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The Ritual Culture of Japan

Symbolism, Ritual, and the Arts

The term "ritual culture" is used here to encompass the full range of ritualized practices, both social and religious. Ritual culture provides a unifying category that allows for considering the interrelations between ritual practices, and religious art and symbol in ways that considering them as three separate categories does not. From the perspective of the study of Japanese religion, not only ritual practices but also religious art and symbolism must first be contextualized within the ritual culture before being interpreted from other theoretical perspectives, such as aesthetics, art history, or psychology. The ritual culture is also of primary importance to our understanding of the actualities of Japanese religion as it is practiced by the vast majority of people (Reader and Tanabe 1998). As Frits Staal has pointed out for Asian religions generally, the religious culture of Japan gives greater importance to ritual practice than to doctrine (1989, pp. 387–406). It is practice which makes it possible for one to attain one's

goals, whether those be defined as liberation, awakening, harmony, prosperity, longevity, purification, or protection. Contrary to the intellectualist presumptions of probably the vast majority of Western language treatments of Asian religions, doctrine is the least important element according to Staal's analysis.[1] Proper belief—orthodoxy—is only very rarely considered to have any direct efficacy in attaining the goal sought. Further indication of the primacy of practice over doctrine is the way in which ritual practices persevere over time and across cultural boundaries, even while the doctrinal rationales for their efficacy changes.[2]

In contemporary Japan the relative ease with which people participate in rituals, ceremonies, and festivals conducted by Shinto shrines, Buddhist temples, folk practitioners, or new religions also evidences the greater concern for practical efficacy than for doctrinal purity. Much less casually, women who were raised in a Buddhist family feel no particular compunction about changing their religious practices upon marrying into the family of a Shinto priest. The new religious practices are seen as simply a matter of family custom (KENNEY 1996–1997, p. 400).

This analysis also applies historically. It was, for example, the similarity between existing ritual practices and those performed by Roman Catholic missionaries that was essential to the introduction of Christianity to Japan in the sixteenth century. Specifically, baptism became culturally accessible because of its similarity with both purification by water (Jpn. *misogi* 禊), and Shingon initiation (Jpn. *kanjō* 灌頂, Skt. *abhiṣeka*) which also includes unction with water as part of the ritual. According to Ikuo HIGASHIBABA, this indicates the "primacy of practice over doctrine" (2001, p. 201). Consistent with this symbolic interplay between baptism and other, more familiar practices is the way in which the ritual practices of contemporary "hidden Christians" (Kakure Kirishitan 隠れ切支丹) show a convergence of the Eucharist and indigenous *matsuri* (TURNBULL 1995 and 1998).

The concept of ritual culture is also a way of identifying the fact that rituals do not exist in isolation, but rather are embedded in a network of practices. For example, one of the most enduring practices in Japanese ritual culture is the complex of possession and exorcism. It is dramatically recorded in the *Genji monogatari* written by Murasaki Shikibu at the beginning of the eleventh century. Two centuries later, possession played a pivotal role in the life of Myōe Kōben, who, upon the advice of a trance medium possessed by the Kasuga deity, changed his plans to go to India (GIRARD 1990, p. 84). Possession

1. Just one example which happens to be ready at hand is PAINE and SOPER 1981, p. 27. The reader may examine for him/herself almost any of the standard textbooks on Asian religions for evidence of the presumption of the centrality of doctrine on the part of the text's author.

2. Similar to the presumption in Western treatments of the primacy of doctrine is the distinction between ritual and meditation. This distinction is at best a rhetorical one, despite its being virtually foundational to contemporary Western religious culture. This is not a natural distinction, but rather one which has arisen out of the history of the polemics between Protestant and Catholic since the Reformation. Particularly in the Anglophone world, meditation is in general positively valued, while ritual is negatively valued. Neither the distinction nor the values are transferable to Japan. What is called Zen meditation is highly ritualized, while the ritual practices of the Shingon tradition are meditative.

continues right into the present day as part of the practices of new religions—for example, Shinnyoen and Mahikari (see DAVIS 1980)—and in the trance oracles of village shrines. It has also been identified as the historical background of the dances performed by female shrine attendants (*miko*) in contemporary Shinto shrines (see BLACKER 1975). Possession by fox spirits, traditionally evidenced by "unusual eating habits, inappropriate use of language, inability to follow social norms, ...newfound abilities in literacy" (SMYERS 1999, p. 178) and other asocial and eccentric behaviors (see also HEINE 1999), forms a particularly long-standing religious practice and literary theme. In the Meiji era, treatment of fox possession by female shamans was displaced by Western, and male-dominated, medicine and psychiatry (see FIGEL 1999, p. 99). Despite the increasing likelihood of such behaviors being treated as medical or psychological problems, exorcism of fox spirits continues in contemporary Japan.

A structurally similar network of practices is based on fear of the threat posed by those dead who, lacking any family connections by which they will be transformed into ancestors, become hungry ghosts (Jpn. *gaki* 餓鬼, Skt. *preta*; see PAYNE 1999). Likewise, there is the danger that one's own ancestors are for one reason or another dissatisfied and causing afflictions among their living heirs. Such concerns about the threats posed by hungry ghosts and dissatisfied ancestors are similar to concern about the fate of aborted fetuses, and the threat they can pose for spirit attacks (Jpn. *tatari* 祟り), leading to the recent creation of memorial rituals for the spirit of the aborted fetus (Jpn. *mizuko kuyō* 水子供養).[3] These rituals are part of the general category of memorial rituals (Jpn. *kuyō* 供養, Skt. *pūjā*) which have been performed for both living beings and the products of material culture. According to Fabio Rambelli, "Traditionally, *kuyō* refers to an ambiguous set of rituals dealing either with the end of beings (death) or with the inauguration of sacred objects. Concerning the former, we find prayers and rites for the happiness in the afterlife of the dead members of the family (*tsuizen* 追善 *kuyō*), but also rites for those dead who because they have not been taken care of by their bereaved have turned into 'hungry ghosts' (*segaki* 施餓鬼 *kuyō*). Among the rituals for the inauguration of sacred objects, there are rituals celebrating new statues (*kaigen* 開眼 *kuyō*), copies of the scriptures (*kyō* 経 *kuyō*), temple bells (*kane* 金 *kuyō*). In other words, an important aspect of *kuyō* rituals consisted in giving offerings to beings and things that could affect the salvation of the donor" (RAMBELLI 1998, p. 6). Thus, although the ritual practice as such has retained its own identifiable character, its doctrinal explanation has been extended from the generation of merit to include protection from spirit attacks and possession by the threatening dead.

Possession is perhaps most frequently considered in contemporary religious studies literature to be a category of religious experience. However, because it exists within a network of interrelated practices, beliefs, and experiences,[4] it is more appropriate to consider it as

3. See UNDERWOOD, 1990, in an issue of the *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* devoted to the topic of *mizuko kuyō*, with additional articles by Elizabeth G. Harrison, William R. LaFleur, and Ronald M. Green. See also HARDACRE 1997 and STEFÁNSSON 1995.

4. The concept of network of practices is borrowed from Bruno LATOUR's work (1993) in science studies. See also COLE and ENGESTRÖM 1993. The concept of network should not be

part of the ritual culture. The category of religious experience almost invariably perpetuates nineteenth-century conceptions of the mind as the passive recipient of experiences, i.e., a patient (WRIGHT 1998, p. x). In this conception the source of experience is an active agent external to the mind. In the case of religious experience the metaphysical status of the agent is most commonly thought of as one that is autonomous, and superhuman, extraordinary or supernatural. The intentional character of human consciousness, however, identifies the role of the mind as actively engaged in the process by which experience is created. To identify possession as part of the ritual culture is not to deny that it has experiential qualities, but rather to deny the theoretical view that the source of those experiences is an external agent acting on a patient who is the passive recipient of the experiences.

Further, it is to deny that experiences exist autonomously rather than as part of a network of practices, beliefs, and experiences. That network of practices is socially sustained[5] and is learned in the course of socialization. Socialization extends to meditative practice as well (see SHARF 1995, p. 418). The belief systems, which are an integral part of the network of practices, serve not only to interpret the experience, but they also serve to create the context for possession experiences to occur, molding them and defining them as possession experiences. Thus, possession is not separable from the diagnostic rituals, including trance possession, in which the source of the spirit attack or possession is determined, and ritual procedures for its relief are prescribed.

Possession is also marked by gender. While there are cases in which men are possessed (for example, by female fox spirits), the majority of those who either suffer from possession or engage in possession professionally have been women (see BLACKER 1975). The case of the *Genji monogatari* is particularly informative in this connection (see BARGEN 1997).

Ritual culture provides a heuristically valuable perspective on the study of ritual practice, and symbolic and artistic representations in Japan for several reasons. First is the priority of ritual practice over doctrine. Second, as an inclusive category, ritual culture allows for seeing the interrelations between ritual practice and religious art and symbol more clearly than if the three were considered as existing in isolation from one another. And third, ritual practices and religious art and symbols necessarily exist within socially maintained networks of practices, beliefs, and experiences.

FIXED AND PORTABLE

Ritual cultures combine elements which are fixed and elements which are portable.[6] Fixed elements are those which are not only in some way unique, but more

taken as implying a stable, consistent, orderly social system, i.e., in the way functionalism classically would have. As I am trying to formulate the concept of networks of practices here for use in the study of ritual cultures, they can be unstable and far from logically coherent, perhaps closer to Levi-Strauss's *bricolage*. See, for example, TAUSSIG 1987.

5. A classic study of the social character of possession is LEWIS 1971.

6. The terminology of "fixed and portable" draws on the work of Lionel ROTHKRUG (1980) on the patterns of Reformation allegiances.

importantly are only relevant to a particular locale. For example, the Sannō cult of Mt. Hiei is only relevant to the locale of Mt. Hiei (see GRAPARD 1987 and 1998). Both the cult of Ōmiwa and that of Mt. Iwaki are additional examples of networks of ritual practices, beliefs and experiences fixed on a specific location (see LISCUTIN 2000). Among the new religions, a particularly clear instance of a fixed element in the ritual culture is Tenrikyō's emphasis on returning "home to the Jiba, the site of humankind's original home marked by the Kanrodai pillar" (see ELLWOOD 1982, p. 52). In contrast, some elements of a religious tradition are portable: they can be relocated from one place to another. For example, many of the Vedic deities were incorporated into the tantric Buddhist pantheon, and were brought to Japan together with cultic practices devoted to them (see LUDVIK 1999–2000; FRANK 1991, 2000a, and 2000b).

However, the categories of fixed and portable are not mutually exclusive, but rather form a range with many intermediate instances. For example, some of the Kasuga deities are believed to have been relocated from their original shrines in Kashima and Katori (GRAPARD 1992, p. 31). The very possibility that such movement could have occurred suggests that there was fluidity between an identification with a particular territory and their role as clan deities (*ujigami* 氏神). Similarly, it seems likely that Mt. Fuji was originally a fixed cult, but having become a symbol of the entire nation, Mt. Fuji is not only worshipped locally, but also from afar.[7] At least equally ambiguous is the creation of miniature replicas of the Shikoku pilgrimage, each of the eighty-eight stations of which would traditionally require some of the soil from the corresponding temple on the island circuit.[8]

Allan Grapard has argued forcefully for attention to the unique local character of religious practice and symbol. For example, in his discussion of the *honji suijaku* 本地垂迹 theory, he says:

> The crucial point is that these systematic associations were always established at the level of particular shrines and temples, and not at an abstract, national level. In other words Shinto-Buddhist syncretism remained grounded in each particular religious community, thereby retaining original Shinto characteristics. This is why studies of these systems of communication between cultures must be made *in situ* before any general conclusions may be drawn: the syncretism found at the Hie shrines is characteristically different from that found at the Kasuga shrines, Kumano shrines, Hachiman shrines, and so on. (Kodansha Encyclopedia, vol. 7, p. 127)

At the same time, the "persisting practices"[9] of Japan's ritual culture are not purely local, but are also interconnected with global histories of the movement of religions across cultural

7. For brief discussion of the social and political dimensions of the Fuji sect per se, see DAVIS 1992.

8. See READER 1988; for a fuller discussion of pilgrimage, see Barbara Ambros's essay on "Geography, Environment, Pilgrimage" in this *Guide*.

9. The phrase is from KEIRSTEAD 1992, p. 98, who in turn has borrowed it from CORRIGAN and SAYER 1985.

boundaries.[10] The apparent opposition between local and global perspectives on religion is reconciled by the categories of fixed and portable. In many cases the unique character of the local results from its being the point of intersection between the fixed and portable.[11]

That religious elements are fixed does not mean that they are invariant. Some, such as the "Oracles of the Three Shrines" may be of long duration, though undergoing gradual, almost imperceptible changes (see BOCKING 2001). In other cases, claims of invariance and long duration are made for recently created ritual practices (see RANGER and HOBSBAWM 1992). In the same way, the portability of some religious elements does not mean that there is some eternal, timeless, unchanging essence that is manifest in each of these times and places, but rather that there is a historical continuity across the cultural boundaries.

Mandalas, the *goma* 護摩 ritual and recitation practices provide three different examples of how portable religious elements have interacted with the local ritual culture of Japan, to create unique forms. While much of Western scholarship usually engages mandalas as paintings, that is, as a form of art, they originate in India as representations of the cosmic court of a deity surrounded by his retinue. The complexity of mandalas is famous and has led to several extensive studies devoted solely to the details of which deities are represented in what form and in what location (TOGANOO 1932; SNODGRASS 1988; MAMMITZSCH 1991). In some cases, mandalas are formed of sculptures rather than painted. Two particularly important examples are the main hall at Tōji in Kyoto and the Eastern Pagoda at the Garan in Kōyasan (see FRANK 1991, pp. 163–85). Interpretations of mandalas need to give primacy to the fact that the context in which mandalas are created is ritual and symbolic, rather than simply viewing mandalas as artistic creations.

The cosmic symbolism of the mandala makes it a very potent organizing image, one which was extended into a wide variety of different realms. As discussed by Barbara Ambros in this collection, the geography of Japan was frequently seen as a kind of mandala, as for example, in the mountain pilgrimages of Shugendō practitioners (see TEN GROTENHUIS 1999; MIYAKE 2001). Conversely, specific shrine-temple complexes such as Kasuga were represented as mandalas, indicating "that the sacred space of cultic centers was associated with the transcendental space of the cosmos of buddhas and bodhisattvas" (GRAPARD 1992, p. 91). These often show the equations between kami and buddhas or bodhisattvas. Not only do these give some intimate glimpses of medieval religious life in Japan, but they also reveal the cultic organization of the shrine-temple portrayed. Even the robe of Buddhist monks (Jpn. *kesa* 袈裟, Skt. *kāṣāya*) was interpreted as a mandala, portraying the Buddhist cosmos, while also being homologized with the seat of enlightenment (Skt. *bodhimaṇḍa*) of the buddhas (FAURE 1995, p. 357).

Frequently seen in Shingon temples are a pair of mandalas. These are the *kongōkai* 金剛界 and *taizōkai* 胎蔵界 mandalas, representing the compassion and wisdom of Dainichi (Skt. Mahāvairocana), the chief deity (*honzon* 本尊) of the Shingon tradition. This

10. With what appears to be the same idea in mind, Robert S. CORRINGTON (2000) employs the terminology of "regional and generic."

11. For a more general discussion of the same issues in contemporary historiography, see IGGERS 1997, esp. Chapter 9: "From Macro- to Microhistory: The History of Everyday Life."

pairing of the two mandalas coincides with the integration in Shingon of two ritual traditions—the deities arrayed in the two mandalas being the deities evoked in the course of performing the rituals of each lineage of ritual practice.[12]

One of the most famous of the Japanese mandalas is the Taima mandala, a representation of the Pure Land of Amida as described in the *Visualization Sūtra*. Medieval legends tell of the miraculous creation of the Taima mandala in response to the prayers of the devout nun Chūjōhime (see TEN GROTENHUIS 1992). However, as a result of examinations of wall paintings at Dunhuang it is now evident that the format of the Taima mandala originated in western China (TEN GROTENHUIS 1999, pp. 28–32). The gradations between ritual and drama, and the highly performative character of Japan's ritual culture are evidenced by the legend of Chūjōhime, graphic representations of which were employed in proselytizing performances recounting the legend (see GLASSMAN 2004). Even these quasi-dramatic performances combine global and local dimensions. Victor MAIR (1988) has shown that such picture storytelling can not only be traced back to China, but that it has its origins in India.

The *goma* (Skt. *homa*) also evidences the way in which a ritual can be portable across cultural boundaries. The history of the *goma* can be traced back through China to the medieval development of tantra (or *mikkyō* 密教) in India, and even further to the fire rituals of Vedic practice. In its classic form the *goma* is a rite of votive offering, or sacrifice, in which the offerings are made into a fire. Though other groupings are known, the Shingon tradition (along with other tantric Buddhist traditions) categorizes its *gomas* and other rituals into five categories (Jpn. *goshuhō* 五種法) according to function: protection (Jpn. *sokusai* 息災, Skt. *śāntika*), increase (Jpn. *sōyaku* 増益, Skt. *pauṣṭika*), subjugation (Jpn. *jōbuku* 調伏, Skt. *abhicāraka*), subordination (Jpn. *keiai* 敬愛, Skt. *vaśīkaraṇa*), and acquisition (Jpn. *kōchō* 鈎召, Skt. *aṅkuśa*). Additionally, there are *gomas* devoted to a wide variety of different buddhas, bodhisattvas, dharma protectors, and other deities (see PAYNE 2000). In contemporary Japan, the *goma* is known in a variety of related forms. It is performed in both Tendai and Shingon temples, where the tantric form of Buddhism has been particularly important. There are discernible differences between the Shingon and Tendai forms of the *goma*. These are in large part attributable to the fact that the Tendai tradition, in addition to the *Dainichi-kyō* 大日経 (Skt. *Vairocanābhisaṃbodhi-sūtra*) and *Kongōchō-kyō* 金剛頂経 (Skt. *Vajraśekhara-sūtra*), also draws upon the *Soshitsuji-kyō* 蘇悉地経 (Skt. *Susiddhikaramahātantra*). This latter text became increasingly popular in Chinese esoteric Buddhism after the time of Saichō and Kūkai, when Tendai prelates such as Ennin traveled to China in search of additional esoteric materials needed to complete the Tendai esoteric teachings.

While in Buddhist settings the *goma* is generally performed inside a temple building,

12. The direct involvement of mandalas in ritual performances is to be distinguished from the idea that the practitioner is to form a complete mental image of the entirety of the mandala. Although this latter idea has become part of the common understanding of mandalas, Robert Sharf has recently demonstrated that they do not function that way in Japanese ritual culture (see SHARF 2001).

another form identified with Shugendō is performed outside. This is known as the *saitō goma* 柴燈護摩, and can be found being performed on the grounds of Buddhist temples, at Shugendō sites, and at Shinto shrines. In the medieval period traditions which identified themselves as Shinto, such as Ōmiwa and Yuiitsu (or Yoshida), created their own *goma* ceremonies. Practice of such hybrid forms was completely suppressed during the Meiji period.

Just as the *goma* was imported from India, recitation practices of various kinds current in Japan can also be traced back to India. Indic ritual culture is largely motivated by an understanding of the Vedas as the eternal vibratory foundation of the phenomenal world. The power of the Vedas could then be drawn upon in ritual performances through the recitation of pieces of the Vedic texts, that is, mantra. Mantra (*shingon* 真言) and *dhāraṇī* (*darani* 陀羅尼) were introduced as part of Shingon and the esoteric tradition within Tendai. Most commonly known today are those forms of recitation found in the "new" Buddhisms established in the Kamakura era. The history of these practices indicates the complex ways in which relatively simple ritual practices come into the popular ritual culture.

One example is the "Clear Light Mantra" (*kōmyō shingon* 光明真言), which has several benefits attributed to it. As pronounced in Japanese, the mantra is *on abogya beiroshanō makabodara mani handoma jimbara harabaritaya un* (Skt. *oṃ amogha vairocana mahāmudrā maṇi padma jvāla pravarttaya hūṃ*). It is perhaps a comment on the difficulties faced by those living in the Kamakura era that one of its most popular uses was the empowerment of common dirt. This dirt could then be sprinkled on a dying person, a corpse, or a grave, purifying the karma of the deceased and assuring birth in the Pure Land of Amida. The Clear Light Mantra was promoted by many practitioners, perhaps the best known of whom is Myōe Kōben (see Unno 1998).

Nichiren is associated with the recitation of the title of the *Lotus Sūtra* (*daimoku* 題目), familiar in the form of the phrase *namu myōhō renge kyō*, 南無妙法蓮華経 or "praise the scripture of the lotus blossom of the wonderful Dharma." Despite the common assumption that Nichiren initiated this practice, it is part of a series of almost identical invocations of the power of the *Lotus Sūtra*. These earlier forms include expressions such as *namu ichijō myōhō renge kyō* 南無一乗妙法蓮華経 and *namu gokuraku nan chigū myōhō renge kyō* 南無極楽難値遇妙法蓮華経, as well as combinations such as invoking both the *Lotus Sūtra* and a buddha (such as Amida; see Stone 1998).

Similarly, although the contemporary practice in the Pure Land schools is of the six-character invocation *namu Amida butsu* 南無阿弥陀仏, this only became the standard version around the time of Rennyo, considered the second founder of the Shin tradition of Pure Land (Rogers and Rogers 1991; Rogers 1996). Earlier, other forms of the *nenbutsu* had been used, including a ten-character version: *kimyō jin jippō muge kō nyorai* 歸命盡十方無礙光如來. The combination of artistic, symbolic, and ritual practice is exemplified by the many scrolls on which Rennyo inscribed the name of Amida (*myōgō* 名号). Other scrolls were more fully illustrated, the aesthetic representation becoming even more complexly saturated with symbolic and performative significance, blurring the lines we draw between written and visual representations (see Blum 2001).

These three examples—mandalas, *goma*, and recitation—all exemplify the unique, local character of Japanese ritual culture. The unique character arises out of the intersection of

portable and fixed elements. Thus, while one dimension of research needs to attend to the global movement of ritual elements across cultural boundaries, another dimension needs to attend to fixed and local aspects. These two interact dialectically, new forms being given to the local by imported practices, while portable elements are themselves molded as they are integrated into the ritual culture of Japan.

Local ritual cultures, however, have come under increasing pressure toward uniformity as a result of Japan's modernization over the last century and a half. Two interrelated kinds of pressures toward uniformity are at work. The first of these is the homogenization of Japanese culture by mass media. The second is the commodification of local customs, including revivals of local customs for the sake of tourism. The latter may have the appearance of supporting locally unique customs, but the process of commodification for the tourist trade itself imposes uniformity. This homogenization and commodification continues the Meiji-period neo-romantic nostalgia for local culture and belief in the authenticity and wisdom of "das Volk."[13] Thus, the historical processes by which fixed and portable elements interact can lead not only to a unique local form, but also move toward convergence across a wider ritual culture.

RITUAL AND SYMBOL AS NATURALIZED CATEGORIES

As an interpretive category, the concept of ritual culture includes the idea that it is a social creation. This is a way of treating the elements of the ritual culture—ritual practice, and religious symbol and art—naturalistically.[14] Such a naturalistic view of ritual culture entails that it be understood as existing in a variety of relations to other dimensions of the social reality; for example, history, economics, politics, culture, and religion.[15] In other words, these other dimensions are aspects of the social context within which Japanese ritual culture exists. The inclusion of religion as one of the contextualizing

[13] On the relation between folklore studies and modernization in Japan, see Figal 1999.

[14] In contemporary scholarly discourse the term "naturalize" and its cognates are employed in oddly antithetical ways. On the one hand it is used to mean something like "subject to treatment as an object of inquiry on a par with any other natural object or social practice." On the other it is taken to mean something like "simply a given which, therefore, cannot be questioned or examined." Those who employ the latter meaning often resort to the expression "denaturalize" when they wish to call something into question—in other words when under the first meaning they want to naturalize it. How this strange situation came about is not at all clear to this author. However, what he does wish to make clear is that he is talking about naturalizing ritual in the former sense. In other words treating ritual as part of the human repertoire of actions and behaviors, comparable, for example, to shopping, and subject therefore to a number of inquiries—economic, social, psychological, political, and so on. This is in opposition to the implicit exceptionalism found frequently in religious studies, such as the Eliadean interpretation of ritual as making sacred time and space present in the midst of the mundane.

[15] This also implies that religion is understood as a social creation, that is, it is not sui generis.

dimensions indicates that ritual culture itself is not simply a subset of religion, but rather has its own social function.[16]

At the same time, the category of ritual culture is used here in order to include a wide range of activities which "ritual"— understood more narrowly as a genre distinct from other genres such as ceremony, festival, pageant, and drama—might be thought to exclude. Use of a wider, more inclusive category is necessitated by the "conspicuously performative nature of Japanese religious thought and practice" (AVERBUCH 1995, p. 258; see also LAW 1997).

As part of the ritual culture, the symbolic lexicon of Japanese religion is also considered here to be a social creation. In other words, it is not—as is so often thought to be the case—that symbols are autonomous, ahistoric representations of some timeless and universal religious meaning. This is important to clarify, since in the Western academic study of religion the intellectual apprehension of symbol differs from the apprehension of ritual. The historical character of ritual has long been recognized in Christian religious culture, due, no doubt, to the concerns with the historical establishment of the sacraments by Jesus. This was the central concern in the debates of the Reformation era. This attention to the historicity of ritual has not been obscured by the neo-Romantics, despite the universalizing of an ahistorical view of ritual by, for example, Mircea Eliade. Symbol, however, is still largely approached ahistorically. The neo-Platonic tendency of Western religious culture, reinforced by the neo-Romantic character of influential strains within the psychology of religion have obscured the historical character of symbols.

One of the consequences of treating symbol as autonomous and ahistoric is that it contributes to an understanding of symbols as having a meaning separate from the specific, local religious setting in which the symbol actually exists. This is found in the work of any of those in the comparative study of religions who implicitly accept a view of symbols that assumes what may be called a "universal hermeneutics," that is, this idea that the meaning of a symbol is the same everywhere and at all times. The corollary of this is that the meaning can be understood without reference to its historical, cultural, religious, political, or economic context.

Sometimes this view is explicated by distinguishing between symbols and signs. The assertion made in support of this distinction is that while signs are arbitrary social conventions, symbols are in some sense natural, and do not depend upon culture for their meaning. Frequently, the idea of a universal hermeneutic is itself based upon a metaphysical preconception in which the source of religious symbols is a transcendent reality, a "timeless realm," from which the symbols are derivative. Frequently, this metaphysic is left implicit, and the Platonic roots of Western intellectual culture make it difficult to even

[16] While the discussion in this essay focuses primarily on the political function of religion, it is also important to note that the Western academic study of religion seems to systemically obscure the economic function of religion. This probably is the result of a generalized aversion to any reductive approach, and a specific aversion to Marxist theory. Yet, without attention to this dimension the motivation behind civic and other institutional support for a wide variety of rituals, ceremonies, and festivals cannot be understood. Why bother organizing a pilgrimage route if not to attract pilgrims and the economic benefits they bring?

explicate, much less call into question. Such a set of assumptions, however, makes it all too easy to presume an equivalence between a symbol whose meaning is known and one whose meaning is unknown simply on the basis of analogy. These presumptions may result in both reading onto the unfamiliar symbol a set of meanings not part of the Japanese understanding, and at the same time obscuring the actual significance the symbol has as part of the ritual culture of Japan.

An example of this is the imposition of the dualistic division of the world into sacred and profane realms onto the religious landscape of Japan. This symbolic division is very widely employed because of the influential role of Eliade, and because his dualistic worldview builds on dualistic religious assumptions implicit in Western understanding of religion (see ELIADE 1959). In contrast, however, Edmund GILDAY (1987 and 1990) has demonstrated that the Japanese religious worldview comprises three parts. The three different realms that Gilday identifies are the mountain, the fields, and the village. The mountain is the realm of the kami, the village the realm of humans, and the fields the realm of contestation between the two: the kami residing in the fields in the winter and moving to the mountains during the summer when humans take over the fields for agricultural purposes. GILDAY suggests that "*pacification* may be one way to characterize the objective of all *matsuri*, insofar as every *matsuri* is marked by an effort to enforce a particular articulation of order" (1990, p. 264).

Not only is there a problem with the idea of a universal hermeneutic or a universal symbolic typology, but symbols do not have any unchanging permanent significance. Any treatment of symbols that decontextualizes them from their social and historical location is fundamentally inaccurate. For example, the symbol of Shōtoku Taishi has been employed in a variety of different rhetorical strategies, and hence has carried different meanings according to the context. Both Buddhist adherents and Buddhist scholars have felt the urgency for the control of representation, because such representations serve in "legitimizing doctrinal interpretations and practices, promoting a particular socio-political agenda, or advancing a scholarly methodology or interpretation."[17] Another instance is the "Oracles of the Three Shrines" (*sanja takusen* 三社託宣), which exemplify the historical and political character of symbols. The oracles originated as political propaganda during the period of conflict between the Northern and Southern courts. Go-Daigo Tennō, head of the Southern court, is portrayed as the rightful ruler, bringing together the religious authority of his Buddhist identity (he is portrayed as a Shingon priest), and the endorsement of the three most important shrine deities, Ise, Hachiman, and Kasuga (BOCKING 2001, p. 34).

Another fundamental difference between Japanese and Western religious cultures important to an understanding of the function of symbols is the absence in Japan of any concern about idolatry. Thus, there is less of the sense that everything religious is solely referentially symbolic, that is, representing something else, some other, "higher" reality.

[17] See Mark Dennis, "Shifting Images of Prince Shōtoku: 'The Urgency for the Control of Representation'," paper presented at the 2001 conference of the International Association of Shin Buddhist Studies, 2–5 August 2001; Ōtani Daigaku, Kyoto, Japan, p. 3. For the phrase "the urgency of the control of representation," Dennis cites LOPEZ 1995, p. 251.

This does not mean that there are not symbolic associations, but rather that it is possible for the actual object and its symbolic significance to be homologized, that is, treated as identical. Thus, Dōgen can assert that any *kesa* sewn by a newly ordained Zen monk, does not symbolically represent, but simply is the robe of the Buddha Śākyamuni (FAURE 1995, p. 349). Likewise in contemporary Zen in its export form, the meditation cushion (*zafu* 坐蒲) is homologized to Mt. Meru, the cosmic mountain at the center of the Indian universe. Bernard FAURE points out that far from diminishing the value of the object, such ritual reproduction sustains the full potency of the original (1995, p. 352). Indeed, one might suspect that the potency of such objects is created exactly through their being infinitely reproducible.

While these examples are found in the portable aspects of Japanese religion, the absence of referential symbolism is found in the fixed aspects as well. For example, Mt. Fuji does not stand for or represent anything. It is just what it is, and as such is sacred in the sense of being a place of great power. There is an "intimate relationship among the gods (*kami*), the land, and its inhabitants.... The ordinary world is explained as an arena of divine activity" (TANABE 1999, p. 8). Exposure to the West may have degraded this cognitive culture over the last hundred fifty years, so that one may find discussions about such things as if they were representatively, or referentially, meaningful. However, this would appear to be an adaptation to the assumptions and expectations of Western religious culture. Japanese religious culture prior to the modern era consistently employs homologies, that is, assertions of an identity which goes beyond a referentially symbolic "standing for," as a primary rhetorical strategy. Such homologies also had hierarchical implications, as in the theory of "true nature and manifestation" (*honji suijaku*), and informed the deification of political leaders as kami (see SUGAHARA 1996).

As mentioned by many other authors in this *Guide*, the distinction between Shinto and Buddhism as we know them today is a modern one. Motivated by nationalist responses to European imperialism in East Asia, and informed by Romantic conceptions of religion and its search for the authentic in the indigenous, the institutional separation of the two traditions was enforced by a series of imperial edicts issued in 1868 (see KETELAAR 1990; BREEN 2000). This distinction is reflected in the modern institutional terms employed, that is, the distinction between Shinto "shrines" (*jingū* 神宮 or *jinja* 神社) and Buddhist "temples" (*tera* or *ji* 寺). As a result the term Shinto must be used with proper attention to sociohistorical context, appropriate only to the rise of self-consciously Shinto movements such as Ōmiwa and Yuiitsu in the late medieval and early premodern periods, and the subsequent separation in Meiji (see, for example, ANTONI 1995). The importance of keeping such contextual concerns in mind in studying ritual culture is the need to avoid anachronisms, which can only be accomplished by clarity about the historical location of the ritual, artwork, or symbol being examined.

Part of the religious recreation of Shinto as an autonomous and indigenous tradition was the creation of a ritual culture, much of which since that time has taken on the patina of "ancient Shinto rites." For example, the Shinto wedding ceremony[18] that is familiar

[18] See SMITH 1995, p. 28. For a study of recent changes in wedding practices, see FISCH 2001.

today and commonly thought of as an ancient custom was newly created in 1900 for the wedding of the Crown Prince (later, the Taishō Emperor). Such recency emphasizes how powerful the Meiji-period rhetoric was that instituted emperor-centered Shinto as a matter of "clarification of what had previously been obscure and a restoration of what had earlier been displaced" (BOCKING 2001, p. 96).

One of the assumptions inherited from functionalist theory in the anthropological study of religion is that ritual is basically conservative of the social order, that it reinforces the existing social order, conveys an understanding of that social order to younger members of that society, and is itself unchanging. The study of the creation of tradition, however, discloses first that rituals, whether conservative or not, are not themselves unchanging, though they often are seen as such very quickly. Also, there are many rituals, both in Japan and elsewhere, which are actively expressive of social tensions. The case of the Furukawa *matsuri* called *okoshi daiko* 起し太鼓 or "rousing drum" evidences both the changing character of ritual and its use as a subversive activity.[19] Prior to the push to modernize Japan in the late nineteenth century, the "rousing drum" was a very peaceful announcement of a Shinto rite to be performed later that same day. In its much more raucous contemporary forms, the wealthy and greedy may be physically assaulted and their property damaged in the course of the ritual. The functionalist explanation of such apparently antisocial behaviors, deriving perhaps ultimately from Aristotelian theories of the social function of drama, but more recently from Turner, is that these are cathartic, that is, they are relatively safe expressions of social tensions, which if not allowed expression under these constrained circumstances might lead to real social change and disruption.[20] However, as Scott SCHNELL suggests, the "instrumental value of religious ritual as a means of adapting to—or perhaps even introducing—changes in the sociopolitical order remains largely unexplored" (1999, p. 4).

The political function of ritual, ceremony, and pageant[21] is evident throughout Japanese history. The ritual power of relics and political control of rituals for their display began in the Heian and continued through the Ashikaga. According to Brian RUPPERT (2000), the "court's appropriation of Buddha relics reflected its view that such public performances represented the largess of the emperor vis-à-vis major shrines and displayed the power of

[19] See SCHNELL 1999; see also Schnell's essay in this *Guide*. Similar festivals are known in India and Europe. The potentially deadly character of what are sometimes called "rituals of inversion" is evidenced in LADURIE 1979. For an important series of discussions of these issues, see LINCOLN 1989, esp. Part II: Ritual.

[20] The functionalist presumption that stability is the norm for society runs the risk of creating a petitio principii fallacy in which because stability is assumed, activities counter to that stability are simply interpreted as ultimately supportive of the social order through the cathartic release of tensions. On the basis of this presumption then, more extreme disruptions are categorized as something else—rebellions—and explained by reference to a different set of dynamics.

[21] Philippe BUC (2001) has recently critiqued the undiscriminating use of the term "ritual" as a category encompassing too many different political events, and indeed, the events described by T. Fujitani discussed here include several different kinds of activities. Hence, the more comprehensive list of "ritual, ceremony, and pageant."

the central government throughout the countryside."[22] Political functions at times also merged with economic ones: "Temples, and the collections of sculptures, paintings, and sutras they housed, were used by members of the imperial household and their associates as tax shelters through the commendation of lands to their upkeep" (YIENGPRUKSAWAN 1998, p. 92).

The Meiji period saw an equally effective use of ritual, ceremony, and pageantry in the assertion of a new, unified Japan, taking its proper place on the world stage under the guidance of the Meiji emperor. These productions combined "ancient-looking rites performed within the innermost sanctuary of the Imperial Palace" with Western-style parades of Japan's modern, that is, Westernized, military and civil authority (FUJITANI 1996, p. 106).

The Meiji emperor also engaged in military reviews, including a review celebrating Japan's success against Russia. This was a review of the ships of the Imperial Navy, and of ships captured from Japan's enemies. The purpose of this review was "to display the enormous spectacle of men and ships, an incredible mass of volatile military power, transformed into docile objects of the emperor's gaze" (FUJITANI 1996, p. 131). This function is reminiscent of one of the earliest recorded political rites, the ritual viewing of the land (*kunimi* 国見) by the Heavenly Sovereign[23] (*tennō* 天皇), recorded in *Nihon shoki* 日本書紀 and *Man'yōshū* 万葉集. Also similar is the goal of "creating the illusion of permanence and unbroken continuity. By simultaneously presenting the new human order and aligning it with the divine order, each ritual performance sought to win the public's acceptance of the legitimacy of the socio-political order" (EBERSOLE 1989, p. 25). The political importance of such rituals, ceremonies, and pageants is found even in cases where the events did not actually occur, as in the funeral services planned for Hideyoshi (see MACÉ 1996–1997).

Detailed information about the festivals and kami worship conducted by the nobility of the court at the transition from the tenth to eleventh centuries is found in the administrative procedures compiled during the Engi era (901 to 922), known as the *Engi shiki* 延喜式 (BOCK 1970 and 1972). This included worship at the Ise Shrine, as well as the procedures for the Bureau of the Consecrated Imperial Princess who represented the sovereign at the Ise Shrine. The fourth book, devoted to the Ise Shrine, includes information on the names of deities in the various shrines in the area as well as the number of attendants (*uchindo*, or *uchibito* 内人) in service at each one. The offerings for each of the annual cycle of rituals is given in great detail. For example, for the Festival of Deity Raiment the list of offerings includes the exact measurements of the silk to be offered, the exact number of strands of silk for jewelry and for sewing, as well as such details as one long knife and sixteen short knives (BOCK 1970, p. 126).

In the eighth book, the liturgies (*norito* 祝詞) of the rituals and festivals are given, many of which correlate with the myths of the *Kojiki* 古事記 and *Nihon shoki*. This connection between the ritual practices detailed in the *Engi shiki* and the myths of the *Kojiki* and *Nihon shoki* is important in giving a larger context to the rituals, as the myths primarily

[22] RUPPERT 2000, p. 262. For information regarding relic veneration in South Asian Buddhism, see TRAINOR 1997.

[23] This usage follows PIGGOTT's discussion of the proper terminology (1997, pp. 8–9). In the Meiji period, however, the term "emperor" does seem appropriate, and hence is used here as well.

function as charter myths, that is, justification for the political dominance of the imperial clan (MATSUMAE 1993, p. 323).

That the myths and rituals have a socio-political function does not mean that they are not religious. The naturalistic view of ritual and symbol being employed here avoids the presumption that religion is sui generis and that religious experience, or religious emotion, is irreducible and the single defining characteristic of religion. Such a conception of religion originates in attempts by Western scholars of religion in the late nineteenth century and early twentieth century to protect religion from what were seen as destructive reductionist inquiries. These authors created a rhetoric that makes religion something which cannot be explained, and which, therefore, is not to be explained. Not only does such a view of religion preclude serious research, but it is based on theological conceptions originating from the Western monotheisms, and are therefore inappropriate to the study of Japanese ritual culture. At the same time, it is anachronistic to impose onto the early Japanese situation the idea that for religion to be religious it needs to not have social and political functions. At that time the political and religious realms were less clearly divided than we consider them to be today: "The sovereign was simultaneously the ritual and political head of the nation" (EBERSOLE 1989, p. 24; see also PIGGOTT 1997, pp. 208–26). State control of religion is one manifestation of this, and in one form or another the Japanese state attempted to control religion right up to the declaration of religious freedom in the twentieth century.

THE INFLUENCE OF BUDDHIST TANTRA, AND BUDDHIST RITUAL STRUCTURES

As the frequent references in the preceding indicate, esoteric Buddhism, introduced by Kūkai and Saichō at the beginning of the ninth century, deeply pervades Japanese religion. A familiar example is the presence of Fudō Myōō (Skt. Acalanatha Vidyarājā, also known as Caṇḍamahāroṣaṇa) in many locations where cold water austerities (Jpn. *misogi* 禊) are practiced. Wrapped in flames generated by his own concentrative power, Fudō ensymbols the generation of inner heat. One of the classic records of this is found in the *Heike monogatari* 平家物語. In chapter five the warrior Mongaku engages in cold water austerities under the Nachi falls at Kumano in midwinter, vowing to stay there for twenty-one days while reciting the Fudō mantra three hundred thousand times. He stayed in the freezing water below the falls until he was on the edge of death. At that point two of Fudō's eight attendant youths revived him, and assured him that Fudō knew of his vow. Renewed in his confidence, Mongaku "returned to the pool and stood under the waterfall again. Thanks to the divine protection, the blowing gales no longer pierced his flesh; the descending waters felt warm" (MCCULLOUGH 1988, p. 179).

The pervasion of esoteric Buddhism is also evident in the area of ritual practice, esoteric ritual having been appropriated not only by other Buddhist sects, but also in the formation of sects which specifically identified themselves as Shinto. As mentioned above, both Ōmiwa Shinto and Yuiitsu (or Yoshida) Shinto developed their own version of the *goma*. Yuiitsu also borrowed the Eighteen Stages ritual (Jūhachidō 十八道) from Shingon, where

today it is the first ritual in the training of a Shingon priest (*ajari* 阿闍梨, Skt. *acarya*), renaming it the Eighteen Kami. The third of the three rituals that formed the core of Yuiitsu liturgy is devoted to the Northern Dipper, apparently also borrowed from Shingon. Here we see an instance of the need for attention to the portability of ritual practices, as esoteric Buddhist rituals devoted to the Northern Dipper were composed in China, in response to the important role of the Northern Dipper in Taoism.

Buddhist liturgical practice, the kinds of rites one can observe in temples all over Japan today, may initially appear to be very diverse, and unique to each particular sect (*shū* 宗) and even lineage (*ryū* 流) within the sect. Beneath the variety, however, certain consistent elements and patterns can be seen.[24] These originate in the Indian Mahāyāna, where it is known as the "supreme worship" (or "supreme offering," Skt. *anuttara-pūjā*).[25] While most frequently comprising seven elements, other groupings of from three to nine are also found. At the same time, different specific liturgies employ various elements, so that the total pool of actions is larger. The most commonly occurring are eleven ritual actions: praise, veneration, confession of faults, rejoicing in the merits of others, requesting the teaching, begging the buddhas not to abandon living beings, going for refuge, vows, sacrifice of oneself, arousal of bodhicitta, and transfer of merit.[26] The ritual tradition of Buddhism, however, has not been attended to in Western scholarship until relatively recently.

The neo-romanticism which permeates Western religious studies emphasizes mystical experience as the most important aspect of religion. This contributed to raising of the "sudden enlightenment" teaching of Zen, what Bernard Faure (1991) has called "the rhetoric of immediacy," together with its portrayal of Zen meditation as entrée to a condition of pure spontaneity, to normative status. Doing so obscured the ritualistic character of some aspects of Japanese religion, such as Zen meditation itself which is highly ritualized. At the same time it marginalized those aspects for which ritual could not be obscured, such as

[24] Morse and Morse 1995, p. 8. This exhibition catalogue also includes valuable essays by James H. Foard, "Ritual in the Buddhist Temples of Japan," Samuel Crowell Morse, "Space and Ritual: The Evolution of the Image Hall in Japan," and Kawada Sadamu with Anne Nishimura Morse, "Japanese Buddhist Decorative Arts: The Formative Period, 552–794."

[25] See Śāntideva 1995; I am indebted to Bruce Williams for his assistance with this section.

[26] The terminology varies between sources:
praise (*vandanā*),
worship/offering/veneration (*pūjā, pūjanā*),
confession/confession of faults (*deśana, pāpa-deśana*),
rejoicing/rejoicing in merits/rejoicing in the merits of others (*modanā, anumodanā, puṇyānumdodanā*),
requesting the teaching (*adhyeṣaṣā*),
begging (*yācanā*, i.e., begging the buddhas not to abandon living beings),
going for refuge (*śaraṇa-gamana*),
vows (*praṇidāna*),
sacrifice of oneself (*atmatyāga, ātmabhāvananiryātana*),
arousal of bodhicitta (*bodhicittotpāda*), and
transfer of merit (*pariṇāmanā*).

the ongoing role of esoteric Buddhism in Japan after the Heian, the point at which it disappears from most Western language books on the history of Japanese religion.

For related reasons, Western scholarship has also overlooked the scholastic character of Japanese Buddhism such as the traditions of debates in Shingon and Shin, which continue into the present. Such debates are both highly ritualized and scholastic, rather than aesthetic and mystical. This may explain why, although we read about the debate in literature and biographies of monks, they are almost entirely neglected in the study of Japanese Buddhism. There is, for example, a monthly debate conducted in the Sannōin on Kōyasan.[27] As one might expect, the topics are related to the *Lotus Sūtra*, and the debate exchange is placed within a very ritualized setting. The entire ritual takes place over a two-hour period, of which about the last forty-five minutes are devoted to the debate per se. Its location in the Sannōin indicates that it is conducted for the edification and amusement of the deities who protect the mountain, who would conventionally be identified as Shinto.

CONCLUSION

The study of Japan's ritual culture requires a series of integrative perspectives. One is the view of ritual culture as incorporating not only ritual practices, but symbolic and artistic representations as well. Similarly, ritual culture includes military pageants and political ceremonies as well as religious rituals per se. This points toward a wide range of contextualizing factors that may be investigated when ritual culture is naturalized, that is, seen as a social product. Another perspective is that of ritual culture as a network involving ritual practices, beliefs, and experiences, which are socially maintained and integrated through a variety of socialization processes.

Japan's ritual culture is both a challenge and an opportunity, as it is based on assumptions and beliefs which are radically at variance with those of Western religious studies. To the extent that the latter grows out of the Western religious tradition it tends to a set of implicit assumptions, for example, that ritual derives from doctrine, that are not appropriate to the study of the religious culture of Japan.

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[27] I was privileged to attend one of these sessions in August 2001, through the generous invitation of the late Rev. Chisei Aratano, whom I wish to thank publicly.

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