verses found a new life on talismans, remaining relevant in various forms until at least the first half of the twentieth century. This phenomenon adds a compelling layer to the enduring tradition of *waka* transmission, demonstrating how these poetic expressions transcended their original intent to become powerful tools for purification and protection. The interplay between *waka*, Buddhism, and women’s ritual practices sheds light on the dynamic evolution of cultural expressions and their enduring resonance throughout history.

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<sup>34</sup> *Kokinshū kanjō* [in:] *Chūsei shinbutsu setsuma: zoku* [Second Part of Medieval Anecdotes on Buddhas and Gods], ed. Yoshihiro Kondō, Koten Bunko, Tōkyō 1955, p. 179.

<sup>35</sup> *Nikkō-san Rinnō-ji zō Keichō*..., pp. 21–22.

<sup>36</sup> *Tokiwa monogatari* [in:] *Kojōruri shōbonshū* [Collection of Scripts of Kojōruri], vol. 1, ed. Shigeru Yokoyama, Kadokawa Shoten, Tōkyō 1964, pp. 468–469.

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## SUMMARY

This paper explores the reinterpreted use of early Japanese short poems *tanka* (henceforth referred to as *waka*) as magical formulas, particularly examining *Moto yori chiri ni majimaru...*, a pseudo-classical *waka* attributed to Izumi Shikibu (976–1031) (also to Ono no Komachi, a ninth-century court poetess) and *Naniwazu ni saku ya...*, a poem recorded in *Kokin wakashū* [Collection of Ancient and Modern Japanese Poems]. These examples, which are well-founded in literature, illustrate how *waka* were repurposed for supernatural applications. The focus is on their practical role in female physiology, particularly as magical formulas to regulate menstrual cycles and ward off impurity caused by menstrual blood. The paper argues that these *waka* endured through their incorporation into talismans (*gofu*), and the study includes examples of talismans from the author's private collection. Through this exploration, it sheds light on the dynamic interplay between *waka*, Buddhism, and ritualistic purity.

## STRESZCZENIE

### JAPOŃSKA POEZJA JAKO FORMUŁY MAGICZNE W KONTEKŚCIE ZWIĄZKÓW Z KOBIECĄ FIZJOLOGIĄ

Artykuł jest poświęcony reinterpretacji oraz adaptacji krótkich japońskich form poetyckich *tanka* (określanych mianem *waka*) jako formuł magicznych. Analiza obejmuje *Moto yori chiri ni majimaru...*, pseudoklasyczny utwór przypisywany Izumi Shikibu (976–1031) (a także Ono no Komachi, poetce tworzącej w IX wieku) oraz *Naniwazu ni saku ya...*, wiersz z antologii *Kokin wakashū* [Zbiór poezji japońskiej dawnej i współczesnej]. Te dobrze ugruntowane w literaturze przykłady mają za zadanie zilustrować, w jaki sposób poezję wtórnie wykorzystywano do osiągnięcia nadnaturalnych celów. Skupiono się w szczególności na jej związku z kobiecą fizjologią – zaadaptowaniu wierszy jako formuł magicznych mających na celu manipulowanie cyklem menstruacyjnym oraz ochronę przed nieczystością spowodowaną krwią. Artykuł pokazuje, że poezja *waka* zachowała tę funkcję dzięki talizmanom (*gofu*) dla kobiet, jednocześnie rzucając światło na związki *waka* z buddyzmem oraz rytualną czystością.





Fig. 3. *Tsukimizu jōka no mamori* [Talisman to Purify Fire During Menstruation]

Source: The author's private collection.



Fig. 4. *Nyonin ōjō "Ketsubonkyō"* ["Bloody Pond Sutra"], the Sutra on How a Woman was Reborn in Pure Land]

Source: The author's private collection.