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SHI ZEN
JAPANESE RELIGION





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INTRODUCTION

As is often noted, the present-day Japanese people celebrate Christian Christmas, listen to “Joya no Kane” (tolling of the bells at year end) at Buddhist temples and feel perfectly natural to pay “Hatsu Mode” (the first visit of the year) to shrines. Many people visit their ancestors’ graves without realizing what “Urabon” actually means.

Based on the unique situation in Japan, the Japanese are said to be atheists without any particular religion. But is this really true? Isn’t it religiousness to have a view of *Kami* being equal to nature as represented by the Japanese eight million forms of *kami*?

From a monotheistic perspective, the Japanese seem to be atheists and there seems to be no “religion” in Japan. However, this merely reflects the perspective from monotheism, which sees religion as unified thinking centered on Jesus, Moses or Muhammad, dependent on missionaries to pass the thinking on to the next generation. Certainly, seen from this perspective, Shinto is far from a “religion”, which has no founder, no sacred book, much less no written records.

As far as Buddhism, Buddhism in Japan is often panned as “funeral Buddhism” and people only engage it when someone dies. Confucianism is not recognized as religion either and it is only appreciated as a series of rituals and method to learn. Some couples get married in churches, even though they are not baptized Christians, which certainly adds to the mysterious Japanese image to monotheists.

In Japan, economics and politics are often discussed in public, while I must say that religion is hardly discussed openly in earnest. Japanese mass media, such as television, report economic and political news every day, often accompanied with commentary and explanation.

However, when it comes to religion, the only occasion religion becomes news is when the Prime Minister at the time visits Yasukuni Shrine or not and whether the visit is private or official.

Nevertheless, it is not too much to say that religions actually move the world. Regarding conflicts between Israel and Palestine, those in Syria and other parts of the Middle East and the relationship between Ukraine and Russia, ethnic and economic problems are the main subjects of discussion. At the same time it is easy to visualize that religion lies at the base of all of these problems.

The 2001 9–11 Incident can be said to have been one of the most horrible incidents that was triggered by religious issues.

In this book, I would like to discuss the religious views of the Japanese people, as seen by Western thinking, without becoming too entangled in Western religious concepts. When thinking of religious issues, reexamining the Japanese people’s religious views is almost equal to seeing the essence of religion, which at the same time, I believe,

presents a glimmer of a new world in which various peoples can peacefully co-exist. Religious studies often follow Western terminology and concepts and therefore cannot properly convey the religion of the Japanese people. More often than not, the religious views of Western experts fail to encompass understanding of the Japanese religion.

The Japanese religion — or really, what is so great about it — I will now proceed to explain.

COLUMN 0

FESTIVALS OF JAPAN

Japanese festivals are held at shrines throughout the country today. According to the Association of Shinto Shrines, the number of festivals amounts to more than 200,000. This is roughly a festival for every five hundred people. These festivals serve as tourist attractions, but the abundance of festivals indicates that they are very important means of human expression. It is one of the essential human qualities that, we feel something sacred and we are, thus, enchanted through festivals.

Each culture everywhere, not only in Japan, has the same festive element. For example, in Greece, festivals are an integral part of their culture.

It is only during the rise and growth of the “modern age” that there are attempts to deny traditional festivals, but they are nothing to be denied. For instance, even in a socialistic nation, which was supposedly the high point of the modern age, festivals still prevailed in the form of May Day or the Celebration of the Founding of the Nation. However, festivals led by rulers and statesmen are not festi-

vals as they were originally meant. They are superficial and not based on traditions. Therefore, they are far from creating an atmosphere where the people become totally and genuinely enthusiastic. A military parade scares people.

In the original festivals, people felt enthusiasm and excitement, perceiving something sacred, not as an individual, but as part of the community, together with other people.

Festivals are written in Japanese as 祭り or 祀り, both of which have the common origin 奉る, which means to offer something with respect. It also means to respectfully offer oneself. Festivals express desire to become united with something transcendent, by offering oneself and becoming one with Kami.

The Japanese festival, as its basis, is communication with Kami in nature. Centering on agricultural matters, the aim is to have festivals on various occasions of the four seasons, following natural changes and transitions. This means that with changes in nature, people's feelings change and people express these changes and transitions in the form of festivals. Their feelings move from nature toward the worship of the soul and the worship of the imperial ancestors. But the fundamental target is Kami in nature.

Postwar views of festivals have always been in terms of materialistic and realistic human relations, such as "praying for a good harvest", "for the sake of personal interests" or "purification from evil" or "appeasement of a curse".

However, this is not the original way. The fundamental spirit is for people to forget themselves and to aspire to touch something greater than themselves.

Mikoshi, or sacred palanquin, is one of the centers of festivals. It is used to carry Kami enshrined in shrines, but why is it necessary to move Kami? Is it because during the

Jomon Period, people moved from place to place, hunting and gathering food? The first Mikoshi incident supposedly took place at Hieh Shrine in Mt. Hiei. This was done by following a former ritual of moving “Hokora”, or small shrine, by Yamabushi or itinerant priests. It is an act reminiscent of moving the divine soul, their protector.

While nature gives humans tremendous benefits, nature sometimes rages and ravages. There are storms, thunder, floods, tsunami and so on. There is something similar to raging nature within humans living in nature. For example, people sometimes have violent emotions and madness which the rational mind cannot comprehend. That is the main reason why festivals are held.

Take festivals in Tohoku, for instance. There are three major festivals in the Tohoku Region. They are “Nebuta” in Aomori, “Kanto” in Akita and “Tanabata Matsuri” in Miyagi. Each festival has a different form. In a sense, these three festivals seem to describe various Japanese cultures in three different ways.

In the “Nebuta” Festival, it is said that there is no master shrine in particular that presides over the festival. The festival supposedly derives from a traditional local festival in which people walked around carrying huge lanterns. However, regarding its origin, this festival derives from “O-harai”, or purification ceremony, held at a shrine.

“O-harai” is an event in which people make a big “doll” and throw all their sins and evils into the doll and finally throw the doll into a river or the sea. During this process, people make a procession, playing flutes and drums to cheer up. This event is called “Nibu-nagashi” (Kurobe City, Toyama Prefecture) and according to Mr. Yawata Kazuo, it later became “Nebuta”.

Nebuta is a huge lantern with various devices, showing characters from Kabuki Plays or episodes from Chinese history like *Sankuochih*. People pull the lantern forward and there are also “Haneto” dancers dressed in traditional Japanese costumes, wearing Taski (sash) and Hana-gasa (flower hats), and jumping around the lantern. Haneto means jumpers. The idea of Haneto is thought to be based on the ancient hunting lifestyle, kicking the ground and running. The accompanying call of “Lassera” could be the voices of hunters pursuing animals.

In Aomori, there is the Jomon-period ruins called Sannai Maruyama, and “Nebuta” seems to have inherited the Jomon culture. It has been shown that the Tohoku and Kanto Regions used to have a lot of brave people. Kashima Shrine in Ibaragi retains the Jomon culture of hunting and gathering, likely in the form of Shika-oi or deer hunting, though now it is almost forgotten.

On the other hand, in Akita’s Kanto Festival, as its name indicates, huge bamboo poles full of lanterns are carried on men’s hip, shoulder or forehead across the streets. The lantern poles look like stalks of rice and lanterns are like grains of rice. This is a visual festival reminiscent of the Yayoi Period, expressing the joys of rice-farming.

Japan has developed in a way combining the Jomon and Yayoi Periods. This seems to be demonstrated perfectly by Nebuta and Kanto Festivals.

In the postwar years, the agricultural Yayoi tended to be thought of the most and rice farming was believed to have supported Japanese culture. In fact, far more than that, the Jomon Era life style of hunting, fishing and gathering became the basis of our Japanese life, and this perception remains in the form of festivals. I understand that this will



Tachi Nebuta in Goshogawara City, Aomori Prefecture. Nebuta often takes after historical and mythological heroes.

further promote Japan's creativity. We will see the creative potentials of the Tohoku and Kanto Regions, once we see their grand festivals.

Tanabata is generally believed to be based on Chinese mythology. Ever since the age of Manyo, it has been introduced as a culture apart from Buddhism. Tanabata is an event that celebrates the day when the star of Kengyu (Altair, cow keeper) meets the star of Orihime (weaver princess) once a year across the Milky Way. Originally, it is worship of "Tanahata Tsume" waiting for Japanese Kami and people placed offerings in front of the garden, erect a leafy bamboo tree decorated with five-colored wish cards, praying for improvement in their calligraphic and sewing skills. Tanabata means vertical board weaving machine. It is the same with the event called Kikoden. It is practical for girls to pray for improvement of their handicraft skills. Wonderfully, the event became a star festival, having a special atmosphere of being united with various Kami of the universe.

In the Tanabata Festival in Sendai, Miyagi, bamboos with many Tanabata decorations fill the long streets of Sendai City. Walking through these decorations covering the streets is in itself a special festive arena which lures people into excitement.

Unlike Nebuta and Kanto which directly excite participants' feelings, the experience of walking through thick bamboo groves makes people feel as if they were in a different sphere. Such a special situation created by unusually fantastic decorations in the midst of bamboo trees changes people's emotions. Being in an unusual world apart from everyday life is different from a festival that merely puts decorated bamboo out in front of the house. Benefits given

by nature and oneness with nature are at the core of these three Festivals.

In other words, in Japanese festivals people become one with nature and Kami. Of course, people enter an unusual world, prompted by a festive orchestra and dancing. Equally important is that there are attractive devices employed both in time and space.

