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## THE ANCESTRAL RITES IN MISSIOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVE

Anyone familiar with the complex nature of the phenomenon in Japanese religion and society usually identified as "ancestor worship" will muster a great many objections towards a missiological approach to this phenomenon within the limits of a brief article. Is not such an attempt predestined to be an irresponsible undertaking? So it may seem. It has to be said, therefore, that what emerges in the following pages is a rough summary of some of our findings after having been immersed in the problem for years.<sup>1</sup> We will not in this article deal in depth with any particular aspect, but rather survey what significant issues are involved in the ancestral rites as such, and what problems are at stake in a Christian missiological approach to the phenomenon.<sup>2</sup> For reasons that shall not be discussed here we limit ourselves to ancestral rites on the household level in the context of traditional Japanese Buddhism, i.e., we have to do with domestic ancestral rites as a folk-religious practice centered around the family altar/*but sudan* and the grave.<sup>3</sup> In our view missiology over the years has tended to concentrate its interest on the major, so-called "higher," religions to a degree that has saved little interest and energy for a

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1. Cf. further Berentsen 1982. (For references see Bibliography below.)
2. For the study of ancestor worship in general, in light of the Christian faith as a must for missiologists, see Hwang 1977. As for recent voices to the missiological problems presented by the ancestral rites in Japan, see, e.g., Shibata 1978 and Magaki 1978.
3. See Hori 1968, Chapter I for ancestor worship as a significant element in what he calls "Japanese folk religion."

serious grappling with the more vaguely defined and diverse practices of local folk religion. However difficult this may be — not least from a methodological point of view — it has to be attempted if the church wants to be fit for communication on the grass-roots level.

### I. Introductory Notes

I, 1. First let us make a few terminological observations. When we used the expression, "ancestral rites," in the title above, instead of "ancestor worship," the major reason was that the latter term tends to exclude the significant *kuyō*-aspect of the rites, i.e., the ancestral rites as masses for the benefit of the dead. When we — for convenience's sake — also use the latter expression, the *kuyō*-aspect is always implicit.

"Ancestor worship" is an unfortunate term also, because it immediately causes discussion among Westerners as to whether the rites should not be identified as veneration rather than worship.<sup>4</sup> The two Japanese expressions most frequently used for "ancestor worship" are *so sen sūhai* and *senzo matsuri*. Besides these it is often referred to as *so sen sūkei* or *senzo saishi*, while the expression "to worship/venerate the ancestors" may be *so sen o sūhai suru, sūkei suru, reihai suru, ogamu, matsuru*. In all these verbal expressions both the idea of religious worship and that of veneration/respect are included. In some the one may be more prevalent than the other. The important thing for us to notice, however, is that in connection with the ancestral rites these expressions are used interchangeably. Already a preliminary terminological inquiry shows, in other words, that the alternative "worship" or "veneration" is not likely to appear in a Japanese mind.

Tricky from a terminological point of view is also the term "ancestor," closely related to the traditional Japanese concept of the

4. Cf., e.g., Norbeck 1970, p. 141, and Bernier 1970, p. 121.

"house," the *ie*.<sup>5</sup> We may note three meanings of the term "ancestor"/"ancestors": 1. The founder of the *ie* as the ancestor par excellence. 2. The souls of all the ancestors of the house counted in a stricter or looser sense. 3. Any deceased person whose tablet may be found in a family altar. This person is included in the object of the rites, although he/she may not be a member of the *ie* at all. The term "ancestor" is not, however, to be defined solely on the basis of social relationships. It also has a qualitative implication in so far as the status of "ancestor" is not attained simply by way of death. It involves a process of growth from the status of "spirit of the dead"/*shirei* to that of an "ancestral spirit"/*sorei*. The term "ancestor" is not, accordingly, a concept that should be used indiscriminately for all the dead. Such an all-embracing term for the dead exists in the concept *hotoke* (the Japanese word for "Buddha").

I, 2. Secondly, some reference should be made to what we call the "Sitz im Leben" of the ancestral rites. They represent a phenomenon which is thoroughly integrated in the life of the Japanese people, historically, religiously and sociologically. Even though its origin and initial shape and content may be obscure, ancestor worship, as it has developed over the centuries in close interaction with the wider religious history of the people, seems to represent a thorough amalgamation of ancient pre-Buddhist and Buddhist ideas. On the folk-level Buddhism was associated with ancestor worship to the extent that the whole nation eventually came to be organized in a religious-political system with the ancestral rites (domestic, tribal, and national) in home and temple as the central pivot.<sup>6</sup>

5. Cf. Takeda 1957/1975, p. 13: "To make clear the structure of ancestor worship one has first to make clear the structure of its premise: the *ie*." (Our own translation.) For the understanding of the term "ancestor," see esp. Smith 1974, pp. 152-183.

6. We cannot here deal with the ancestral rites in historical perspective. For this problem see Takeda *op. cit.*, and Tamamuro 1971/1974.

The radical social, constitutional and other changes in modern Japan have, in many respects, affected the ways of the ancestral rites.<sup>7</sup> They may well be said to be caught in a complex dual dilemma, that of profound changes in sociological structures, and that of secularization over against traditional religious values. There are interesting examples in contemporary religious life to show, however, both that the traditional religious values of ancestor worship are geared to new sociological structures, and that the problem of ancestor worship in modern Japan goes beyond the problem of structures; it is a problem of existential religious significance touching upon the very fundamentals of human existence.<sup>8</sup> We are probably right when we look upon the domestic ancestral rites in present Japan, not only as a victim of change, but as an agent influencing the changing process as well.<sup>9</sup>

When we said above that we shall concern ourselves with the rites centered around the *butsudan* and the grave, it means that we focus on the practice of the dead being taken care of, worshipped and remembered in close interaction between the family with its home altar and the family temple with its priests. This interaction is carried out partly through rites for individual spirits, rites which are basically of a one-time nature (as the funeral with the subsequent *hōji*-ceremonies), and partly through rites and festivals for the collectivity of the dead, rites that are to be repeated and perpetuated ad infinitum (as the daily observances at the *butsudan* and, e.g., the *Bon* festival).

Let us then turn to the results of an analysis of the basic assumptions of the ancestral rites.

7. Cf. Maeda Takashi's interesting study, Maeda 1965.

8. See, e.g., the function of ancestor worship in *Rissho Kosei-kai* as presented in *Rissho Kosei-kai* 1972, and the rites for deceased persons as practiced at *Isshinji*, Osaka, presented in *Fujii* 1974.

9. Cf. Takahashi 1975.

## II. A Systematic Analysis

The purpose of such an analysis is not to try to portray a consistent religious "system." That simply is not possible. The ancestral rites present an amalgamation of different ideas of which some are hard to reconcile. The purpose is to focus upon basic premises underlying the ancestral rites in order to prepare for a subsequent inquiry into the problems that arise in the encounter with the Christian faith. Three major problem areas seem to present themselves as significant. II, 1. The first is related to ancestor worship as part of the social, inter-human milieu, including the ethical code that governs the social relationships. As already stated, any study of Japanese ancestor worship has to be a study of the Japanese *ie* to which it belongs.<sup>10</sup> The traditional *ie* is to be characterized by the rule of four Ps: It is patriarchal, patrilineal, primogenitural and patrilocal. These four principles are all subordinate, however, to the overriding principle of the preservation and continuation of the *ie* itself. The principle of male primogeniture, for example, is not of such a preponderance that it is allowed to jeopardize the tradition of the *ie* as such. Therefore the adoption-system/*yōshi seido* is universally accepted as a valid means to continue the house where there is no natural heir.<sup>11</sup> This points to a most crucial aspect of the *ie* in our context. The "house," namely, is an everlasting entity transcending any actual generation and member of it. It is an entity in continuity from the past into the future including both the dead, the living, and the not-yet-born. In the *ie* these groups are all united in an interdependent community which transcends life and death. This ultimate reality of the *ie* is symbolized in the family grave and the family altar, i.e., in the ancestral rites. In other

10. If we should venture to point out specific items among the vast number of books on the Japanese family-system, we would suggest Kawashima 1950 and 1957/1959.

11. For the *yōshi seido*, see Smith *op. cit.*, pp. 165-167.

words, the *ie* is a social and religious unit at the same time, a fact which arrests any attempt at describing the *ie* in purely sociological terms.<sup>12</sup> Within this ultimate community each individual — whatever his actual position within the household — is considered a partaker in the "house," and the ancestors are its protectors.

Since the war Japan has seen a significant process of nuclearization of the family with obvious consequences for the sociological milieu of the ancestral rites.<sup>13</sup> Nevertheless, most scholars, in their investigation of post-war changes, point to the persistence of the old values in various ways. Looking at contemporary Japan, therefore, we are confronted with a complicated state of affairs. The traditional unity of *ie* and ancestor worship may be accepted and conformed to by some, consciously rejected by others, and — perhaps by the majority of the common people — considered as part of the traditional culture that in some way or other has to be carried on and transformed into a consonant coexistence with the realities of modern, industrialized Japan.

Even though H.Ooms may be correct in saying that "the ancestor cult does not have its own moral code,"<sup>14</sup> it is, nevertheless, obvious that it has implications for ethics which — over the centuries — have been closely associated with the Confucian philosophy that provided concrete ethical prescriptions. In the first place, the ancestral rites harbor important implications with respect to the criteria for the evaluation of moral conduct. Within the primary social nexus of the family no one plays his/her own game. The prosperity, unity, harmony and

12. "The eternal continuity or eternity of *ie* is a rule or norm for Japanese in general. Once established, an *ie* is supposed to last forever and never to become extinct." (Takeda 1976, p. 121. Cf. also Hori 1962, pp. 136-137.)

13. A lot of research has been done to survey the position of the *ie* and the family in the modern process of industrialization and urbanization. See for example Kawakoshi 1957, Sano 1958, Matsumoto 1960, Koyama 1960/1972, Fujii *op. cit.*, and Takahashi *op. cit.*

14. Ooms 1967, p. 267.

honour of the house is considered the summum bonum. The ultimate ethical criterion, therefore, is neither to be 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 forebears. That will is the ultimate one, and with ultimate will goes ultimate authority.

In the second place, ancestor worship carries implications for concrete behavior and its motivation. Important here is the whole notion of gratefulness to the ancestors for the benevolence/*on* bestowed upon the family, and the subsequent obligation to repay this *on* through one's own conduct. Thus, the repayment of *on/hōon* becomes a major motivating force for moral behavior. The actual repayment of *on* is carried out through the virtue of filial piety/*kō*, which is nothing but a response on the part of the descendants to the *on* of the forebears — including living and dead. What *kō* means in concrete terms may vary according to one's status in the family. Any family member, however, will serve the group according to his/her status as the first and basic requirement of filial piety. The ancestors and their descendants are, in other words, linked together in a circle of obligation.

II, 2. The second problem area is a further analysis of the relationship between the living and the dead, i.e., of this life to “afterlife.” In our presentation above, it has already become clear that, in the context of the ancestral rites, death does not constitute an ultimate end to man's existence. Somehow there is a continued existence beyond death which provides the basis for a fundamental community between the living and the dead of the house. The various aspects of the rites reflect

a significant feeling of closeness and continuity, an unbreakable spiritual bond which, in the words of Hori Ichirō, has provided the Japanese with an answer to the universal quest for permanence and eternity.<sup>15</sup>

The ancestral rites are based on “the assumption that some sort of spirit survives the body after death,”<sup>16</sup> and of special interest in our context is the idea of its process of growth after death. As a child passes through stages from birth to adulthood, the soul/*tamashii* passes through corresponding stages from a dead spirit/*shirei* to mature ancestorhood/*sorei*.<sup>17</sup> Important stages in this process are the *imiake* — also called the *man-chūin* — at the 49th day after death when the soul completes its stay in the “purgatory”/*chūin*, and the final memorial rite/*tomurayage* at the 33rd or 50th anniversary, which marks the decisive turning point between the period of growth towards ancestorhood and the state of ancestorhood itself. Having arrived at this stage the *sorei* is conceived of in terms of a supraindividual, unlimited, abstract being that may easily be identified with a specific *kami* or buddha.<sup>18</sup> This idea of growth is combined with orthodox thinking and terminology in a way which leaves quite an amount of ambiguity and to which we cannot address ourselves in this article.<sup>19</sup> It is sufficient to say that it is integrated with a popular interpretation of Nirvana and attainment of buddhahood/*jōbutsu*, ascribing to the dead in general the status of *hotoke*, while at the same time the soul is considered to be on its way to ancestorhood, and the whole notion of rebirth seems primarily to be related to this process of the soul after death.

15. Hori 1962, p. 136.

16. Dore 1958, p. 325.

17. Cf. Tsuboi 1970, pp. 13–20.

18. Cf. Takeda 1957/1975, p. 105; Tsuboi *op. cit.*, pp. 14–18; Inoguchi 1965, p. 170; Smith *op. cit.*, pp. 56, 96.

19. A good presentation of these problems are given in Takeda 1957/1975, pp. 213–244.

Looking closer at the community between the living and the dead, significant aspects emerge. With the process of growth goes the idea of transfer of merits/*ekō*, *tsuizen ekō*, from the living to the dead. For the spirit of the dead to become an ancestral spirit is not only a matter of time. It presupposes the diligent performance of the rites by the bereaved.<sup>20</sup> Through masses for the dead/*tsuizen kuyō*, merits are gained for the sake of the *jōbutsu* of the departed.<sup>21</sup> If these are neglected, the *shirei* will not only fail to attain the status of *sorei*; it will fall into a miserable existence itself and bring harm to the living.<sup>22</sup> In other words, the dead are dependent upon the living for their well-being beyond the grave.

Dependence, however, goes further. Another basic assumption of the ancestral rites is the belief that their object is in possession of supernatural power to enter into and to control the life of the living.<sup>23</sup> If the newly dead and the person who passed away in adverse circumstances may be feared as dangerous and possibly malevolent, the full-fledged ancestors are primarily seen as protective benefactors watching over the life of their offspring. In the daily worship before the *butsudan* this basic role of the ancestors is revealed in the worshipper's simple prayer for protection and guidance, prayers mostly of a general nature, but at times also concrete and specific. Most scholars today agree, however, that even the collective ancestors may turn in anger towards their descendants, sending warnings or curses/*tatari*, if their right to be worshipped and served within the household is neglected.<sup>24</sup>

20. Cf. Watanabe 1959/1975, p. 119, and Takatori/Hashimoto 1968/1975, p. 195.

21. The two most common forms of *tsuizen kuyō* among ordinary people are the so-called *zaibutsu kuyō*, that is offering of money, fruit, vegetables etc., and *hōhō kuyō*, that is recitation of sutras. (Cf. Takeda 1957/1975, p. 239.)

22. Cf. Watanabe *op. cit.*, p. 119.

23. Cf. Maeda *op. cit.*, pp. 56–69.

24. Cf. Takeda 1976, p. 122; Yonemura 1976, p. 183; Tsuboi *op. cit.*, p. 20; Watanabe *op. cit.*, pp. 118–119.

Benign protection if properly served, and punitive warning if neglected are, after all, nothing but two faces of the coin we have called the community between the living and the dead. The community involves, in other words, reciprocal dependence between the living and the dead; the ancestral rites serve as vehicles for the living to intervene in the "life" of the dead in order to further their "salvation," and the same rites point to the possibility that the dead may intervene in the life of the living. In addition to the circle of obligation, there is a circle of interdependence.

II, 3. The third and final problem area in our systematic analysis concerns the position of the ancestral spirits vis-à-vis the position of the person who performs their rites. We have already noticed that the object of the rites is seen in categories which put the ancestors in a supernatural and suprahuman position. The fact that they are petitioned, for example, is in complete accordance with the belief that they are in possession of power going beyond ordinary human potentialities. This protective power of the ancestors gives them a status within the household which in many ways is parallel to that of the *kami* worshipped at the *kamidana*. The latter are worshipped as tutelary gods of the house, and the same tutelary function is one of the essential roles played by the ancestors.<sup>25</sup> They are in command, in other words, of potentialities that in the wider religious milieu are ascribed deities conceptualized as *kami* or buddha/*hotoke*.

This is reflected in the rites in several ways. Identification between ancestral spirits and *kami* may be symbolized by transferring the individual tablet from the *butsudan* to the shrine of the tutelary god/*ujigami* at *tomuraiage*, or by erasing its post-humous name and moving it from the *butsudan* to the *kamidana* of the house.<sup>26</sup> The growth

25. See for example Ariga 1969, pp. 375–377.

26. Cf. Smith *op. cit.*, pp. 97–98. As for other examples see Inoguchi *op. cit.*, pp. 177–178; Yonemura *op. cit.*, pp. 179–180.