

V. ANCESTOR VENERATION IN JAPAN

1. "More Japanese participate in the rites marking memorial observances for the spirits of the dead than in all other rites combined" (Smith 1974:vii).

2. Ancestors and Primitive Shinto:

Hori shows that there were two foundations of primitive Shinto:

2.1 ujigami based on family or clan (uji) system.

"Each family had its own shrine as a central symbol of its solidarity, dedicated to the ancestral spirit who had been enshrined and worshipped by its ancestors. This type of belief system is characterized by particularism and exclusiveness from other families, so that its main function is to integrate all the members of the family into a patriarchal hierarchy" (Hori 1968:30).

2.2 hito-gami based on a close relationship of an individual kami (god) with a religious specialist such as a shaman or a medicine man. Hito-gami means human-god. This system was characterized by the strong individuality both of the kami and its transmitter who lived for a long time in the memory of the believers. This was the more prominent type as can be seen that 80% of Shinto shrines are of man deified after they died.

3. Ancestors and Folk Buddhism

3.1 Buddhism came to Japan via China. In China it had incorporated the Confucian ancestral rites and filial piety as central to its beliefs.

- "Over time the association of ancestral rites with institutionalized Buddhism became so complete that for most Japanese today Buddhism has come to mean ancestor worship and little more" (Smith 1974:2).

3.2 During the Tokugawa Shogunate (1603-1868) ancestor veneration became associated with the Buddhist temple.

"For the parishioners the temple became primarily the place where the ancestors worshipped, and the priest the chief officiant at ancestral rites. What had until then been more or less household-centered ancestral observances, requiring no priests at all, provided the raw material for a structure Buddhist formulation of practices requiring the services of temples and priests for their proper execution" (Smith 1974:22).

3.3 The doctrine of Extinction and Nirvana was reinterpreted.

"...ordinary people, finding the doctrine of nirvana difficult, likened it to physical death. So from the idea that those who have entered nirvana are hotoke (buddha), all the dead were called 'buddha' regardless of whether the persons had any affiliation with buddhism during their lifetime, and regardless of their character" (Takeda 1957:232). As a result, many Japanese have no statues of Buddha on their ancestor selves, only ancestors.

3.4 Few Japanese take karma and transmigration seriously (Ooms 1967).

- 3.5 Japanese find it hard to think of their ancestors in hell. They also have little concern with heaven. They are concerned with this world.
- 3.6 Folk spirits contined. The response was that boddhisattvas such as Jizo protect village communities from devils and evil spirits.
 "At the borderline of the village people raised long stones which they called 'the god of the grave.' Shaped as a linga they resembled the statues of Jizo, and the buddhist popular preachers (*hijiri*) adapted their preaching to popular beliefs, and reinterpreted the stone-lingas to be Jizo." (Gorai 1984:30)
- 3.7 The Bon festival. August 13-15. The most popular Buddhist festival. This is no longer an offering to the priest, but an offering to the ancestors and a welcoming of them home for a time.
- 3.8 Nembutsu: Reciting the sacred name of Amitabha (Amida in Japan) that is believed to enable humans to reach the Pure Land. Under Japanese influence it expanded to be a memorial service to the spirits of the dead, either dead family members, or wandering spirits that can harm the living.

4. Ancestor Veneration

4.1 Collective memorial services:

Four seasonal holidays: New Year (Jan. 1-3), Bon (Aug. 13-15), and spring and fall equinoxes (Mar. 18-24, Sept. 20-26). On Bon the Buddhist altar is opened and offerings placed before the tables. Sometimes a fire is prepared at the entrance of the house to guide the spirits back home. The next day the grave is visited and offerings made. A community dance is often held.

4.2 Rationale for ancestor veneration:

4.21 Welbeing of the living: There but not dominant. "A straight rejection of the idea of protection is rare, but its wholeharded acceptances seems equally rare" (Ooms).

4.22 Success and prosperity: Not dominant. Most people do not anticipate direct intervention by ancestors. Life is determined by the initiatives of the living. Ancestors are to be enjoyed as generally passive and overseeing the actions of the living in the manner of tutelary deities (Smith).

4.23 Entertainment: One common theme.

4.24 Meaning of Life:

- ancestor veneration deals not so much with the problem of individual death and continuity, but the continuity of the *ie* or household. "through ancestor wroship the membership of the *ie* is enhanced to such an extent that true membership is never lost: it transcends death and lasts forever" (Ooms 1967:286).
- "The prosperity, unity, harmony and nonor of the house is considered the summum bonum. The ultimate ethical criterion, therefore, is neither to found in universal standards transcending the social group nor in individual happiness and edification. Whether the interests of the family, including living and dead, are served or not is ultimately the standard applied for a proper distinction between moral and immoral conduct. Since the ancestors are regarded as 'living' members of the family, the

decisive point in this connection is that the individual and the family at any time should know themselves to be in harmony with the will of the forbearers. that will is the ultimate one, and with ultimate will goes ultimate authority" (Berentsen 1985:265).

- "...the members of the household are united among themselves and with the ancestors... They are all their descendants, and even the bride who is not a descendant, enjoys the same position. . . The daily offerings occur when the whole family is united in the morning at breakfast. Thus integration is not such that everybody feels united around the ancestors. Instead they share the meal with everybody, and hardly any more attention is paid to the dead than to any other living member of the family." (Ooms 1967:266).
- in contrast, individualistic Christianity sees little endurance of the family beyond three generations.
- There is no acceptance of the concept that death cuts off or ends the relationship between the dead and the living.

4.3 Rites of Transition.

There is a parallel between path of child to adulthood and dead to ancestorhood:

CHILD TO ADULT

Birth 7th day 31/33 day 100 day 3 yr 5yr 7yr Marriage

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Funeral 7th day 49th day 100 day 1yr 3yr 7yr 13yr 17yr 23yr 33yr

DEAD TO ANCESTOR

4.31 The chief aim of ancestral rites is to transform the spirit of the dead to the status of an ancestral spirits. This based on the idea of transfer of merits (eko) from the living to the dead. Time alone is not enough. There must be diligent performances of the rites that gain merit for the dead.

5. State Shinto

This is a merger of Buddhism and primitive Shinto during Tokugawa period. Emperor became the ancestor of the nation. He could trace his lineage to the founding ancestor - Jimmu, who was a direct descendent of Amaterasu-o-mikami, the Sun Goddess.

6. Christian Response

6.1 Must deal with an immanentist religion.

- in an immanentist religion, nature possesses a symbolic meaning that reinforces the folk religion. Believers project faith onto the natural environment.
- life beyond is seen as analogous to life here.
- gods are immanent for they work through existing forms.
- we need therefore a theology of God as transcendent as well as immanent.

- We need a theology of worship.

6.2 Must deal with ancestor veneration.

- Smith concludes it is both memorialism and worship. "The Family of God may be the family,... I have no doubt that the family's dead are its gods. Like all gods they are worshipped and petitioned."
- need a theology of resurrection, and of ancestors
- must deal with communion with the dead. Gehman (1985) notes in O.T. "Scripture suggests that it is impossible to communicate with the dead" (1985:485). He also deals with necromancy (1985:495).
- we need rituals to maintain solidarity of the household (ie). This must maintain sense of respect for parents (ho-on redefined). It must also include a teaching of the new family of God (familia Dei - see Shedd 1958).

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