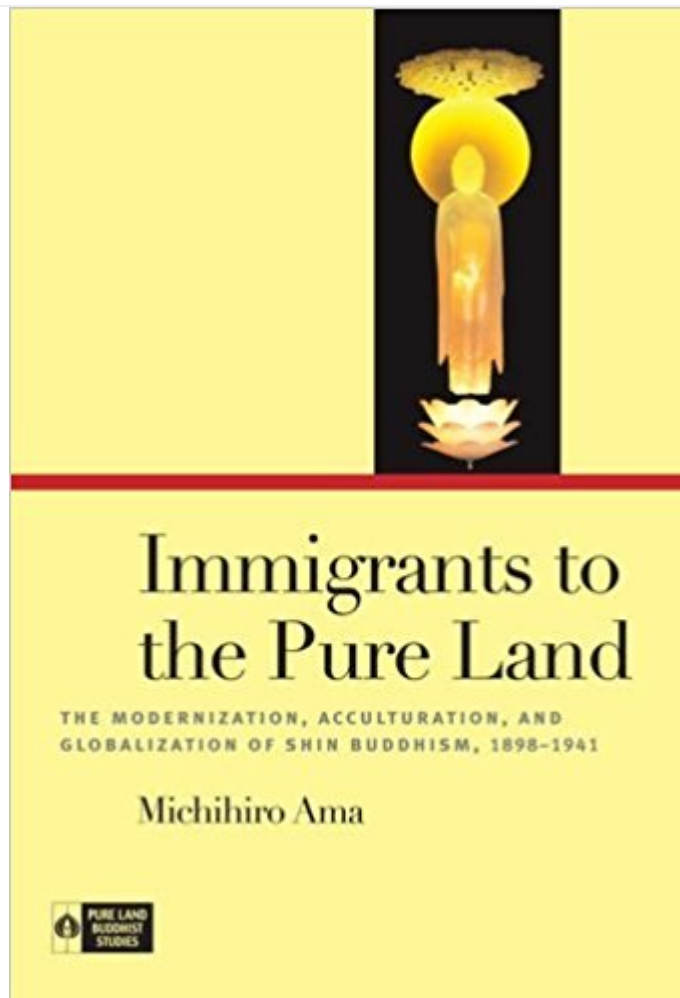


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Immigrants to the Pure Land: The Modernization, Acculturation, and Globalization of Shin Buddhism, 1898-1941



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Immigrants to the Pure Land: the Modernization, Acculturation, and Globalization of Shin Buddhism, 1898-1941. By Michihiro Ama. (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2011). Pp. 313. Cloth, \$47.00.

This volume is a timely contribution to the burgeoning field of American Buddhism, expanding our knowledge of Shin Buddhism (Jōdo Shinshū) in the United States between the 1880s and the 1930s, the formative years of its overseas institutional expansion. It relies heavily on the prewar Japanese documents at the BCA Archives (the Buddhist Church of America), one of the earliest Buddhist organizations in the United States. The BCA was renamed the Buddhist Mission of North America of Nishi Honganji (BMNA) in the decades prior to World War II. Drawing further from publications of Nishi and Higashi Honganjis, newspapers and periodicals in North America and Japan, historian of Japanese Buddhism Ama Michihiro provides an informative history of the Shin Buddhist churches in North America and Hawai'i, with particular attention to the Nishi Honganji branch. He provides a brief account of the Higashi Honganji in North America, but the study is fragmented due partly to the paucity of written sources. In placing the Shin religious activities in the transnational context of the Kyoto Honganji headquarters' institutional history in Asia, and American immigration and racial policy toward Japanese, Ama makes the point that Nishi Honganji ministers succeeded in their early overseas propagation by mainly addressing Japanese immigrants' cultural and ethnic experiences in Hawaii and North America. His account demonstrates that the overseas Shin Buddhism's perseverance and adaptability had contributed significantly to its organizational expansion by the 1930s.

In his effort to provide a social history of Asian-American Shin Buddhism, Ama maps out Shin's institutional expansion in Hawai'i, California and Vancouver, where Japanese immigrants most densely resided from the turn of the nineteenth century to the 1930s. He pays close attention to the Nishi Honganji expansion from the lenses of its two major overseas headquarters— the Honpa Honganji Mission of Hawai'i

(HHMH) and the BMNA—in the United States and Canada. The two organizations were founded in response to the drastic influx of Japanese immigrants in Hawai‘i and mainland North America. Since the majority of the first-generation Japanese immigrants (Issei) in Hawai‘i were Shin Buddhists by origin, the HHMH expanded faster than the BMNA, which oversaw Shin missions in mainland North America. Shin ministers’ involvement in the Japanese language was one of the major topics threaded through this book. The language schools were instrumental in fostering the ethnic identity and solidarity of the Japanese, accommodating their resettlement in the host culture, and developing their religious belief and practice. During the 1920s, in Hawai‘i the majority of the second-generation Japanese (Nisei) attended the language schools, of which at least 47% were directly sponsored by Buddhist organizations. On the mainland, “almost every Buddhist church had a Japanese language school” (55). Ama associates the religion with the cultural heritage of the Japanese community, appreciating its successful consideration of the migrant experience, which in turn contributed to its popularity among the Japanese.

Ama makes a fairly persuasive argument that the Honganji’s early overseas program benefited significantly from its intimate relation with the imperial enterprise of the Japanese government. In Asia, the two Honganjis made inroads into Hokaidō, the South Pacific, and the Asian continent, among other regions (182). Although the BMNA and HHMH had different programs and different relationships to the Kyoto headquarters, they remained subordinate to the headquarters, which reserved the right to assign titles and status to the overseas ministers and churches. Thanks to the Japanese government’s official negotiation of labor migration with the Hawaiian consul, the Japanese population in Hawai‘i had reached 125,368 by 1924 (32). The Kyoto Honganji headquarters privileged the expansion of the HHMH over the BMNA, considering Hawaii as “Japan’s future territory” (36). By the late 1930s, the BMNA ministers took more interest in promoting Śākyamuni’s teachings among whites. Because the Japanese were one of the largest ethnic groups in Hawai‘i, the HHMH was more involved in the Japanese plantation workers’ public and private life. The BMNA’s orientation toward Japanese women responded to and supported its Kyoto headquarters’ religious and imperial activities. In 1908, Nishi Honganji founded the Federation of Buddhist Women’s Associations throughout

Japan. The BMNA's female laity purchased the Federation's monthly journals for women, and donated money to their counterparts in Japan. In the 1930s, these women even participated in the Japanese government's imperial enterprise, sending materials "to Japanese soldiers stationed in Manchuria" (83). From as early as 1897 to the 1930s, there had been a mutual support between the Japanese Empire at home and the overseas Shin organization: the prosperity of one supported the prosperity of the other.

Ama gives particular attention to the Japanese Shin clergy's religious practice in North America and Hawai'i as a continuation of the Honganjis' reform in Japan. The resident ministers emphasized contemporary issues including the application of democratic principles and the integration of Western and Japanese cultural practice in America. Ama interprets their strategy of integration as an extension of the Honganji headquarters' reform and modernizing policy in Japan. In Chapter One, he shows that the Honganjis had actively introduced a representative assembly between the 1880s and the 1890s. The Honganjis reformed their liturgy and doctrines in the model of Christianity in the West. Ama attributes such modernizing activities to the top-down effort of the headquarters, as well as of prominent Shin clerical scholars like Kiyozawa Manshi (1863-1903) of Higashi Honganji, and Shimaji Mokurai (1838-1911) of Nishi Honganji. He believes that Kiyozawa's modern Shin Buddhist discourse not only altered the doctrinal practice of the religion in Japan, but also inspired several important Japanese ministers to promote Shinran's teachings in North America. For example, Itsuzō Kyōgoku (1887-1953), a Shin minister who received Kiyozawa's influence in Japan and worked for the Issei and Nisei Japanese laity in North America between 1922 and 1941, promoted the spiritual liberation of the Japanese laity through their reliance on the original vow of Amida Buddha.

Ama foregrounds the perseverance and resilience of the resident Shin ministers and Japanese laity in maintaining their cultural heritage, adopting Protestant practice and American legal tradition of democracy. Chapter Two demonstrates that the growth of Shin Buddhism in its formative years in Hawai'i was achieved not only by the support of the Kyoto headquarters and the devout laity, but also by the ministers' efforts to overcome challenges and resistance from both anti-Japanese local

politics and those Japanese plantation workers who were suspicious of the ministers. In Japan, Shin remained a popular movement with many followers. However, in the United States, it was based on the ethnic need of the Japanese laity for community solidarity. The network of Shin practice engaged society less completely than their Christian counterparts, and was regulated by the laws and policies of the American society. This situation allocated relative freedom to the Shin ministers, who introduced alternative organizational and ritual practices into the American Shin churches. The churches developed new organizational styles rather than merely imitating the styles from Japan. The open and syncretic feature of Shin Buddhism was particularly salient in the 1930s, partly as the Issei clergy's response to the Nisei and Caucasian Buddhists' request for a more liberal configuration of ministry. In the mid-1930s, the BMNA officials terminated the rituals pertinent to the celebration of imperial holidays, and standardized an eclectic form of services suggestive of both American and Japanese influence (91).

One strength of the volume is its acute attention to the internal conflicts and disputes between the Shin churches and the Japanese communities, an approach that problematizes the stereotypical perception of the people as homogenous and the religion as peaceful. Based on a nuanced, careful reading of the BCA archives and those on the history of Japanese immigrants in Hawai'i and Vancouver, Ama brings into light the complicated love-hate relationship between the BMNA office and local churches, between churches and their laity, and between churches and Japanese language schools. For example, in the 1910s, in California, when the conflicts of two local Shin churches with the central authorities of the BMNA and the Kyoto headquarters increased, some ministers converted and aligned with Higashi Honganji (52-53). The emergence of dissenting groups suggests that the overseas churches did not always maintain a normative relation with the Shin headquarters, destabilizing the notion that Nishi Honganji was a unified body with a common loyalty. In the 1930s, in some Japanese communities that did not have their own language schools, parents would send children to schools affiliated with a Shin mission or church for a Japanese education, but not for religion (57). This tension illustrates that, at the popular level, even though the Japanese did not always respond to the community-building and religious activities of Shin organizations, many expected its ministers to be custodians of Japanese tradition. In addressing the internal conflicts of

the Japanese communities and their heterogeneous relations with Shin churches, Ama produces a compelling account of Shin's success as an ethnic religion for the Japanese.

Ama's reliance on the Japanese Shin archives provides a wealth of descriptive detail from the Japanese perspective of the BMNA and HHMH, but tends to present the institutions as independent organisms external to the larger social and religious context of the United States. He undertakes to reconstruct the history of converted white Buddhists, but his examination is primarily Japanese-centered, and underestimates these white Buddhists' contribution to Shin's integration into the mainstream American society in the decades before World War II. Without addressing the broader American religious and intellectual context, the intentions behind the Japanese ministers' conversion of the non-Japanese, and the religious visions of those converted white ministers, Ama's portrayal of the converted Buddhists remains superficial and suffers from the absence of any analytical framework. At the time, Buddhism was construed in America as a rational philosophy, as well as a religion founded by Śākyamuni that was compatible with the monotheistic structure of Christianity. From around the 1900s, Shin ministers in mainland North America took advantage of the Euro-American misunderstanding of Shin Buddhism, making it their objective "to propagate the doctrines of Gautama Siddhartha [sic], the Buddha Sakaymuni, as set forth in the sacred scriptures of His disciples" (38). The ministers established a close relationship with the white population, borrowing Theravada rituals to initiate and ordain local white converts. In California, the BMNA ministers taught Śākyamuni's doctrine to the Euro-Americans, while delivering Jōdo Shinshū sermons to the Japanese. It was not until the late 1930s that the office began to promote Shin Buddhism in English. The dual self-representation undermined the church's relation with many of its converts, resulting in the white ministers' varied commitment to the institution. For instance, after being ordained in the BMNA, Robert Clifton, a Euro-American youth, left the church. He returned and was ordained again, but finally left for the second time to join the Theravada tradition.

The absence of a rigorous analytical framework neglects, or at least underestimates the role of the converted whites in the institutional success of Shin Buddhism overseas. Ama's study is most successful in

addressing Shin Buddhism's close collaboration with and support of the Japanese community, which contributed to the early Shin success in Hawai'i and North America. This ethnic dimension denotes the Shin churches' relatively distant relation with the politics of its host society. In a society where the Christian population figured prominently, Ama observes that the Shin churches fostered and nourished Japanese ethnic identity, an activity that sometimes antagonized anti-Japanese and pro-Christian local communities and governments. The situation was compounded between the 1920s and 1930s, when a series of anti-Asian immigration laws were passed. In the 1920s, Robert Clark, a converted Caucasian Buddhist, proposed that he could "help lessen discrimination against Japanese immigrants by demonstrating similarities between Buddhism and Christianity to the American public," if his enterprise were sufficiently funded by the Japanese (78-79). Ama fails to point out that the Shin's weaker level of social penetration meant that having white converts improved its political position and self-representation as a transracial religion for both Japanese and mainstream Americans. In the 1920s and 1930s, both the BMNA and HHMH created English Departments to encourage the converted Euro-American Buddhists to promote Śākyamuni's doctrine among the non-Japanese American population, and to expand their institutional influence.

Ama appreciates the Shin churches' flexible approaches to both the Japanese and white converts, noting that the ongoing tension between authenticity and adaptation in Shin Buddhism's overseas development was constructive for its long-term institutional success. Despite its organizational unity, following its early years of proselytization, the Shin's doctrinal and ritual contents within and outside of Japan grew divergent. The BMNA and HHMH assimilated Protestant forms of organization and rituals in their churches, denoting that American Shin Buddhism have mutated over time, not simply preserving its Japanese past, but also representing the culture of the American society. The ministers developed different sermons and instructions for the Nisei Japanese community. For instance, in the 1910s, the HHMH Bishop Emyō Imamura (1867-1932) instructed the Nisei Buddhists to study the political ideologies of the United States, but observed the imperial rules of Japan with the Issei (140). In the early 1930s, the Honganji headquarters made efforts to translate Japanese Shin Buddhist texts into English for its oversea churches. However, the quality of the English

translation was so low that “neither Euro-Americans nor Nisei parishioners fully understood Shin Buddhist doctrine and its relationship to the teachings of Śākyamuni Buddha during the prewar period” (97). The expansion of Shin Buddhism during the 1930s could be rendered as a process whereby both Japanese and Euro-American Buddhists helped the institution to forge a multi-race public image. The religion established its foothold by creating multiple forms of self-representation to the Issei laity, the Nisei, and Caucasian converts, on the one hand, and by setting up a dialect of American practice and Japanese Shin ideals, on the other. The multicultural context placed American Shin Buddhism in a transitional status, and suggested that the future development of Shin Buddhism would be determined, not exclusively by the Kyoto headquarters and its association with Japanese cultural identity, but also in response to local circumstances in Hawaii and North America.

In general, this is a well-documented study of the acculturation process of the overseas Nishi Hongaji organizations in the transnational context of Japan, Hawai‘i and North America from its formative years of the late nineteenth century to the critical period of the 1930s. Ama’s history of the BMNA and HHMH highlights both the Kyoto headquarters and the resident Japanese ministers’ flexibility and perseverance in expanding the religion among both the Japanese and whites. In delineating the social experience of Japanese immigrants, he successfully identifies the Shin application of the legal and religious practice of American society, a strategy that contributed to its prosperity in a Japanese community engaged in integrating into mainstream white culture. His nuanced approach brings out the complexity of the Shin institutional history among Japanese immigrants. But his examination of Shin Buddhism as a convert religion excludes the diverse experiences of Euro-American Buddhists, and marginalizes their contribution to the Shin expansion overseas, leaving room for future exploration.

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