Introduction

The warrior class dominated the political landscape of Japan perhaps longer than in any other culture, and it is only natural that it has been, and still is, the most popular theme among historians. From its rise in the late Heian age (794–1185) to its complete dominance in the peaceful Tokugawa age (1600–1868), eventually also spearheading the fall of this last shogunate, the samurai is not only a historical figure heavily researched by scholars but also a legendary hero and an ideal that can be found in today's popular culture in Japan and many Western countries. Though the popular samurai image continues to compete with scholarly interpretations, serious students of Japanese history now have access to many works in English that dispel the common myths and offer a more balanced view of the warrior's social and political roles in different eras. Indeed, considerable progress has been made in the last few decades among Western historians, who are now able to offer a more refined understanding of the warrior class, not only challenging earlier views but perhaps even contributing actively to scholarly discussion in Japan.¹ For example, though Japan's first warrior government (the Kamakura Bakufu) was established as a national power in 1185, scholars have realized that it was not as dominating as previously thought and that the traditional elites in Kyoto still wielded considerable power.² As a result, the age of the warrior has been pushed forward to the fourteenth century, when the second warrior government (the Muromachi or Ashikaga Bakufu) assumed all the responsibilities and qualities of a national government and warrior culture truly began to dominate Japanese society.³

These revelations have put the momentous social and political
changes of the fourteenth century into a sharper focus, greatly advancing our comprehension of how the warrior class adapted and became the rulers of Japan. But this interpretation also has important consequences for the era preceding the Ashikaga age (1336–1571). It now appears that the period from the emergence of the warrior class in the late Heian period to the establishment of the Muromachi Bakufu has no identity of its own. If it was not the beginning of the warrior age, then what was it? Though some scholars might be satisfied to call it a transitionary phase into true warrior rulership, such an identification would not explain why it took more than two hundred years to complete. Nor do attempts to characterize this era as a simple prolongation of the Heian style of rulership offer any valuable insight, since they overlook substantial differences between the mid-Heian and Kamakura (1185–1333) systems. In short, to account for these changes exclusively within the framework of the Heian system would be to do injustice to the realities of contemporary historical documents. Researchers must instead consider rulership from a more encompassing perspective, taking into account both adjustments and continuities in the transition from an imperial bureaucratic system of the early and mid-Heian eras to a warrior-dominated polity of the fourteenth century. One of the main goals of this book is to address this problem and to provide a coherent synthesis of rulership from the late eleventh to the late fourteenth centuries.

Warriors and courtiers were not the only elites wielding authority in the late Heian and Kamakura eras. Most scholars are at least vaguely aware that there were also a number of temples and shrines, Buddhist monks, Shintō priests, and secular followers of various religious centers with enough political, economic, and military power to pressure, or even challenge, the secular authorities. Perhaps it is this worldly aspect of religion that has induced previous scholars to ignore this age, concluding that the religious disturbances in the late Heian and Kamakura eras were simply a sign of the imperial court’s decline and the inevitable rise of the warrior class. The following quote, attributed to the otherwise dominating Retired Emperor Shirakawa (1053–1129), has been used frequently to support such views: “The flow of the Kamo river, the roll of the dice, and the mountain monks [of Enryakuji] are things I cannot control.”4 The sources in which this quote appears were written some two centuries after Shirakawa, and its reliability must therefore be questioned, but it leaves no doubt as
to the perception of the secular influence of Buddhist temples in the late Kamakura era. More important, there are also contemporary records indicating that Buddhist monks and their followers could cause trouble in the capital during Shirakawa’s era. In 1108 the monks from Enryakuji and Onjōji, normally rivals over the leadership of the Tendai sect, joined forces to protest Shirakawa’s appointment of a monk from another sect (Shingon) to perform an important ritual even though it was, according to precedents, Onjōji’s turn. The retired emperor refused to oblige the monks, although several courtiers noted that there was reason in the Tendai protest. In response, the monks approached the capital, and Fujiwara no Munetada, a courtier in Shirakawa’s service, fearfully noted in his diary: “Previously, the clergy were clad in protective armor when they came to the imperial palace, [but] this time, they are already armed, carrying bows and arrows. It is possible that the mob now reaches several thousand. Truly, it is a frightening situation when the court has lost its authority, and [the palace] must be defended with all available might.”

The armed protesters never reached the capital in 1108, but such quotes led the pioneering British historian George Sansom to conclude that Buddhist temples during this age “failed miserably to provide the moral force that the times demanded, since the influence of the sects with the greatest power and greatest responsibility in medieval Japan was on the whole an evil influence breeding disorder, corruption and bloodshed.” This view may appear archaic today, but its basic tenets are still predominant among scholars in the field. In fact, despite a growing awareness of temples and shrines as social and political institutions in the West in the last two decades or so, religious institutions are sadly missing from most surveys on premodern (ca. pre-1600) Japan, and when incidents or skirmishes involving religious followers are described, they are rarely explained in their political context.

In a ground-breaking article, Neil McMullin has argued that the reasons for this negligence are to be found above all in the historians’ own milieu. Most historians have depoliticized religion by taking it “out of its socio-political-economic-cultural setting” and have thereby tended to treat religion as a subject strictly distinct from other social sciences and in particular, one might add, from history. Such a division, McMullin argues, is based on the modern idea that religion and politics are and ought to be
separate entities, which has led to a critical attitude toward “the clergy and religious institutions seemingly in direct proportion to the degree of economic, political and military power that the clergy and the monastery-shrine complexes possessed.” Stated differently, scholars have assumed that religious institutions with secular power and influence are signs of corruption and degeneration, whereas noble hegemons who acquired unprecedented wealth and influence have been heralded as heroes. Most historians today would probably agree with McMullin, as do I, that such simplistic dichotomies need to be discarded.

McMullin’s article is important not only because of its lucid analysis of the problems of dealing with religious institutions, but also because it represents a new spirit among current scholars. A few pioneering studies have demonstrated the importance of incorporating temples and shrines as vital components of the political order and the mentalité of the premodern age. The merit of such works notwithstanding, however, they cover widely different periods and give little more than a glance at the general interaction between religious and secular power. In particular, religious institutions have not yet been treated over an extensive period, making it difficult to grasp the framework within which they worked or the range of characteristics among various temples and shrines. Studies on temples as secular powers in the long term are thus, to put it simply, long overdue.

Three Religious Gates of Power
The current study focuses on the secular power of three of Japan’s most powerful temples—Enryakuji, Kofukuji, and Koyasan—from the late eleventh to the late fourteenth centuries, in an attempt to explain the role of these temples in the larger context of the ruling structures of the Heian, Kamakura, and early Muromachi eras. Enryakuji was arguably the most influential temple in premodern Japan. Located on Mt. Hiei just northeast of Kyoto, the complex housed some three thousand monks, well known for their various ways of putting pressure on the imperial court in issues that concerned the temple. Fighting even occurred occasionally between Enryakuji and other religious centers, in particular Onjöji, a sibling within the same Buddhist sect (Tendai). However, perhaps the most striking evidence of Enryakuji’s political influence are the many divine demonstrations, known as gōsu (literally
“forceful protests”), that the temple staged to pressure the government in Kyoto to act in the temple’s favor. It can be estimated that some three hundred protests were staged by religious institutions in the capital from the late eleventh to the sixteenth centuries, and more than one-fourth of them were staged by Enryakuji.

In spite of its prominent political position, Enryakuji has received surprisingly little attention by historians. While there are a number of studies on Tōdaiji and other temples as proprietors of private estates, no such studies are available for Enryakuji. In fact, few scholars, even in Japan, have attempted to place protests and conflicts involving the monks on Mt. Hiei in their historical context. One reason for this oversight is the prejudice against temples with political power and the consequent unwillingness to deal seriously with such issues. Another, much more poignant, is that the temple and its entire archive were destroyed when Oda Nobunaga put the torch to the complex on Mt. Hiei in 1571. As a consequence, scholars have tended to avoid Enryakuji as a topic for historical study, assuming a lack of adequate sources. However, a number of useful sources survive that shed considerable light on the history of Enryakuji and its role in the premodern Japanese state.

First, there are several contemporary diaries that are extremely valuable in describing the temple’s involvement in capital politics. Though many of these sources have been used to explain events in Kyoto, they also contain much of interest on Enryakuji. Since the diarists, who were high-ranking courtiers, often participated in the litigation process, there are entries that not only describe the outcomes of appeals and lawsuits from temples and shrines but also offer detailed explanations of the origins of the conflicts themselves. Second, a variety of chronicles provide additional information about the temple, although they were written at a later date. The most useful source in this category is the Tendai zasuki (Records of the Tendai Head Abbots), a collective scripture telling the story of the head abbots of Enryakuji from the temple’s founding in the late eighth century to the early Shōwa era (1926–1989). Though essentially an appointment record, the Tendai zasuki provides crucial information about the most important events under each head abbot, often citing related documents in full in the process. Other records in this category include legends and war tales such as the Heike monogatari and the Genpei seisuiki. Such sources are less reliable because of their ten-
dency to glorify certain events, lineages, or clans, and they tend to be biased against religious institutions, condemning their secular power. Nevertheless, they do offer some insight into aspects of events that are not readily available in contemporary sources. The last category of sources consists of a small group of government documents pertaining to Enryakuji that can be found at other locations. For example, since governments issued their verdicts to opposing parties during a dispute, some of these documents survived at temples that had been in conflict with Enryakuji.

The Kōfukuji complex was founded in the old capital of Nara (710–784) early in the eighth century, giving it a head start and a slight advantage over Enryakuji in terms of ties with the imperial court. As is well known, Kōfukuji became the clan temple of the powerful Fujiwara family, allowing the temple’s monks and the Hossō sect to dominate the religious establishment in the early Heian period. The Hossō center’s fortunes were thus tied to those of the Fujiwara clan, as both prospered immensely for the several successful centuries of the Fujiwara regency (ca. 858–1068). Records regarding the temple’s landholdings are not conclusive at this point, but there are indications that Kōfukuji controlled over three hundred estates (most of them in Yamato Province, where it dominated; see Map 1) as late as the sixteenth century.14

Though Kōfukuji also rivaled the size of Enryakuji in terms of monks and secular supporters, the temple complex itself did not encompass as large an area, since it was confined to the city of Nara. The distance from the capital of Kyoto did not, however, discourage Kōfukuji’s monks from staging some seventy divine demonstrations to pressure the imperial court to act in its favor. In fact, monks from Kōfukuji and Enryakuji combined for a vast majority of disturbances both in and around the capital, and most scholars still begin with the “armed monks of the southern capital [Nara] and the northern ridge [Mt. Hiei]” (nanto hokurei no sōhei) when addressing the phenomenon of armed conflicts involving religious institutions.15

Unfortunately, the two temples are also similar in their paucity of contemporary records and original documents. Kōfukuji suffered a devastating destruction at the hands of warriors late in 1180, when forces of the Taira clan attacked the temple for opposing its hegemony in central Japan during the Genpei War (1180–1185). Kōfukuji’s oldest buildings date to the reconstruction during the next several decades, but a large part of the complex was
destroyed again in the fourteenth century during the conflict between the two imperial courts (the Nanbokuchô era, 1336–1392), which involved cloisters of Kôfukuji on opposing sides. There are fortunately frequent references to Kôfukuji and its supporters in several diaries, which appear to be especially informative regarding the Hossô center, since many of them were written by Fujiwara nobles. Other useful sources are also similar to those regarding Enryakuji, including a small number of documents contained in other collections as well as monk appointment records such as the Kôfukuji bettô shidai (Precedents of the Kôfukuji Head Abbot) and the Sôgô bunin (Appointments to the Office of Monastic Affairs) from the Hossô center. Another interesting and useful temple chronicle is the Kôfukuji ryaku nendaiki (An Abridged Chronicle of Kôfukuji), which lists appointments of ranking Hossô offices in relation to developments in the Fujiwara clan. Scholars can thus reconstruct much of Kôfukuji’s history and involvement in politics from the same type of sources as for Enryakuji, though there are also the same limitations concerning the extent of landholdings and branches under the control of these monastic complexes.

Kôyasan provides a contrast to Enryakuji and Kôfukuji in several ways. First, it was located on Mt. Kôya on the Kii peninsula at a considerable distance from the capital, as indicated by imperial pilgrimages, which took about six to eight days. Thus, regardless of its importance as a retreat for esoteric studies founded by the legendary monk Kûkai (who also chose the mountain as his grave site) and its ranking as one of the two major Shingon centers, the temple’s direct involvement in political matters in Kyoto and Nara was more restricted. Second, since the Kôyasan clergy skillfully avoided direct involvement in any wars from the late Heian to the early Muromachi eras, a considerable number of original documents still exist, most of which have been published in eight volumes of the Dai nihon komonjo: iewake 1 as Kôyasan monjo. As a result, numerous studies of Kôyasan and its estates in Kii Province have been published as both articles and book-length studies in Japan. In fact, many classic studies of Japan’s private estates (shôen) grew out of the rich Kôyasan document collection.

On the surface, it may thus appear that Kôyasan does not fit the traditional mold of elite temples because of its location and rare involvement in factionalism in the capital. However, since the Shingon sect was one of the main providers of ceremonies for the
imperial state, represented primarily by Tōji in Kyoto, an avenue for promotions was readily available also for monks from Mt. Kōya. More important, Kōyasan was a significant, though more passive, player in the religious and political systems, and it received much attention from noble and warrior patrons in the form of donations of land and other income-generating titles. Similar to Enryakuji and Kōfukuji, it operated as a ryōke (proprietor) of most of those estates, with members of the Fujiwara or imperial families as patrons (honke). Furthermore, though the monks on Mt. Kōya may have focused less on making headway in and around the capital than did their colleagues on Mt. Hiei and in Nara, they were representatives of a religious elite institution who were valuable allies during times of disturbances and war. Indeed, it is not until the late thirteenth and early fourteenth centuries, as Japan was experiencing momentous social and political changes, that Kōyasan developed characteristics that clearly set it apart from other monastic complexes located closer to the capital. Japanese scholars see this transition as one from shōen ryōshū (shōen overlord) to zaichi ryōshū (local resident lord), according to which the temple alienated itself from a reliance on status from the capital and took direct control of estates and inhabitants close to the temple. Stated differently, Kōyasan abandoned the old style of rulership based on elite status in favor of a local territorial lordship. Kōyasan will therefore—although it is not as central to this study as Enryakuji and Kōfukuji—serve as an important point of reference, indicating some of the variations among the most powerful religious institutions in premodern Japan.

It is through the many appeals, demonstrations in the capital, and conflicts with other elites that the political power of Enryakuji, Kōfukuji, and Kōyasan is most visible in the sources. Though some of these incidents have been noted by earlier scholars, they have not been analyzed in conjunction with other political developments. This study is therefore devoted to explaining these conflicts during the period when they were most frequent, from the late Heian to the early Muromachi eras, from a perspective that illuminates the polity as a whole. The central themes involve various land and appointment conflicts and what in contemporary terms were known as hōki (mobilizations), gōso (forceful appeals), and kassen (battles). Such conflicts became, interestingly enough, most frequent and most violent during the tenures of three retired emperors: Shirakawa (1086–1129), Go-Shirakawa
Their eras are consequently the topics of chapters 3 to 5, where I explore and analyze the origins of conflicts involving Enryakuji, Kōfukuji, and Kōya-san, in a larger historical context. It is during Shirakawa’s era that the imperial family reasserted its power vis-à-vis the Fujiwara regents, establishing in the process new factions and competition involving other gates of power as well. The sudden emergence of conflicts involving religious institutions was, in fact, a result of Shirakawa’s efforts to control the elites of the late Heian governmental structures, thereby threatening the established balance of power. During Go-Shirakawa’s violent times, the importance of these temples becomes even more apparent as their influence and activities in capital politics increased while they were courted by all sides during the factional conflicts of the 1160s and 1170s and the ensuing Genpei War. Go-Saga’s era in the mid- and late thirteenth century was characterized by an imperial resurrection with the assistance of the Kamakura Bakufu, which resulted in further involvement by the still influential centers in the capital region. Yet the social and economic changes of the late Kamakura age also affected the elite temples in various ways, forcing them to adjust or to risk losing their position within the imperial state.

Chapter 2 provides an in-depth survey of the early history and development of Enryakuji, Kōfukuji, and Kōya-san as organizations and temple communities from their establishment to the end of the Heian age. Although I aim here to familiarize the Western reader with important terminology and background information related to these monasteries, I also emphasize the significance of secular factors in religious developments and vice versa. Chapter 6 focuses on the different forms of protest that the monks of the most influential temples, most notably Enryakuji and Kōfukuji, used to pressure the imperial court to respond to their pleas. Though these protests are vital indicators of issues that concerned the elite temples and of the methods used in communicating their concerns, they have not been the topic of any English-language scholarship. The forceful appeals supported by spiritual symbols will receive special attention, as they were the most common form of actual protest, but they also raise important questions regarding religious beliefs among members of the secular leadership, the role of the elite temples within the state, as well as general political structures. Finally, in Chapter 7, I show how the establishment of the Ashikaga Bakufu and the increasing influence of
the warrior class in the fourteenth century gradually eliminated a governmental system within which the elite temples had actively participated. These temples were not rendered powerless; rather they were excluded from matters of national rulership, resulting in their disassociation from government and complete independence, as the bakufu declined from the second half of the fifteenth century. By thus treating four different eras of intense conflicts involving religious institutions and paying particular attention to the means of communication and conflict solution, this study will present a theory of rulership spanning several centuries.

The Kenmon Theory

Few scholars have been able to offer a synthetic interpretation of ruling structures taking into account the power of religious institutions in premodern Japan, since most have failed to disengage themselves from the conventional periodization, that sees the Heian, Kamakura, and Muromachi eras as all but mutually exclusive. However, Kuroda Toshio (1926–1993) opposed such restrictive views, arguing for a different approach that recognized the leading Buddhist temples as legitimate co-rulers of the premodern Japanese realm. He was a pioneer in constructing the first, and perhaps only, theory that took into account the different expressions of political and religious power in more than one era. His influential theory is commonly known as the kenmon taisei (the gates of power system).21

Though Western scholars in the field of Japanese history owe much to Kuroda Toshio’s theory positing religious institutions as important co-rulers of what he called the medieval state, his contributions have been little acknowledged until recently.22 Few indeed are those, in both Japan and the West, who have responded to Kuroda’s own exhortation to analyze religious riots and monk disturbances “in conjunction with other political and military incidents.”23 Although most Japanese scholars acknowledge the importance of religious elites in the Heian and Kamakura eras, attempts to follow up on or adjust Kuroda’s synthesis of shared rulership have been all but nonexistent.24 In contrast, his more doctrinal interpretation of “Japan’s medieval ideology,” which Kuroda termed the “kenmitsu taisei”—the exoteric-esoteric system, named after the exoteric (ken) scriptures and the esoteric (mitsu), orally transmitted, rituals that dominated the religious world in
the Heian and Kamakura eras—has left more tangible traces among today’s scholars. Kuroda developed this doctrinal theory in opposition to the traditional view that the new popular sects of Buddhism, in particular Honen’s Pure Land and Shinran’s True Pure Land sects, dominated religiously as early as the Kamakura age. Instead, he claimed that the eight traditional sects, which combined the six teachings of Nara, headed by the Hossō sect of Kōfukuji, and the somewhat later Tendai (Enryakuji) and Shingon (Tōji and Kōyasan) sects continued to provide the general ideological framework until the fifteenth century. Unfortunately, the frequent discussions of the ideological aspects of Kuroda’s theories have resulted in a tendency to neglect the larger theory (the kenmon taisei) that concerns itself also with the political environment and the ruling structures.

Kuroda introduced his theory of shared rulership, the kenmon theory, in the mid 1960s in an attempt to describe the sociopolitical system in Japan from the eleventh to the fifteenth centuries. According to this theory, the highest authority in the state was shared by a number of private elite groups known as kenmon (“gates of power” or “influential families”). These elites were the leaders of three power blocs—the court nobles (kōke or kuge), the warrior aristocracy (buke), and temples and shrines (jisha)—which ruled the realm together by sharing responsibilities of government and supporting each other’s privileges and status. Cooperation was a fundamental principle in the kenmon system of rule despite occasional conflicts between the blocs. In fact, Kuroda stated that the kenmon were mutually dependent on each other to maintain their status and wealth: one kenmon was never powerful enough to rule without the support of other elites. During the twelfth century, for example, the retired emperor dominated the political scene but relied on warrior aristocrats to supply military force. A similar dependence existed between the court and the warrior government in the thirteenth century.

But how did the kenmon evolve? It is well known that Emperor Kammu (ruled 781–806), an astute and forceful sovereign, was responsible for moving the capital from Nara (Heijō-kyō) to present-day Kyoto (Heian-kō) in 794. But Kammu could not have foreseen that strong and direct imperial rulership would not last long after his death. From the mid-ninth century, the Fujiwara clan, though the most ardent supporter of the imperial-bureaucratic system and the emperor, had been the dominating
faction at the imperial court. The Fujiwara chieftains virtually monopolized the right to provide consorts for imperial princes and emperors and came to exercise their power as maternal relatives of reigning emperors, assuming the post of regent (sesshō) or chancellor (kanpaku). As the most important courtiers in the realm, the Fujiwara obtained substantial private privileges, including a large portfolio of tax-exempt estates, known as shōen. The clan’s assets were managed by the chieftain with the help of other subordinate Fujiwara members and a private family headquarters (mandokoro). In addition, the head of the clan used this wealth as well as his personal retainers to promote his own career at the imperial court and to perform his duties as the leading government official. The distinction between public and private thus became increasingly blurred, and, by the eleventh century, considerable private wealth as well as powerful allies and retainers were needed to attain important posts in the government. Yet, since the Fujiwara were still primarily dependent on government titles to rule and to maintain their position (even within their clan), Kuroda claimed that these events did not signify the beginning of kenmon rule per se.29

The first signs of a kenmon system appear, according to Kuroda, late in the eleventh century when members of the imperial family reasserted their dominance as retired emperors. Beginning with Shirakawa, who retired from the throne in 1086, the imperial house transformed itself into a private elite, amassing estates and attracting retainers of its own. The period from 1086 to 1185 is therefore known as the era of “rule by retired emperors” (insei), though Kuroda also pointed out that other elites, such as the Fujiwara, were never completely eclipsed. The crucial point at this juncture was that rulership now took place without high government offices, indicating that government was becoming increasingly privatized. Rulers typically retired to be able to exert their power.30 Bureaucratic titles thus mattered little to the imperial family or the Fujiwara leaders in the twelfth century. In short, direct control of estates, provinces, and manpower was more important than government titles in order to influence or dominate the government. The kenmon style of rule was then further expanded in the twelfth century as the privatization of power and property continued and other elites came to share the responsibilities and privileges of government. These “new” members—religious institutions and members of the warrior aristocracy—had
performed functions within the state for centuries, but they now acquired enough independence and power to assume the characteristics of kenmon.

According to Kuroda, the kenmon all shared five characteristics that defined their elite status. First, they had their own private headquarters, which handled administrative and economic matters within the kenmon. The Fujiwara clan and many religious institutions developed such organizations early in the Heian period, while other elites followed later in the eleventh and twelfth centuries. The retired emperor had his equivalent in the in-no-chō (the retired emperor’s private headquarters), and the warrior elites followed with their own versions during their rise to national prominence in the second half of the twelfth century. Second, these headquarters issued edicts to convey orders from the head of the group, controlling matters pertaining to land and internal disputes. Such orders, though not entirely supplanting government edicts, took on a public character as they became virtually indistinguishable from those issued by official organs. Third, each kenmon had a number of retainers or followers who were loyal only to its leader. These retainers included both armed and civil personnel, and they were frequently employed in tasks for the state, as the elites increasingly used their private resources to perform government functions. For example, military retainers were used to maintain peace and to protect the palace area against demonstrations by the monks from Nara and Mt. Hiei. Fourth, the head of each elite had complete judicial rights—that is, rights to self-rule—over his own family or lineage. Promotion within the Fujiwara family or a temple was, in other words, an internal issue, even if the imperial court held a nominal right to confirm or (on a rare occasion) deny it. Indeed, the appointment of a head abbot at Kōfukuji was normally made by the Fujiwara chieftain on the recommendation and approval of the clergy. Fifth, the kenmon also had immune control and jurisdiction (another aspect of self-rule) over its assets, which came to include a large number of private estates. This privilege bordered on extraterritoriality, since the authority of government officials did not extend into private estates and the temple compounds, which could serve as a refuge for criminals, although the proprietors were expected to extradite them. It should also be noted that the shōen contained a vertical division of rights (shiki) that was an integral part of the kenmon system. In fact, these terms were inseparable, since the kenmon
constituted the political elite of a socioeconomic system based on *shiki* and *shōen*. Kuroda’s argument is quite convincing, since the term “*kenmon*” itself first appears in *shōen* documents of the mid-Heian period.32

These several elites, Kuroda argued, joined to make up three larger power blocs, which performed specific duties (administrative, military, and religious), thus sharing the responsibilities of rulership while receiving judicial and economic privileges in exchange. The court nobility, consisting of the imperial family and the capital aristocracy, held the administrative and ceremonial responsibilities of the state. Supported by their private organizations and assets, the nobles maintained their privileged access to government offices and remained the formal leaders of the state. The emperorship, however, was above the system as the outstanding symbol of the state itself, ensuring its exceptional survival through ages of both peace and turmoil. It was the emperor who made all important appointments, including the shōgun and monks for important Buddhist ceremonies at the imperial court, even though such appointments at times existed in name only and the imperial power per se may have been limited. In other words, the three power blocs all needed this figurehead in whose name they ruled and prospered.33

The warrior aristocracy was responsible for keeping the peace and physically protecting the state. Beginning in the mid-twelfth century, these duties were entrusted to prominent warrior leaders from the Minamoto and Taira clans. This unofficial division of responsibilities was formalized with Minamoto no Yoritomo’s (1147–1199) establishment of the warrior government in the east (the Kamakura Bakufu) in the 1180s, which Kuroda saw as a second phase of the *kenmon* system. Although the bakufu could easily out-power the court and its supporters in the capital area (which actually happened in the Jōkyū War of 1221), it could not eliminate the court and rule on its own, since it lacked the administrative and bureaucratic apparatus to extend its rule over all classes in thirteenth-century Japan.34 Its main responsibility was rather confined to maintaining peace and controlling the warrior class. The court and the bakufu consequently complemented each other in an overlapping rulership that has been termed a dual polity by some historians.35

The third member of the ruling triumvirate—the religious establishment—supplied the state and its members with spiritual
protection. It also supported a vertical differentiation among the rulers and the ruled through magical and expensive rituals that only the most prestigious courtiers could afford. Since the power of religious institutions is the subject of this study and since the religious bloc is the most controversial part of Kuroda’s theory, it will be useful to explore his analysis of temples and shrines in some depth.

During the ninth century, the most popular Buddhist sects (the kenmitsu schools) developed close relations with the most powerful families in the capital. However, after two centuries of patron-client relations, the larger temples became less dependent on direct and voluntary support from the capital nobility. By the eleventh century, these temples had private estates of their own, a vast number of monks, lay followers, and branch institutions over which they held exclusive judicial rights. Administrative duties and the management of these assets were handled by the temple’s own headquarters. A head abbot, often of noble birth, represented the temple and served as the channel of communication with the other elites. Even though the head abbot was principally a chosen leader, his leadership within the sect was not unlike that of the Fujiwara chieftain or the retired emperor. In effect, these religious centers had been “kenmon-ified.” By approximately the same time, a doctrine that supported the interdependent relationship between the imperial court and Buddhism developed. It is known as ōbō-buppō sōi (the interdependence of the Imperial Law and the Buddhist Law), representing the idea that the state and Buddhism were dependent on each other as the wings of a bird or the two wheels of a cart. Tangible evidence for this ideological concept, which also includes the idea that the Shinto gods (kami) are vital in protecting the Buddhist deities and institutions, exists from the mid-eleventh century both in religious sources and in documents of more secular character. The ōbō-buppō sōi concept provided the ideological foundation for the participation of Buddhist institutions in government, while linking together the realms of the kami, the buddhas, and the living.

Kuroda’s kenmon concept is especially appealing because it treats religious institutions as political powers both in their own right and as providers of doctrines and spiritual support. Moreover, the idea of shared rulership in medieval Japan can help explain a number of complex relationships involving the elites from three different groups. However, it can also be misleading,
since it labels religious institutions as a coherent power bloc on the same level as the court and the bakufu. Three points illustrate the problems that occur with this idea.

First, it is difficult to imagine that the religious establishment had the same kind of power as the court or the bakufu. Taira Masayuki, Kuroda’s student and successor, adjusted his mentor’s theory in this respect. Taira states that religious institutions never had enough power to form an independent government as the warrior aristocracy did. He further claims that temples never held ultimate authority in any way. That power only belonged to the secular powers.38 Second, if religious institutions did not have the same kind of power as the other two power blocs, then how independent were they? Kuroda himself seems to have recognized a certain difference here. Temples, he concluded, were “half-dependent” on the court.39 As this study will suggest, ties with the court were quite strong and much different from those with the bakufu and the warrior class in general. For example, the ceremonial and religious duties of the *kenmitsu* temples—their raison d’être—were almost exclusively directed at serving the members of the imperial court, and it was in an attempt to defend the right to perform such ceremonies that the monks of Enryakuji, Kōfu-kuji, and Tōdaiji staged many of their protests in Kyoto. Third, by claiming that the religious establishment constituted a separate bloc, Kuroda assumed that there was a sense of unity among the most powerful temples and shrines. As will be apparent in this study, this point is arguably the weakest in the whole *kenmon* theory. While the court and the bakufu were coherent in that they had clear apexes in their blocs, the religious establishment cannot be seen as a single hierarchy during the late Heian and Kamakura periods. Different doctrines and sects coexisted and competed for favors from the court in a system that can most aptly be described as one of doctrinal multitude. It is therefore misleading to treat the religious establishment as a collectively active body. Individual temples and shrines had *kenmon* status, but they were too diversified in power and structure to be compared with the court and the bakufu as a single bloc.40 Though a handful of temples had elite status and were actively involved in maintaining the centrality of the state, the religious establishment as a whole was clearly inferior to the power of the imperial court and the bakufu. In the end, I have found it more helpful to use the term “shared rulership,” emphasizing the different elites involved as well as
their functions, than to assume the existence of three distinctive blocs. The interaction between the elites, which is characterized by interbloc alliances and intrabloc conflicts, also indicates that a division into blocs can create serious misconceptions.

Based on these objections, how relevant is it to use the term “kenmon” to refer to religious elite institutions? Are they, for example, referred to as kenmon in contemporary sources? Surprisingly, these questions have not been posed by scholars in the West or in Japan. Kuroda used “kenmon”—a historical term—mainly as an analytical term in his works. The warrior government (bakufu) and religious institutions are not referred to as kenmon in historical sources. Rather, there are numerous examples where the terms “kenmon” and “kenmon seika” (powerful houses and influential families) are used expressly to distinguish the noble powers in the capital from religious institutions. Moreover, there is no exact contemporary religious equivalent to the compelling terms “kôke” (or kuge; the nobility) and “buke” (the warrior aristocracy), further belying Kuroda’s idea that the religious establishment could be considered one coherent hierarchy. Yet there is some evidence to support Kuroda’s analytical usage. There are frequent references to the prerogatives of the kenmon and temples and shrines (kenmon narabi ni jisha) in documents and other contemporary sources, putting them on a level of parity. This impression is further strengthened by the term “sôke,” or “shûke” (sect lineage), which appears in several Kôyasan documents in the Kamakura era, indicating the kind of independence and authority associated with the kenmon.

“Sôke” most commonly refers to the head abbot (chôja) of Tôji, denoting his leadership of the sect, as in an edict issued from that temple in 1283. However, it is the broader usage of this term that deserves full attention, as seen in examples for Kôyasan such as a document of 1239 that lists eight articles of the sôke, indicating the kind of power and authority that was both comparable to and independent of that of the secular and religious elites in Kyoto and the warrior aristocracy. Such juxtapositions are also openly made between the sôke and the buke by a monk-manager of a local estate in pledges to Kôyasan in the late thirteenth and early fourteenth centuries. Moreover, and most important, a document from the Kôyasan clergy of the seventh month of 1271 explicitly juxtaposes the kuge, the buke, and the sôke. It is evident from the contents of this okibumi (directive of regulations) and
from the honorific empty space that precedes all three terms that a concept of elite noble, military, and religious spheres of authority existed at this time. Undoubtedly, this document represents the best support for Kuroda’s kenmon taisei, while it also reaffirms the close relationship between the elites and the shōen hierarchy. Although these terms are thus far restricted to Shingon documents and evidence of a widespread usage is lacking, the claims nevertheless indicate that notions of freestanding religious powers were part of the intellectual environment in the capital region of the Kamakura age.

It is no exaggeration that the kenmon theory has made important contributions to the field. The notion of privately based elites that shared governmental duties is an important insight that facilitates comprehension of the ruling structures of Heian and Kamakura Japan. To be more specific, the kenmon theory brought attention to three important issues. First, the concept of shared rulership opposed the traditional view that the Heian and Kamakura polities were characterized by a sequence of elites in total control of government. Kuroda pointed out that the Fujiwara family, the retired emperors, and the Kamakura Bakufu, even during the heydays of their respective power, were never completely dominating. They were merely the primus inter pares—the dominating elite among other elites—who could not rule alone without the support of their peers. Conversely, the other elites were not completely eclipsed even when the balance shifted to their disadvantage. The Fujiwara family, for example, continued to play an important role in the capital throughout the reign of retired emperors and in the Kamakura period. Second, Kuroda questioned the view that the establishment of the Kamakura Bakufu in 1185 marked the transition from court rule to warrior rule or from the ancient to the medieval era. Indeed, historians have recently realized that there were more continuities between the Heian and Kamakura periods than were previously acknowledged, and as a result, studies that move away from the warrior-centered view of these eras have appeared in the last decade or so. The continued authority of the imperial court and the central proprietors is one important aspect of this revision. As part of this realization we should also consider Kuroda’s claim that it was kenmitsu ideology, which maintained its multidoctrinal emphasis, and not the new populist sects that dominated thought and ideology at the national level in Kamakura Japan. Third, Kuroda
showed that religious institutions were not merely parasites who usurped authority from the imperial court. On the contrary, they were important participants in the government as providers of religious rituals for the well-being of the state and its officials. Such rituals were instrumental in creating and maintaining the social stratification that supported the court hierarchy, since the ability to finance and perform lavish and often magical ceremonies augmented the status of those involved. Moreover, religious institutions served as extensions of the state when they collected income in the provinces as the representatives and religious protectors of the state. In sum, the kenmon theory made scholars realize that religious institutions in premodern Japan were socio-political institutions integral to the government and its rule.

In substance, the kenmon system was a ruling system in which a number of elites—“gates of power”—ruled through their private, or extralegal, assets, and it was the head of the most powerful kenmon who typically dominated the government. The headquarters of that elite thus assumed a more official character and issued documents to different government organs. The retainers of the kenmon leader also came to serve the government and received official titles. At the same time, not even the dominating kenmon chief had enough power to become an absolute ruler. He was dependent on the support of the other elites, who assumed specific public responsibilities (religious, military, or administrative) in exchange for confirmation and support of their private control of land and their own lineage. Kenmon rulership was, in other words, a ruling system in which private and official powers were combined to achieve efficient government over land and people.

Benefiting from the positive contributions of the kenmon theory, this study acknowledges that religious institutions in premodern Japan were not merely locations of worship and religious rituals, but also important members of the ruling elite. By politicizing religion and accepting the interdependence of religion and politics, poorly understood religious protests and conflicts can be explained in a coherent manner without resorting to simplistic theories of secularization and doctrinal semantics. My approach is thus to some extent like that of an Annales historian, as I address the least understood aspect of premodern Japanese rulership over the long term in order to construct a new synthesis of the framework within which rulers and subjects, monks and shrine
servants, warriors and courtiers acted. The object of this monograph, therefore, is not only to provide new information or a reinterpretation of known events, but above all to offer a comprehensive theory that can advance general understanding as well as generate new questions regarding the era that has been known as the late ancient and the early medieval in Japan.