Temples and Graves during the Transitional Period between the Medieval and Early Modern Periods

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This paper traces the changes occurred in the position of the sanmai-hijirí who were engaged in performing funeral services during the early modernization that took place in temples from the 16th century through the 17th century. Past research has posited the transfer of priests who were engaged in funerals (temple priests who were not involved with burials) from the Ritsu Sect to the Pure Land Sect in the 15th century and has proposed that the professional associations of sanmai-hijirí were formed in the 16th century. However, historical records do not readily confirm this, and in this paper I advance the following two hypotheses.

The first is that in the 16th century funeral associations resided permanently in graveyard temples adjoining temples, were under village control, and were organized by high ranking temples (Ritsu Sect, Saikaishu) which had jurisdiction over temple graveyards. While they were organized, this did not mean that they did not have independence. They had some degree of autonomy as illustrated by their search for grave sites in places that conflicted with the directions of those associated with the deceased and their participation in agricultural affairs, which was enough to cause arguments with other villages. On this basis, one may conclude that to some extent the preconditions for the establishment of a professional association were already in place.

The second point is that during the time between the end of the 16th century and the beginning of the 17th century when early modern temple systems were developing, hijirí temples associated with the sanmai-hijirí emerged. In addition, the division between temples and society was beginning and this is believed to be attributable to two elements: the waning of the power of the Ritsu Sect (Ritsu temples and the Saikaishu) which had had sufficient influence to serve as a bridge between the two, and the inclusion of graveyard temples into the honmatsu system which saw them assume a sect-like nature and become danna temples (temples supported by their parishioners) which resulted in other danna temples that used communal graveyards losing their ties with the danna.

In conclusion, I advance the notion that the effect of these developments led to the organization of the sanmai-hijirí during the 17th century.