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Reception of *Ketsubon-kyō* (“Bloody Pond Sutra”) in Edo-period Japanese Pure Land Buddhism

Abstract

The *Ketsubon-kyō* (“Bloody Pond Sutra”), introduced to Japan through the fifteenth-century Tendai school, played a crucial role in shaping cross-sectarian Buddhist views on women’s salvation. Existing research primarily examines its general role in Buddhist eschatology, with school-specific studies focusing on Zen Sōtō and Pure Land (*Jōdo-shū*) as exemplified by Shōyo Ganteki. This paper further explores its unique reception within the Pure Land strain of Buddhism from the 18th to 19th centuries. Two contrasting interpretations emerge: (1) The bloody pond (*chinoike*) originating in the sutra was understood as a realm exclusively for women who died in childbirth. (2) The sutra contributed to the eschatological idea of women’s impurity, reinforcing Hōnen’s view of their abandonment by buddhas. These perspectives highlight the *Ketsubon-kyō*’s influence on Pure Land Buddhism.

Keywords: *Ketsubon-kyō*, women in Buddhism, Pure Land Buddhism, impurity



Ketsubon-kyō (*Bloody Pond Sutra*), which made its first appearance in the fifteenth-century Tendai school,¹ was later received and interpreted by the main strains of Japanese Buddhism (Shingon, Pure Land, Zen). It grew to play an important role in shaping teachings on women's salvation, pointing to a closely shared and cross-sectarian understanding of the issue.

The existing body of research on *Ketsubon-kyō* tends to focus on its overall influence on Buddhist eschatology, while school-specific studies are limited to Zen Sōtō (Nakano Yūshin,² Nakano Jūsai³) and Pure Land school (Jōdo-shū) as represented by Shōyo Ganteki's commentary (Kōdate Naomi).⁴ Based on religious literature, partially from the author's private collection, this research seeks to highlight aspects of its reception that are unique to the Pure Land tradition⁵ (especially from the eighteenth through nineteenth centuries).

This paper will argue that within the Pure Land Buddhism two somehow contradictory views emerged. Firstly, as the analysis of temple histories (*engi* 縁起) and records of the white lotus-like followers (*myōkōnin-den* 妙好人伝)⁶ of the True Pure Land school (Jōdo shinshū) will reveal, the bloody pond [hell] (*chinoike* [jigoku] 血の池[地獄]), originating in the aforementioned sutra, was interpreted as a realm of existence solely for women who died in childbirth (rather than women in general, as existing versions of *Ketsubon-kyō* would suggest⁷). Such an interpretation aligns with *Ketsubon-kyō* wage

¹ The earliest known reference to its presence comes from Chōben 長弁, a Tendai monk at the Jindai-ji temple in Chōfu, in a record from 1428. In his *Shianshō* 私案抄, Chōben cites a *fujumon* 諷誦文, which is a request for a memorial ceremony made by Ida Utanosuke, *Chōben shianshō*, in: *Zoku gunsho ruijū*, *Shakebu*: vol. 28, ed. Zoku Gunsho Ruijū Kanseikai, Tōkyō 1977, p. 125.

² Nakano Yūshin (Yūko), 'Sōtōshū ni okeru Ketsubon-kyō shinkō (2)', *Sōtōshū Shūgaku Kenkyūjo Kiyō* 7 (1994).

³ Nakano Jūsai, 'Shūmon fukyōjō ni okeru sabetsu jishō (1): seisabetsu', *Kyōka Kenshū* 30 (1987).

⁴ Kōdate Naomi, 'Shiryō shōkai: Ketsubon-kyō wage. Kinseiki Jōdoshū ni okeru Ketsubon-kyō shinkō' [Presentation of a Source: Exposition of Bloody Pond Sutra in Japanese. Beliefs related to Bloody Pond Sutra in Early-modern Pure Land Buddhism], *Bukkyō Minzoku Kenkyū* 6 (1989).

⁵ In this paper Amidism, also referred to as Pure Land Buddhism entails two main schools: Jōdo-shū and Jōdo shinshū.

⁶ The name originates from white lotuses (*myōkōka* 妙好華), which bloom amid the mud, symbolizing purity. The finest and most magnificent of lotuses were believed to grown in the lake Anavatapta (Anokudacchi 阿耨達池) – snow white, silver-like, with broad petals, that make the flowers resemble canopies. *Myōkōnin-den* is a genre of literature that portrays the lives of model followers of Amidism, who exemplified true faith in the compassionate grace of the Buddha Amida through their actions, often in the face of challenging life circumstances (suffering, poverty, illnesses). It thrived during the 18th and 19th centuries, particularly after the first collection was compiled by Gōsei 仰誓 and later expanded by Sōjun 僧純 and Zōō 象王. The protagonists are primarily peasants and townspeople. These works reached their audience not only through written texts, but also via sermons delivered by the clergy. *Iwanami Dictionary of Buddhism*, eds. Hajime Nakamura et al., 1st edition, Tokyo 1989, p. 771.

⁷ Based on existing copies, Kōdate Naomi identified four groups of the sutra: 1. Those attributing women's afterlife existence in the Bloody Pond to postpartum blood, with King Yama instructing Maudgalyāyana on how to save them. 2. Those attributing it to both postpartum and menstrual blood, with King Yama teaching Maudgalyāyana. 3. Those mentioning only postpartum blood, with the Buddha guiding Maudgalyāyana on methods of salvation. 4. Those referencing both postpartum and menstrual blood, with the Buddha instructing

血盆経和解 (*Japanese Exposition of the Bloody Pond Sutra*), a commentary produced in the early 18th century by Shōyo Ganteki from the Pure Land school (Jōdo-shū). The monk took an interest in the sutra in search of a means to save his mother, who had died in childbirth.

Secondly, the original reception of the *Ketsubon-kyō* is evident in its association with the thirty-fifth vow of Buddha Amida, promising women rebirth in his Pure Land. The pessimistic idea that women were abandoned by all buddhas and bodhisattvas⁸ was expressed by Hōnen, the founder of the Jōdo school, but under the influence of the *Ketsubon-kyō*, this eschatological situation was attributed to their blood-induced impurity and widely popularized by Buddhist poetry (*nenbutsu*,⁹ *wasan*, *kudokibushi*). Such an interpretation spread despite the sutra's promise of rebirth in a blissful land (*ōjō anrakukoku* 往生安樂国), with no specific mention of Amida and his land.

Bloody pond hell and death in childbirth

In Pure Land Buddhism, from at least the 18th century, the concept of the "bloody pond hell" – a place of karmic retribution – became noticeably linked to motherhood, reflecting a narrowing of the category of women thought to reincarnate there. Key evidence of this interpretation can be found in the moralistic literature of the *myōkōnin-den* 妙好人伝 and *engi* 縁起 genres. The most prominent and influential example of the former is *The Tale of Onatsu's Resurrection* (*Onatsu sosei monogatari* 於夏蘇生物語). First published in 1773, it circulated through various editions and handwritten copies up until the early Shōwa era (1930s), making it one of the most widely read works of this kind.

The story of Onatsu highlights many of the central and recurrent themes surrounding the salvation of women in Amidism. Initially, Onatsu is depicted as a disbeliever, unaware of the blessings she receives daily from Buddha Amida. Concerned for her afterlife, her husband Yoshikichi arranges for a sermon by a priest from Shinkō Temple (Shinkō-ji 真光寺). The priest's passionate teachings, especially those related to the thirty-fifth vow, move Onatsu's heart and lead to her conversion:

Maudgalyāyana on how to save women. Shōyo Ganteki, *Bussestu daizō shōgyō Ketsubon-kyō wage*, ed. Kōdate Naomi, Tōkyō 2014, p. 344.

⁸ Mahāyāna Buddhism acknowledges the existence of countless buddhas and bodhisattvas, each presiding over their own buddha-fields, with the Buddha Amida's Western Pure Land (*saihō jōdo*), or Pure Land of Bliss (*gokuraku jōdo*), being one of them. The idea of the abandonment of women signifies that they could not be reborn in Pure Lands other than that of the Buddha Amida.

⁹ Religious practice (also viewed as an act of faith) in Pure Land Buddhism, which involves chanting or invoking the name of the Buddha Amida. Specifically, it consists of reciting the six-character formula *Namu Amida Butsu*. Robert E. Buswell et al., *Encyclopedia of Buddhism*, vol. 2, Thomson Gale, 2004, p. 587. In Japan, especially since 18th century onwards, this term has been used to refer to all Buddhist prayer formulas, including *wasan* hymns. See: Sakamoto Kaname, 'Minkan nenbutsu wasan to anzan kigan', in: *Jōdoshū no shomondai*, ed. Fujii Masao, Tokyo 1978, p. 279.

[...] The Buddha Amida made forty-eight fundamental vows. Among them, especially the eighteenth vow was made for sentient beings in all ten directions.

‘Whether a woman or a sinner, anyone who abandons the pursuit of self-driven practices (*jiriki*) and the accumulation of merit, and instead entrusts himself fully to me, will be welcomed into my Pure Land’. Such is the vow.

However, women are prone to doubt. Although the vow includes all sentient beings from the ten directions, a woman is blinded by the dense clouds of five hindrances (*goshō*) and covered by the thick fog of the three obediences (*sanjū*); she is carrying the weight of her bad karma. Fearing that women might question whether the main vow applies to them, [the Buddha Amida] made the thirty-fifth vow, specifically promising the attainment of Buddhahood by women (*nyonin jōbutsu*).

This shows that the Tathāgata’s vows were directed more toward laypeople than monks, more toward the sinful than the virtuous, and more toward women than men.

(本願と申は阿弥陀如来に四十八の本願まします中に別して第十八の願に十方衆生と誓ひ玉ひていかなる女人悪人なりとももろもろの雑行雑修自力の心をすてゝ一心に我を頼まん者を極楽へむかへんとの御誓願なり然る所女人の身は疑ひふかふして十方衆生とはあれども五障の雲深く覆ひ三従のかすみあつくたなびきて罪業重き身なれば若本願に漏やせんと疑わん事を恐れ重ねて第三十五の願に女人成仏の誓ひをたてまします是にて知べし如来の本願は出家よりは在家善人よりは悪人男子よりは女人を正とし給ふなり).

Inspired by the sermon, Onatsu entrusted herself to the Buddha’s compassionate grace, as a result of which “the horns¹⁰ of her false views broke” (*jaken no tsuno orete*). Not long after, she died in childbirth, enduring a week of excruciating pain, yet continuously chanting Amida’s name. As her body lay in the coffin, Onatsu miraculously came back to life.¹¹ She recounted to her family the wonders of the Pure Land that she had seen with

¹⁰ Horns symbolize mental defilements (such as jealousy) that obstruct enlightenment. It should be noted that images of bloody pond hell presented on mandalas depict women with horns and other animalistic features, such as scales. Oguris Kenji, *Kumano kanjin jikkai mandara*, Tōkyō 2011, p. 99.

¹¹ The story covers main teachings of Amidism, but I will focus on those justifying Onatsu’s resurrection. First, it should be noted, that Onatsu was promised that when her time came, she would be reborn in the Pure Land, which was available to only a very few (“one in a thousand, four or five in ten thousand”). Secondly, the story emphasizes the importance of true faith in Amida’s grace. Merely reciting the invocation without sincere belief does not guarantee entrance to the Pure Land, as demonstrated by Onatsu’s mother, who diligently chanted Amida’s name but failed to truly entrust herself to his compassionate power (*tariki*). Onatsu was thus given a mission to guide her mother to genuine conversion.

her own eyes, as well as her encounter with Shinran, referred to as the revered founder of the school (*go-kaizan* 御開山).

The conclusion of the story notes that while the bloody pond was believed to be the destination for women who died in childbirth, Onatsu's genuine faith saved her: "Though her life was cut short by difficult childbirth (*nanzan*), she did not fall into the bloody pond, nor descend into hell, but went straight to the Pure Land. This serves as undeniable proof [of the power of entrusting oneself to the grace of Buddha Amida]" (難産にて命終りたれども血の池への墮ず地獄へもゆかずして直に極楽へ参りしなりこれ慥成証拠なり).

Such a belief is reflected in other works of the *myōkōnin-den* genre, but none of them were as influential as the story of Onatsu. One example features the life of Zenbēi, the younger son of Yasui Kyūbēi from Ginzan in Iwami Province, Nima County, in the village of Ōkuni. His story is part of a collection compiled by Gōsei in 1784.¹²

Zenbēi's family was involved in a complex web of religious affiliations, which provides a context for examining how the followers of the Pure Land tradition viewed the bloody pond hell in contrast to other Buddhist denominations. On his mother's side, the family was associated with the Mangyō-ji temple of the Jōdo shinshū, while his father came from a Zen background. Early in life, Zenbēi's literary talent was recognized by the monks at Kanzeon-ji, a nearby Shingon sect temple, where he was taken in as a disciple. However, following the death of his elder brother, Zenbēi returned to secular life, at the request of his parents, and became a devout follower of Amidism.

Zenbēi arranged the marriage of the nursemaid (*uba*) who had cared for his son. During childbirth, she endured extreme pain for five days and nights. In desperation, her family, having found no relief in medicine, considered seeking a talisman (*gofu*) from Ryūshō-ji, a Zen temple in Ginzan. Fearing Zenbēi's disapproval, they kept their plan secret. Yet the news eventually reached him, so he wrote a letter: "Anyone who has once abandoned their own efforts and merits and fully entrusted their afterlife to Buddha Amida, yet turns to other teachings, dishonors Master Shinran, the founder of our school. This woman, now married into your family, is one of us. Even if she is to die, I will not permit her to drink the talisman (*gofu*)". (一旦モロモロノ雑行雑修自力ノコソロヲフリステム一心ニタノミ奉ル、ト弥陀一仏ニ帰命セシ身カ、別法ヲウケテハ開山聖人へ申ワケナシ。コノ婦ハ、モト我家ヨリヨメ入サセタレハ、ワカ家人也。タトヒ死ストモ護符ハワカノマヌゾト)。

Before long, Zenbēi visited the woman in person and addressed her:

Even if you were to die, is there anything better than being reborn in the Pure Land? What ordinary lay people say that a woman who dies without delivering a child is bound to fall into the bloody pond hell, is groundless nonsense. Anyone illuminated by Amida's grace, even if one dies covered

¹² *Myōkōnin-den (nikan-bon)*, in: *Taikei shinshū shiryō: denki hen*, vol. 8, ed. Shinshū Shiryō Kankōkai, Hōzōkan, Kyōto 2009, p. 409.

in blood, will be reborn on a lotus flower. How could you doubt this?” He persuaded her diligently. The nursemaid, being strong-willed, had never intended to drink the talisman. Shortly thereafter, her condition stabilized, and she successfully gave birth without complications. A mistake was narrowly avoided. Had she delivered after using the talisman, her family would have attributed the successful birth to its power. They would have been even more reassured by prayers for worldly benefits.¹³

(タトヒ死ストモ極楽へ往生セハ此上ノアルヘキヤ。産セスニ死ヌルモノハ血ノ池ノ地獄ヘオツル、ナトト世俗ニイフハ、ワケモナキタワコト也。一念帰命ノ身ハ、光明ニ摂取セラルレハ、血ニマミレテ死ストモ、蓮台ニ生シコト何ノ疑カアラントネンコロニサトスニ、乳母ハ、モトヨリ堅固ノ領解ニテ、自身ハ護符ノム心ハ更ニナカリケル也。カカルトコロニ、程ナク脈ナヲリテ、ヤカテヤスク娩産シテ、シカモ産後モ无難ナリケル。今スコシチカヒニテ、給テモ護符ヲノマセタルコロニ出産シナハ、コレ正ニ護符ノ力也トテ、一層イヨイヨ現世ノイノリニカタマルヘキニ (...)).

The story underscores a powerful doctrinal point: true salvation lies in relying entirely on the grace of Buddha Amida (*tariki*). Resorting to talismans, typical of other schools such as Zen and Shingon, reflects a reliance on one's own efforts (*jiriki*), the stance Zenbēi rejected. Additionally, such an approach would demonstrate an attachment to earthly matters, contrary to the focus on the rebirth in Pure Land. As someone well-versed in various teachings, Zenbēi firmly opposed the belief, spread among the secular followers of Pure Land tradition, that death in childbirth led women to the rebirth in the bloody pond hell.

Another exemplification of this belief related to the bloody pond comes from the life of Otsuyu from Nagaoka in Echigo Province. The story is set in the 9th year of the Tenpō era (1838) but remained unpublished until 1915.¹⁴ Its late publication and clear influence of *The Tale of the Resurrection of Onatsu* demonstrate the persistence of these ideas.

Otsuyu is modeled after Onatsu. Unlike her devout husband, Kisuke, she showed no interest in reciting *nenbutsu*. Concerned for her fate, Kisuke sought guidance from a priest at Shōkaku-ji 正覚寺, who taught her that, as “a woman's body is dirty and impure” (*nyonin ga fue fujō no mi* 女人在垢穢不淨の身), her only path to salvation was faith in the Buddha's fundamental vow. These words transformed Otsuyu, making her a devoted practitioner. In the 8th month of the 9th year of the Tenpō era (1838), she faced complications during childbirth. Despite the pain, she continued chanting and declared:

“Even if I die in childbirth, I have no reason to worry about going to the bloody pond or to hell. How grateful I am that I will go to the happy

¹³ *Myōkōnin-den (nikan-bon)*, pp. 70–71.

¹⁴ *Myōkōnin-den zenshū*, vol. 2, ed. Hōzōkan Hensōkyoku, Kyōto 1915, pp. 85–90.

and blessed Pure Land!"¹⁵ (難産で死すとも、血の池へも地獄へも行く案じは少しもなく、うれしい楽しい浄土へ参る事有がたや).

She gave birth, but the child soon died, and Otsuyu followed. On the day of her funeral, however, she revived, spoke of the Pure Land's splendor, and foretold the day of her rebirth there. The influence of Onatsu's story is evident. Like Onatsu, Otsuyu's words during childbirth confirm that she was expected to fall into the bloody pond, but her faith saved her.

Another crucial detail is that, despite days of suffering, she (similarly to Onatsu) ultimately delivered the baby rather than dying with it still in her womb. This leads to a key factor in determining whether a woman who died in childbirth could be saved or attain Buddhahood (*jōbutsu* 成仏) – the removal of a fetus from a woman's body. Such a practice is documented in ethnographic sources:

If a woman dies due to complications during labor without delivering the child, she is to be buried only after labor is induced. In such cases, monks of the Pure Land school (Shinshū) are not called upon; instead, Zen monks are requested. The monk clears the room, locks the sliding doors and recite a lengthy sutra. Upon completion, when the coffin is opened, the deceased is said to be cradling the infant in her arms. For some reason, even a notable monk, if he performs this ritual three times, must leave his temple. Leaving his temple means taking just one umbrella and departing. (Nishishō-mura in Takashima District, Shiga Prefecture).¹⁶

(難産で子が生れずに死んだ場合には子を生ましてから埋めるものだと言ひます。此場合真宗の坊さんでは駄目で禅宗の方丈に頼むのだ相です。そうすると、人を皆んな出して、襖をめめ切って長い御経をあげるのだ相です。御経が終って棺の蓋を取ると死人は子を抱いて居る相です。何故か知りませんが、どんな高僧でもこの行法を三度行ふと、寺を開かねばならぬ相です。寺を開くと云ふのは傘一本を持った切りで其寺を出る事だ相です).

For further confirmation of such a procedure, handwritten notes on a slip of paper (*kirigami*) (see figure 1), dated to the 2nd year of the Ansei era (1855), can be provided. They contain instructions for monks on how to bury a woman who died while pregnant (*kaitai shijo sōhō no koto* 懐胎死女葬法之事). This particular passage describes the ritualistic preparation of a sickle (*kama* 鎌), likely intended for the mechanical extraction of the fetus from the mother's womb.

¹⁵ *Myōkōnin-den zenshū*, p. 89.

¹⁶ Ihana Iemon, 'Shiga-ken Takashima-gun Nishishō-mura', in: *Tabi to Densestu: Tanjō to Sōreigō* 旅と伝説: 誕生と葬礼号, no. 67, Tōkyō 1933, p. 112.

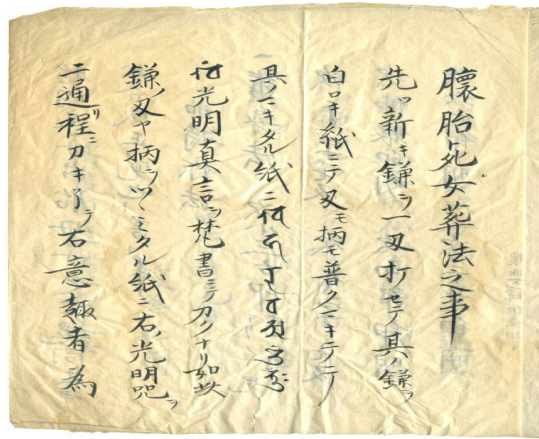


Fig. 1. *Kaitai shijo sōhō no koto*. Private collection.

Another means of saving a woman, who died at childbirth, from suffering in bloody pond hell, was to perform rituals of purification – *nagare kanjō* 流れ灌頂 (consecration by water). Shōyo Ganteki, a monk of the Pure Land school, in his *Japanese Exposition of the Bloody Pond Sutra* (*Ketsubonkyō wage* 血盆経和解, 1713), dedicated a section of his work to explaining the meaning behind such a ceremony:

Ordinary laypeople perform *nagare kanjō* when a woman dies in a state of defilement due to childbirth (*san'e*), thereby transferring a meritorious deed to her. Even if a woman did not die in childbirth, or did not give birth during her lifetime, she still menstruates. Therefore, out of fear for her sins and obstacles [to escape from the chain of existences], she should perform *nagare kanjō* as soon as possible. She should also make offerings to the gods of earth and water to have her sins and obstacles removed. Needless to say, people should perform meritorious deeds such as *nagare kanjō* for their mothers to pray for their salvation.

(世俗産穢ノ上ニテ死スルトキハ流灌頂ヲ行ヒテ追薦ヲ致ス。タトヒ産穢ニテ死セズ或ハ一期ニ一子ヲ産ヌ女人ナリトモ月水ハアルコトナレバ罪障ヲ恐レテ心アル女ハ存命ノ内ニ早ク流灌頂ヲ執行シ地神水神ヲ供養シテ罪障ヲ除クベシ況ヤ阿孃ノ為ニ流灌頂等ノ作善ヲ致シテ菩提ヲ子ガフベキコト勿論ナリ).¹⁷

As the above passage demonstrates, during Ganteki's time (in the 18th century), the prevailing view was that *nagare kanjō* was a ritual of purifying the dead from defilement caused by blood from childbirth. However, he advocated for its extension to all women,

¹⁷ Shōyo Ganteki, *Bussestu Daizō shōgyō Ketsubon-kyō wage*, eds. Kōdate Naomi, Iwata Shoin, Tōkyō 2014, p. 103.

including those childless due to the defilement associated with menstrual blood. He particularly emphasized its role as a memorial rite for one's mother, regardless of the cause of her death.

As ethnographic sources indicate, the ritual of *nagare kanjō* took many forms and survived until the 20th century. For example, an account from the Kōbe area (the author first encountered a unique structure used for this ritual beneath the Kannon Bridge near Aoya Fudō Waterfall) provides insight into how it was performed:

It is said that when a woman who dies in childbirth, she falls into the bloody pond hell. Her relatives cut a piece of white cloth about the size of half a hand towel (*tenugui*). They place bamboo poles at each corner and create a structure in a stream that resembles a fishing net. Passersby are expected to make offerings by pouring water over the cloth, using a dipper (*hishaku*) placed there for this purpose. If a hole quickly forms in the cloth from the water being poured, it is believed that the deceased woman will quickly attain the state of Buddha. This is what my mother told me.¹⁸

(此は産で死んだ人は血の池地獄に落ちると云って、身内の者が白木綿で手拭を半分に切った位の大さの物を作り、四隅に竹で柱を立てた網の様な物を小川に拵へて居き、道行く人に必ず備へてある柄杓で水をかけて手向けて貰ひ、此布が若し掛け水の為に早く穴があれば死人の成佛が早いとか云ふ事を其時母に聞いた)。

So far, the discussion on the Pure Land Buddhist understanding of the role of bloody pond hell has been based on *myōkōnin-den*. However, as mentioned in the introduction, the same tendency can be traced in *engi* (histories of origin). A valuable example comes from *The Origin of the Bloody Pond of the Wife of Tobaya from the Shiba Saiōji District* (*Shiba Saiōji-chō Tobaya no sai chi no ike no yurai* 芝西応寺町鳥羽屋の妻血の池の由来). This story is linked to Reverend Kaseki (Kaseki Shōnin 珂碩上人, 1618–1694), the founder of Kuhonbutsu (Jōshin-ji 浄真寺) in Edo and the *o-jūnen* 御十念 ritual (a tenfold invocation of Amida), which was aimed at attaining various earthly benefits such as an easy delivery and smooth recovery.¹⁹

Tobaya's wife, though his admirer, never visited him during her life. She eventually died from a complicated childbirth. Her remains were taken to the family temple (*bodaisho*), where funeral rites and the seven-week memorial observances were conducted. Subsequently, she appeared in a dream to a monk by the name of Geppō from Daien-ji in Isarago, seeking salvation: "As you are aware, Geppō, I died because of complications

¹⁸ Tatsui Takeshi, 'Hyōgo-ken Kōbe-shi Nunobiki fukin', in: *Tabi to Densetsu: Tanjō to Sōreigō* 67 (1933), p. 127.

¹⁹ Tsutsumi Kunihiko, *Edo no kōsō densetsu*, Tōkyō 2008, pp. 159–160.

during childbirth. I have descended into the hell of the bloody pond, where I suffer terrible torments. Please, journey to Okuzawa on my behalf and ask the Reverend Kaseki to grant me the *o-jūnen*, so that I may be saved from this pain and suffering”. (扱月峰様、私事ハ御前も御存の通り難産にて果しゆへ、血の池の地こくへ落苦しミたへがたし。何卒私名代におく沢珂碩上人の元に至り、御十念をうけて苦悩をまぬかるゝやうに御願ひ申と) The woman also appeared to her husband with the same plea and finally appeared before the Reverend Kaseki:

The Reverend [Kaseki], dressed in white robes, had spent a sleepless night reciting invocation. (...) Behind the water basin, he saw a young woman bowing low, with her head pressed to the ground. “Why do you come to the monks’ quarters?” he reproached her. However, she remained in that position as if lifeless, not even lifting her face. He continued to question her: “Who are you? From which province do you come?” At last, she raised her face and said: “I am not of this world. I have fallen into the bloody pond in the realm of death, where I endure pain and suffering. I have come here, taking advantage of a moment of relief. In my earthly life, I was the wife of Tobai Saburōzaemon from the Shiba Saiōji district. From my youngest years, I revered your wisdom and virtue. I had longed to visit you so that you might grant me the tenfold invocation, but I was unable to bond with you as I had desired. Please help me in your mercy!” she pleaded. Overcome by compassion, the Reverend bestowed upon her the *kechimyaku* (the transmission of lineage) and the *Ketsubon-kyō* [Bloody Pond Sutra]. He recited the series of tenfold invocations for her thirty times. Then, the ghost vanished.²⁰

(上人常衣不臥し念仏執行し給ふ。(…)手水鉢の向に若き女中のひれふして見へければ、何ゆへに僧房へ来るやと御とがめなされしかども、たゞ打しほれて面をもあげざれば、押返して、汝ハ何者なるれば何国より来ると仰られけれハ、やうやく面を上ケ、私ハ娑婆のものにあらず。迷途血の池に落苦痛をうけるものなり。少のひまを得て爰に来れり。生涯の事を申せば芝西應寺町鳥羽や三郎左衛門と申者の妻なり。私幼少よりあなたの御徳識をしたひ、参詣致し御十念拝受仕たく存居り候へども、思ひにまかせず御縁をむすはず候へども、御慈悲に御たすけ下されべしと願ひければ、あはれにおぼしめし血ミやく血盆経さづけ給ひ、御十念おし返し三十へんまであたへ給へば、亡者ハ消うせけり)。

²⁰ Unpublished leaflet entitled *Kuhonbutsu: hōmotsu ryakki* 九品佛 寶物略記 from the Author’s private collection. For similar source see: ‘Kuhonbutsu jinai annai’, in: *Ryaku engishū*, vol. 2, ed. Nakano Takeshi, Tōkyō 1996, pp. 434-437.

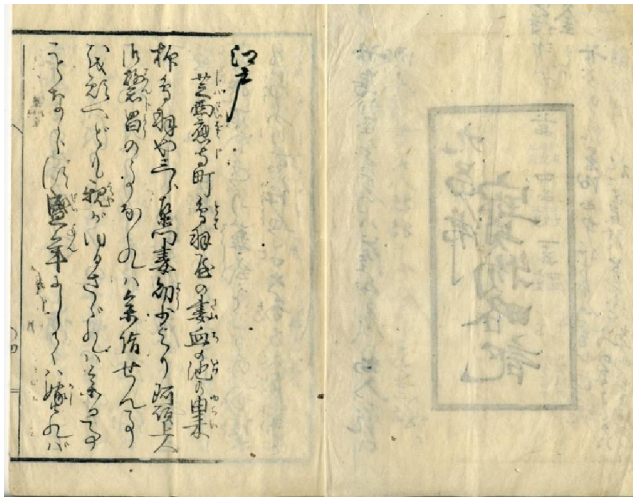


Fig. 2. *Shiba Saiōji-chō Tobaya no sai chi no ike no yurai*. Its exact date of publication is undetermined, but it bears a handwritten note confirming, that it was purchased in 1850. Booklet form a private collection.

Following the rituals, Kaseki's disciples discovered a burial kimono (*katabira* 帷子) stained with blood. This discovery led Kaseki to conclude that his ritual had successfully saved the woman's spirit from torment. When her husband arrived, he confirmed that the garment was the exact piece of clothing in which his wife's body had been dressed before burial.

In accordance with Buddhist tradition, the woman was granted a posthumous Buddhist name (*kaimyō* 戒名), Shunshōin Kagetsu Myōkō Shinnyo²¹ 春澄院花月妙好信女. Her burial kimono was carefully cleaned and preserved as a testament to the miraculous event, serving as a reminder for future generations. On the back cover of the booklet, two annual temple events are announced: *senbu*, the ritual recitation of the *Sutra of the Buddha Amida* (*Amida-kyō*) a thousand times, and *mushiboshi*, the airing of the temple treasury. During *mushiboshi*, sacred relics – acquired under miraculous circumstances – were publicly displayed. Among these artifacts was the blood-stained burial kimono (*katabira*) from the bloody pond hell, once belonging to the woman whose story was recorded in the booklet. Other sources, such as *Edo meisho zue* 江戸名所図会 [Famous Sites of Edo with Illustrations], confirm that this garment, referred to as *mōja no katabira* 亡者の帷子 (the burial kimono of the deceased), was exhibited to pilgrims and tourists in the 19th century as one of the key attractions of Kuhonbutsu.²²

²¹ Notably, her posthumous name includes the component Myōkō (White Lotus).

²² 'Edo meisho zue', vol. 2, in: *Dai Nihon meisho zue*, ed. Dai Nihon Meisho, Tōkyō 1922, p. 128.

Ketsubon-kyō and its association with the rebirth in the Pure Land of Amida

Another aspect of the original reception of the *Ketsubon-kyō* in the Pure Land tradition can be observed in its association with the 35th vow of Buddha Amida, which explicitly promises women rebirth in his Pure Land. While the pessimistic notion that women were abandoned by all buddhas and bodhisattvas was articulated by Hōnen,²³ the *Ketsubon-kyō* reframed this belief by attributing women's exclusion to their impurity caused by blood. Within this framework, Amida was portrayed as the sole Buddha who would not exclude women from the possibility of salvation.

This interpretation gained widespread recognition through Buddhist poetry and prayers, including *nenbutsu*, *wasan* (hymns), and *kudokibushi* (ballads),²⁴ which reinforced the belief in Amida's endless compassion towards women. Such prayers were often recited by *nenbutsu* practitioners organized into devotional confraternities (*kō* 講), shedding light on popular beliefs surrounding women's salvation. It should be noted, that *Ketsubon-kyō* promises a rebirth in a blissful land (*ōjō anrakukoku*), but does not explicitly reference Amida or his Pure Land. This Amida-centered interpretation became deeply embedded in the religious consciousness of Pure Land followers.

As an exemplification of the interplay between the *Ketsubon-kyō* and Pure Land thought, a newly obtained version of the *Chinoike wasan* [Hymn on the Bloody Pond] will be discussed. The hymn's opening section explores the origins of the bloody pond, presenting a narrative that does not fully originate from the sutra itself:

A woman carries the burden of bad karma,
That is why she bleeds for seven days each month.
And when she gives birth, harmful blood flows,
Defiling both gods and buddhas,
Thus drawing punishment upon herself.
The poisoned blood reaches the earth,
It gathers and gathers until it forms a pond.

女人あくごふふかきゆへ
つきに七日のぐわつすいと
さんするときのだいあくち
かみやほとけをけがすゆへ

²³ In his *Muryōjūkyō shaku* 無量寿経釈 Hōnen emphasized that, due to their inherent mental flaws, women were excluded from rebirth in any buddha-land. Their hopeless situation was further exacerbated by their exclusion from main sites of Buddhist practice in their present life, such as Enryaku-ji on Mount Hiei. Hōnen also referenced the Chinese monk Zēndō (Shāndǎo 善導), who asserted that, through Amida's vow, a woman transforms into a man after death, enabling the Buddha to guide her to the Pure Land. Oguri Junko, *Nyōnin ōjō: Nihonshi ni miru onna no sukui*, Kyōto 1987, pp. 82–83.

²⁴ For an example of *kudokibushi* grounded in Pure Land tradition see: Małgorzata Sobczyk, *Krew kobiecego w religiach i folklorze Japonii: konteksty* *Sutry krwawego jeziora*, Toruń 2022, pp. 516–527.

おのづとばちをうけるなり
 またそのあくちがちにふれて
 つもりつもりていけとなる

This passage reflects the belief that women's bodily impurities, particularly menstrual and childbirth blood, are the cause of their karmic suffering, explicitly linking impurity to afterlife retribution. The hymn's closing section, however, emphasizes the power of *nenbutsu* in a woman's salvation, integrating the *Ketsubon-kyō*'s teachings with the Pure Land tradition:

One who constantly has recited *nenbutsu*,
 At the end of life,
 Will have her female body transformed into that of a man.
 Buddha Amida will come to welcome her,
 And the Bodhisattva Kannon, a seven-jewel
 Lotus-shaped throne will bring forth and seat her upon it.
 Bodhisattva Seishi right before her eyes
 Will stretch his arms and bless her (*kanjō*).
 All 25 bodhisattvas will play joyful music (...) ²⁵

つねにねんぶつもふすなら
 その人いちごのおわりにハ
 によしんをてんじてなんしとす
 あみだによらいがらいこふし
 くわんおんぼさつハ七ほうの
 れんだいさしよせのせ給ふ
 せいしぼさつハマのあたり
 みてをさづけてくわんちよふす
 二十五ぼさつそれくに
 くわんぎのおんがかきならし

This passage describes *raigō* 来迎, or the "welcoming descent" of Buddha Amida, who, accompanied by 25 bodhisattvas arrives at the moment of his devout follower's death to guide them to rebirth in his Pure Land. This most idealized vision of death contrasts strikingly with the unfortunate fate of a woman afflicted by impurity, as presented in the opening part. The hymn not only reinforces Amida's role as the sole Buddha offering salvation to women but also reflects the widespread doctrinal blending between the *Ketsubon-kyō* and the devotional practice of *nenbutsu*, characteristic of the Pure Land tradition.

²⁵ Unpublished print from the author's private collection.

Another striking exemplification of this phenomenon can be found in *Kushō nenbutsu* 口称念仏 (a 19th-century manuscript), which includes a prayer entitled *Ketsubon-kyō*. Its beginning describes the impurity induced by menstrual blood, common to all women, supposedly presented in accordance with the sutra. In fact, this passage conveys teachings unaccounted for in any known version of *Ketsubon-kyō* but bearing some resemblances to other prayers of the Pure Land tradition.²⁶ *Nenbutsu* entitled *Ketsubon-kyō* emphasizes that a woman has no place to dispose of her defilements, making a clear allusion to the buddha-lands in five directions, which are unavailable to her:

A woman is deeply sinful, so when her impure menstrual blood is discarded toward the west, it frightens Buddha Amida of the Western Land of Bliss. When it is discarded toward north, it frightens Shakyamuni Buddha of the northern [realm]. (...) When she shows it to the ruler of the morning,²⁷ she defiles the Great Sun Buddha.²⁸

(女人のつみふかき事不浄によこれし月水が西へむかいてほすれ
ば、にしは西方極樂のあみだほとけのをそれなり。北へむいて。
ほすればきたは北方しやかむに仏のをそれなり。(…) あさの王
にまたしめしつすが、大日如来をけがしたまふ)。

The closing part serves as a reminder to integrate the *Bloody Pond Sutra* with *nenbutsu* practices characteristic of the Pure Land tradition:

Had she upheld the *Bloody Pond Sutra* during her time in this world, she would not have fallen into this evil water.²⁹ If a woman has an understanding husband, she can ask him to recite invocations. If he recites invocations for her, she will have nothing to regret. Women's attainment of Buddhahood – I sincerely rely upon you, Buddha Amida!

(しやばにありし時血盆経をたもつなら。かゝる悪水にも落じ。お
つとの心ろある人ハ、念仏申てくれよと頼。念仏申してくれるな
ら。かほどくい心ちにもあらじ。女人生佛南無阿弥陀佛)。

Overall, the quotation highlights the idea that by faithfully following the *Bloody Pond Sutra*, a woman could have avoided karmic retribution. However, if she has already descended into the bloody pond hell, she can still rely on her family to transfer spiritual merits to her by reciting *nenbutsu* on her behalf.

²⁶ For example: *Shihon Jōdo* 四品浄土, part of the manuscript *Shihen wasan* 四遍和讃, copied in 1806. *Minkan nenbutsu shinkō no kenkyū: shinryōhen*, Tōkyō 1966, pp. 567–568.

²⁷ In other words: “to the sun”.

²⁸ Based on the unpublished manuscript *Kushō nenbutsu* from the author's private collection.

²⁹ In other words: “menstrual blood”.

Conclusion

This study has demonstrated how the teachings of the *Ketsubon-kyō* were integrated into the concept of salvation in Pure Land Buddhism, shaping beliefs about women’s spiritual fate. By examining textual and ritual evidence, it highlighted how the imagery of the bloody pond became closely associated with death in childbirth, thereby narrowing the category of women they were primarily addressed to.

At the same time, literature-based contradictory examples reveal that Pure Land Buddhism did not simply reinforce the notion of impurity derived from the *Ketsubon-kyō* but instead reinterpreted it within a broader framework of universal salvation. Through the promise of Amida’s compassion, women – despite their karmic burdens – were ultimately included in the path to rebirth in the Pure Land.

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