RELIGION IN JAPAN- AN OVERVIEW OF NEW PARADGIMS

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Seemingly Japan is not a country where people tend to be religious. However, there are strong evidences which show that in spite of Japanese people's apparent "indifference" towards religion, they are religious in many ways. From Japanese politics, business and sports to rituals, festivals and celebrations the influence of religions can be vividly seen. The huge number of religious organizations, institutions and various movements including main religious main sects and sub sects such as Buddhist, Shinto's groups and Christian churches having marvelous buildings as well as a layer of New New Religious Movements are only a few examples of Japanese religiosity. This paper aims to answer the question how religious discourse in contemporarily Japan tends to keep pace with the changing patterns of society, highlighting the new trends in various forms of religious activities such as modern modes of virtual pilgrimages, cyber worship, religious ceremonies and rituals etc.

Key words: Religion, Japan, New Trends, Transformation, Society

New Trends in Religious Ceremonies and Rituals

Japanese are well known nation in the world for their traditional festivals, celebrations and rituals on different occasions and events such as beginning, growth, fertility and rituals performed on death.

There has been a great emphasis on celebrations in Shinto on various levels including individual, household and community on one hand and on the other, the ultimate frustration and social dislocation caused by death is dealt by a Buddhist priest. He supports the people to a sense of protection and security by organizing funeral services. These activities, basically, bring Japanese populace into relationship with *kami* and shrines or Buddha and temples and reflect social value for community expressing the wish for welfare and solidarity in order to keep its beliefs and sentiments alive.

Festivals and Celebrations

Shrines have been playing a role of a centre for community where religious events as well as many activities take place providing a sense of social bond. Reader mentions that the ritual of *miyamairi* , in which shortly after birth the baby is taken to the local shrines to receive the blessings and be placed under the protection of the *kami* who is the guardian of the local community and the area,

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integrates the child to the local community and also, because of Shinto's ethnic theme.[1]

No doubt, the change in demographics greatly influenced the social life of Japanese; however, shrines are still performing their centralizing role in lives of Japanese particularly old-timers. Morioka in the cities, the notion that a Shinto shrine has a territory of its own is still held only by the old-timers who have lived in their neighborhood for generations and who participate in the shrine's annual festivals. [2]

A study was conducted by Morika in order to explore the problem of the impact of suburbanization on Shinto belief and behavior. A small Tokyo suburb called Nozaki was selected. In terms of residents' period of arrival, several matters have been analyzed. According to this study a gradient pattern was seen when the period of arrival classification was employed and this was the first result to which the attention was drawn to. [3]

However, when it came to such matters as shrine visitation at New Year's or at festival times a certain diffuseness of response was seen as well as visiting a shrine with recently born child, decorating the household entrance with pine branches and so on. These actions can exist quit apart from having a connection with the local shrine. When it came to the idea that shrines were important as a matter of custom or as something to rely on the same diffuseness also occurred. It is precisely the existence of these two aspects that composes the real nature of transformation which is going on in Shinto belief and behavior. [4]

Exploring the reason behind this Morioka (1975, p- 71) suggested that it first came into existence to enshrine the *ichi mon no ujigami* (guardian deity of a clan) and that subsequently, with the collapse of the clan system and the participation of people who had once been outsiders, the guardian deity became the tutelary deity of local area. Reader points out another aspect of festivals that importance of these festivals and celebrations and a lasting quality are eradicated by contemporary change, even when the agricultural rhythms on which these founded no longer govern the tempo of modern society and even though the traditional community nature of Shinto appears to be decline.

Instead, festivals and other occasions for letting off steam and stepping outside the normal patterns of life have become,

perhaps, even more prominent especially, as counterweights to the increasing tensions and pressures contemporary city life.[5]

Death and Ancestor

It is often said that the Japanese are "born Shinto and die Buddhist."

Along with the focus on faith, happiness and enlightenment, Buddhism is ingrained in the lives of Japanese because of its role in providing the framework of both interpretation and practice of dealing with death and the spirit of dead. [6]

Buddhists view death as a natural procedure in the life cycle. Death signifies the end of one's existing body, but it also signifies rebirth and reincarnation of the spirit in Buddhism.[7] Reader[8] describes another central element in the religious, social, and cultural lives of the Japanese, namely, venerating and paying homage to their ancestors.[9]

The close relation between ancestors and Buddhism as it has evolved in Japan are, perhaps, nowhere more clearly expressed than in a short booklet (*Sotoshu no nenjugyoji*). Ten articles of faith have been mentioned in it. Most of the articles centre on the etiquette of the behaviour in dealing with the ancestors in affirming the importance of temples in it.[10]

Buddhism for most Japanese is a religion of death and ancestors, and what ritual and spiritual practice it espouses.[11] The Japanese housewives Association (1980), reports that, in a limited survey, the percentage of persons who held Buddhist funerals was93.8%.[12]

It should also be clear here, that Shinto shrines have also been playing an important role in this regard over the centuries. Yasukuni shrine is a good example for this.[13]

Nevertheless, in present days Japan, the way that humans live and die has been drastically affected by rising access day by day to modern biomedical technology serving to the dying process and prolong life. Therefore, a vast majority of Japanese think that this has modified the common understanding of the process of death and dying in Japan.[14] Funeral practices, especially in urban areas, in Japan have undergone various transformations during the twentieth century. There has been a trend toward private funerals, and the development of new forms of funerary practices such as the movement for advocating *shizenso* (natural funerals).[15]

As a matter of fact, the recent trends in contemporary Japanese funerals reveal a change in religious affiliation, family bonds, and individual standards. As opposed to a common Buddhist funeral rites Japanese now increasingly, want to conduct a living-funeral or a non-religious funeral as well as to disperse ashes after cremation.

It is, perhaps, due to many reasons such as housing conditions, in which sufficient place is not available to place caskets, and altars. In addition to this, number of people living in multi-family housing components, where the rituals of funeral cannot be arranged. People are also preferring more frequently to hold funeral ceremonies in funeral homes so that they could avoid disturbing their neighbors by setting up tents along narrow streets, and having mourners, hearses etc while entering and leaving the area.

Similarly, the numbers of non-religious funerals memorial gatherings held in a style of party, and private funerals where only family members attend the memorial are increasing due to the change of Japanese people in perception regarding funerals. Interestingly, music is also played in such funerals as well as practice of reading sutras is replaced with speeches. Medori illustrates that the modern trends reflect commercialized forceful marketing attempts for memorial gatherings by hotels, which can no longer count on wedding reception and other feast demands because of the declining numbers of children and a uninspiring economy. Memorial gatherings are events to which people come to remember the deceased in an environment in which articles associated with the deceased are displayed, flowers arrayed, music played and so on. Recently it has become more common to hold these events at hotels.[16]

Moreover, the shift from the ancestor worship that used to value the deceased for the purpose of household maintenance, to the memorialism of individuals that celebrates the deceased's personal life based on the bereaved's love toward the deceased is perhaps the key change that underlies this transformation of funerary costumes. Therefore, such funeral ceremonies and mortuary rites also reflect the isolation of the aged ones during the process of dying, the asymmetrical relationship between the deceased and the bereaved, and the attenuating ties between people and Buddhist temples. [17]

Although, modernization and urbanization has reduced the communal knowledge about funeral practices as well as materials such as coffin however, funerals still maintain their role as an event for building or creating societal relations. Rowe traces the effects of new commercial spaces and modern crematoriums on the concept and the structure of contemporary funerals.

One of the striking aspects is that the expanding physical separation between the mourning family and the corpse throughout the process of death simultaneously an increase in the ritual authority of the professional funeral industry has led to many noteworthy variations in funeral style. Another significant aspect is the changing attitude towards the corpse that emphasizes the physical comfort and individual need of deceased over the pacification of the spirit.[18]

Sacred Places in Modern Japan

Sacred places, as almost in every religion, hold an immense importance in Japanese religions and have been known as centers of real power in Japanese society over the centuries.

These holy places including shrines, temples and churches are worth studying in many respects such as their key roles through providing spiritual requirement of community, their locations on natural phenomena, like water fall at Nachi at very height, their historical, cultural and touristic importance, their architectural grandeur, like the shrine of Ise and the building, art and sculptures works of Hasedera, and eventually their promotional transformation providing modern transportations and virtual visiting facilities in changing Japanese contemporary circumstances. We begin here with the primary concerns of these holy places in Japan after the Second World War.

Holy Places: Improvements rather than Changes

Instead of changes Japanese religious institutions kept their focus on improvements in the new post-war circumstances. To uphold the social base that they had established during the pre-war period was the major activity for both Shrine Shinto and Buddhist temples.

In brief, they paid very much attention to preserve their on hand membership. Buddhist denominations sought to maintain the identity of denominational members as *danka* (patrons of the respective Buddhist temple). The leaders of shrine Shinto want to protect the traditional idea of the *ujiko* (the parishioner of a shrine

living within the shrine's traditional parish boundaries). It seems that as if the basis for the traditional religions would continue comparatively to be stable (at least in economic terms) until the identities of the *ujiko* and *danka* will not change.[19] As a matter of fact, the traditional religious values and costumes of Japanese religiosity have long contained many practices and rituals involving the holy places and pilgrimages. Therefore, in spite of the continual process of urbanization and modernization the central attitude of reverence and a sense of veneration for sacred places and religious journeys consistently remained intact.

Pilgrimages to eminent Shinto shrines or Buddhist temples including other visits to various famous sacred places and holy mountains persist to be highly popular in Japan as traditional kinds of religious journey. Admitting this historically, variations exist in the popularity of certain religious services and mountains, and in the extent to which people observed such cults. Journeys during the New Year holidays are good example for this when more than half the Japanese population visits famous Shinto shrines and Buddhist temples, such as the grand Shrine of *Ise*, the *Meiji Jingu Shrine* and the *Kawasaki Taishi* temple.

Moreover, many people, excluding most Christians or members of exclusive sects, make their trips to famous shrines and temples on their regular festival days to pray for happiness and good fortune.

Worship or Cultural Visits

Are these visits solely as touristic or cultural or a type of worship? Reader answers this question saying that pilgrimages or shrine and temple visiting should not be seen be as cultural or touristic: just as with the actions performed at hatsumode and other such times in the social religious calendar, pilgrimage does not involve in some form of religious interaction. Of our respondents in the survey, 32 per cent stated that they little did else at temple besides getting their scroll stamped, which implies that for them this was primarily a touristic, cultural souvenir-gathering exercise. Yet the rest did take part in all manner of activities, from lightening candles and incense (49 percent), chanting prayers (18 percent), chanting prayers as well as the special pilgrimage song of each temple (11 percent) buying different religious amulets and talismans (20 percent), offering special prayers for the benefit of their ancestors (9 percent) and leaving a fuda, or slip of paper marked with

religious inscriptions and with the pilgrim's name, at temple (6 percent). [20]

Economic Factor

Economic reasons and the advancements in the field of transportation and communication are, perhaps, one of the major contributing factors which have played a significant role in keeping the religious places centres of mass activity. It is due to the fact that shrines and temples have been; inevitably, the focal point for business activities over the centuries in order to satisfy basic the requirements of visitors and entertainments through various types of stalls and markets, hence they were attracting visitors and vis-à-vis business men for handsome amount of income.

Special festivals at such religious places were frequently the occasion for market days and regular monthly ennichi (when the *kami* and Buddha were especially receptive to prayers). [21]

Temples and shrines have served in many cases as the nucleus around which urban areas have grown such as Narita which developed as a town in front of the temple gate of Shinshoji, as its growing number of visitors was significant reason for the growth of network of shops, stalls and other establishments in terms of catering the needs of visitors. Journeys to temples and shrines and performance of pilgrimages are nowadays more comfortable and easier because of the improvements in transportations as compare to olden days, when people used to travel even foot and climb up the very high and steep mountains like the mount Fiji.

The provision of new and convenient means of climbing to more than 2000 m makes it easy for large numbers of visitors to climb the mountain. A notable observation is that as a result, a great amount of garbage is often found everywhere on the route, and in turn, it is inevitable that the sacredness of the mountain under this condition is affected. Other holy places based on natural features are, similarly, affected both physically and culturally.[22]

In short, the effects of modern means of transportation and communication can be seen in many ways.

First, the places that were formerly open only to mountain ascetics or trained Buddhist priests are now accessible and open to everyone.

Second, this brought an increase in the number of visitors to sacred places. The modern visitor, for instance, has an easier access to Koyasan, the Shingon Centre, where Kobo Daishi's mausoleum is, from the centre of Osaka via a railway line and funicular railway built by the Nankai Railway Company, while *the Keihan* Railway besides providing access via a regular bus service to the Korein Narita san temple, also gives a ready access to Iwashimizu Hachimangu shrine via a funicular railway running up the slopes of Otokoyama from the local Yawata station.[23]

The last but not least point we want to point out here is that not only shrines and temples themselves but the tourist networks and transport companies like Iyotetsu bus Company of Matsuyama in Shikoku, enthusiastically publicising religious festivals, sites and pilgrimages.[24]

Holy Place in the Space

It is true that, since prehistoric times the spiritual veneration and mystical adoration engaged toward high and steep mountains, remote places, or deep lakes may have been, more or less, misplaced through the modernization of our lifestyle on these elements of natural landscape. Nonetheless, a new trend that may symbolize a recent expansion of traditional ideas about sanctified places may be the trend to attribute greater sacredness to outer space.

A deeper interest in outer space is another interesting as well as one of the most striking points in the modern history of Japanese religiosity. This without any doubt can be considered one of the most recent tendencies during the course of new religious change in Japan since the 1970s. Holy places are commonly depicted as existing on remote planets rather than on the earth within the new religions.

Similarly, the gods worshiped by them live within the solar system or on remote planets. This trend may be related to recent trends toward imagining aliens not as invaders, but as beings who bear divine messages to human beings. It makes us wonder whether the concept of cosmic sacredness, or of a sacred contained by the universe, may be gradually changing as a result of space age technology. The expression "cosmic deity" is found in the teachings of some sects.[25] We find religious groups who believe in a specific planet as home to deities on rare occasions. An

exceptional example is *Yamato no Miya*, with headquarters in Yamagata city.[26]

Virtual Sacred Space and Cyber Worship

In order to understand the new modes of being spiritual in the rapidly changing world cyber worship and virtual pilgrimages on the internet can rightly be considered as a significant religious phenomenon. Nevertheless, conservatives related as they are substantially sacred sites which are permeated by the mythical imaginare of tradition as well as to re-imagine the sacred, cyber worship exploit the new technological possibilities of the internet. As a form of religious journey, virtual pilgrimage has four following major traits:

First, it offers a myths cape an immaterial mental geography originally coming from scriptural oral or sacred traditions.

Second, in order to experience a sense of sacred presence it subsists as an interactive visual-auditory ways.

Third, it generates figurative types of entertainment that are liminal in nature.

Fourth is more important as being a leisure time activity of individuals. It is to create virtual travelling communities of pilgrims who use the discourse of *communitas* to express their understandings as well as their experiences through net surfing from the computers or even, now from their mobile phones.[27]

To Nabutaka this increasing phenomenon in Japanese religions is a virtual sacred space. As a result of the fast increase of Japanese computer users since the 1980s and similarly the expansion of the internet in the recent years on mobile phones this phenomenon has become notable all over the world as well as in Japan.

In addition to that as a matter of fact the boundaries between virtual and ordinary reality become vaguer and the former may tend to become more influential than the latter because the display technology allows the reproduction of increasingly realistic scenes and feedback from the user can be employed to change the image as desired.

In the mid 1990s, one started to see a growing online presence by religious organizations and by individual Buddhist temples and Shinto shrines, as well as the development of shrines that only existed in cyberspace and that did not, therefore, suffer

economic burdens faced by "real" shrines and temples of the upkeep and servicing of physical buildings. They drew attention to the development of *intanetto sanpai* (online worship) at shrines and temples and to growing number of online sites representing shrines and temples that could be visited virtually and at which one could pray, acquire talismans and make prayers request. They also noted that as well as, real shrines and temples with online presences, virtual or cyber shrines which had no "real" presence were also starting to appear online. [28]What is currently evident in the studies of new media in Japanese contexts is that the online religious practices and representations are to a great degree rather a conservative reiteration of the offline.

There are many examples [29]for this such as Matsushima Nyokai a Buddhist priest who is running Ryugensan Kotoku temple in Tokyo along with an affiliated cemetery and his attempt to develop a new mode of practice via the establishment of cyber grave that can be accessed and worshiped online.[30]

Interestingly, a virtual visit to an ancestral grave is a simple and an easy way. As it is mentioned before that during equinoctial weeks, spring and autumn, and during the summer festivals of Obon in August the Japanese people traditionally visit their ancestors' graves. As a result, the grave of each individual family represents a sacred place for that family. Nowadays these visits are conventionally exercised in Japan online through internet. On websites offering virtual grave visits, an ancestor's gravestone may be shown on the screen and by clicking on the image at some point, the tombstone will be automatically decorated with flowers, and the voice of sutra recitation can be heard. The visitors can then register or enter his or her message in the site's guest book as proof of a visit.

Nonetheless in the mid-1990s, when this type of grave visit first became known to traditional religious organizations these virtual visits and online worship were denounced by some representatives of the traditional religions being heretical activities.

As is shown in this case, virtual holy places have not yet gained general acknowledgment as genuine sacred space. This is pretty interesting, since it suggests the opinion that such virtual visits to graves are viewed as a deviation of the normal idea of a holy place.[31]

Role of Religion in Work and Business

As mentioned earlier that Japanese religions are still exclusively shaping people's lives and playing a key role enriching the values and ethics in the society. Japanese are religious not only in their socio-political sphere of life but also in their socio-economical activities to promote the unity and economic growth.

It is a well-known fact that Japanese companies and businesses are very much concerned about the efforts for creating cohesion and harmony by offering many incentives including social welfare schemes, company housing and leisure facilities along with different other activities including songs to organize outings so that a feeling of belongingness and loyalty can be instilled in their employees. These are contributing factors to the trend of shifting the loyalties of people from their local community to their work place.

Ian Reader argues that various forms are repeated and reflect the social unified and cylindrically ordering patterns of shrines. These occur within framework of firms and companies including induction ceremonies on one hand in which new employees are initiated into the firm by making oaths of loyalty and allegiance and on the other various celebratory parties at the *bonekai* (end of year) to get rid of the last year's frustrations and at *shinnekai* (beginning of the year) to express hopes for the future.[32]

In addition to this, many religious institutions are adopted actively in terms of reinforcing the sense of devoted discipline to run the company smoothly. Reader describes that it has long been common for companies to send groups of employees especially new ones, to Zen Buddhist temple to take part in the periods of monastic training that are aimed at strengthening their resolve and formulation a sense of discipline obedience to rules of etiquettes and actins. Many companies also sponsor communal memorial rites at Buddhist temples for their employees who die. *The Keihan* Railway Company sponsors such a rite every three years at the *Korien* temple which supplies the safety amulets for its trains and buses, while the famous grave yard at Shingon Buddhist temple centre at Mount *Koya* contains many communal company graves.[33]

Another significant phenomenon in Japanese commercial world is that some companies sponsors the festivals as some companies have built or adopted their own shrines. For example, the shrine of famous car company *Toyota* is situated near to its head office in Nagoya. The shrine of Shiseido, a cosmetic

company is on the roof of its headquarters in Ginza. It is not Shinto which is playing a crucial role in business world of Japan but Confucius ethics are also need to be studied in detail.

One of the major Japanese ethical traditions is Confucius Analects whose contributions in Japanese organizational communications[34] and managerial and industrial practices are undeniable. [35]

In short, Japanese religions have been co-opted in business and commerce benefiting from their traditional involvement with fertility, production and support for the community on one hand, and on the other, psychological assurance in terms of uncertainty and insecurity involved in business.

Conclusion

The religions in Japan have been playing significant role in the lives of people on both individual and collective levels. The religiosity was concerned especially with the expressive action. Japanese people have incorporated and assimilated various religious traditions from birth celebrations and rituals to death memorials into their lives.

In this country as religious history rolls along down the centuries, "new layers" of religion are added over the decades one on top of the other, but the old, even the oldest forms of religions, seem never quite to vanish. The religiosity in Japanese society was prevalent since the ancient times facing many challenges, accepting and digesting many foreign religious or spiritual themes has been and also seems that it will certainly remain intact in the future.

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