

"IMPORTANCE OF RELIGION AND CUSTOMS IN JAPANESE SOCIETY"

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INTRODUCTION

Religion has played a prominent role in Japan. Religious life in Japan is rich and varied thanks to a long history of interaction among a number of religious traditions. In addition to a number of organized religions, there are many religious beliefs and practices outside organized religion. Most of the individual features of Japanese religion are not unique, since they have counterparts in other traditions; rather the distinctiveness of Japanese religion lies in the total pattern of interacting traditions.¹

In Japan freedom of religion is guaranteed to all under the constitution, article 20 of which states that "No religious organization shall receive any privileges from the state, nor exercise any political authority. No person shall be compelled to take part in any religious act, celebration, into or practice. He state and its organs shall refrain from religions education or any other religions or activating."²

The predominant religion in Japan today is Buddhism, which had a following of 90 million as of the end of 1994, Christianity is also active: there were about 1.5 million Christians in Japan as of the end of 1994. Among the other religions, it is estimated that there are more than 100,000 Muslims, including non-Japanese temporarily residing in the country.³

Japan's indigenous religion is Shinto, which has its roots in the animistic beliefs of the ancient Japanese. Shinto developed into the community religion with local shrines for household and local guardian gods. People deified heroes and outstanding leaders of their community for generations and worshipped the souls of their family ancestors.

Eventually the myth of the imperial family's divine origin became one of the basic tenets of Shinto, and early in the nineteenth century a patriotic Shinto movement gained ground.

After the Meiji restoration in 1868, and especially during World War-II, the authorities promoted Shinto as state religion. Under the post war constitution, however, Shinto no longer receives any official encouragement or privileges, though it still plays an important ceremonial role in many aspects of Japanese life.⁴

Shinto exists side by side with sometimes overlaps in the popular mind with Buddhism. Many Japanese today go through Shinto rites when they marry and Buddhist funeral rites when they die.

Buddhism was introduced to Japan from India via China and Korea around the middle of the sixth century (officially in A.D. 538). After gaining imperial patronage Buddhism was propagated by the authorities throughout the country. In the early ninth century Buddhism in Japan entered a new era in which it catered mainly to the court nobility. In the Kama Kura period (1192-1338), an age of great political unrest and social confusion, there emerged many new sects of Buddhism offering hope of salvation to warriors and peasants alike. Buddhism not only flourished as a religion, but also did much to enrich the country's arts and learning.⁵

Belonging to the Mahayana (greater Vehicle) Buddhism of East Asia, Japanese Buddhism generally preaches salvation in paradise for everyone, rather than individual perfection, and exists in a form quite different from that found in much of South East Asia. All of the more than 100 Buddhist sects in Japan today belong to or trace their origins back to the major branches of Buddhism that were brought into or developed in Japan in early time: Jodo, Jodo Shin, Nichiren, Shingon Tendai and Zen.

Immediately after the World War-II several new religious movements gained momentum, some of them based on Shinto, some related to certain sects of Buddhism, and others of mixed religious orientation. Many of their movements undertake various social and cultural activities within their close-knit religious communities; some also have come to engage in substantial political activities.

The Japan

ese regard Confucianism as a code of moral percepts rather than a religion. Introduced into Japan at the beginning of the sixth century, Confucianism had a great impact on Japanese thought & behaviour, but its influence has declined since World War-II.⁶

CUSTOMS IN JAPANESE SOCIETY

The Japanese cultural tradition includes many forms of the fine arts and folk arts. Local variations are found throughout Japan's mountainous archipelago, where most river basins, valley, on islands have their own specific folklores.

Climatically Japan is a country with many distinct seasons and many annual events are associated with the changing seasons.

NEW YEAR (SHOGATSU)

New year observances are the most important and most elaborate of Japan's annual events. Although local customs differ, at this time homes are decorated and the holidays are celebrated by family gatherings, visits to shrive or temples, and formal class on relatives and friends. In recent years two New year festivities have been officially observed from 11th January through 3rd January, during which time all government offices and most companies are closed.

Preparation for seeing in the New Year was originally under taken to greet the toshigami, or deity of the incoming year. These began on 13th December, when the house was given a thorough cleaning the date is usually nearer the end of the month now. The house is then decorated in the traditional fashion. A sacred rope of straw with dangling white paper strips (slide) is hung over the front door to demarcate the temporary abode of the toshigami and to prevent malevolent spirits from entering. It is also customary to place Kadomatsu, an arrangement of tree springs, beside the entranceway. A special alter known as a toshidana (literally "year shelf") is piled high with kagamimochi (flat, round rice cakes), sake (rice wine), persimmons, and other foods in honor of the toshigami. The night before New Year's is called Omisoka. Many people visit Buddhist temples to near the

temple bells rung 108 times at mid-night (joya no kane) to dispel the evils of the past year. It is also custom any to eat toshikoshisoba (literally, "year - crossing noodles") in the hope that one's family fortunes will extend like the long noodles.

SETSUBUN

Traditional ceremony to dispel demons now observed on 3rd or 4th February. The practice of scattering beans (mamemaki) to drive away demons is one of a number of a magical rites performed to ward off evil.

On Setsubun, beans (usually soybeans) are scattered inside and outside the house or building to the common chant of Oni wa soto, fuku wa uchi ("out with demons! In with good luck"). It is customary for family members to eat the same number of beans at their age.

DOLL FESTIVAL

(Hina Masuri) Festival for girls held on 3rd March. Tiered platforms for hina ningyō (hina dolls, a set of dolls representing emperor, empress, attendants, and musicians in ancient court dress) are set up in the home, and the family celebrates with a meal, eating hishimochi (diamond shaped rice cakes) and drinking Shirozake (made with rice malt and sake) also called joshi no sekku, Momo no Sekku (Peach Festival) and Sangatsu Sekku (Third Month Festival).

VILLAGE AND CITY FESTIVALS

Although Village festivals and city festivals resemble each other in several ways because they developed from the same origin, there are differences: village festivals tend to centre on agriculture rites in the spring and autumn, and city festivals occur mostly in the summer, village festivals emphasize a man-god communion, and the city festivals stress human camaraderie. The most famous of all summer festivals is Kyoto's Gion Festival.⁸

CHILDREN'S DAY

The fifth day of the fifth month has been celebrated in China and Japan since ancient time. In Japan May 5 was made a national holiday in 1948.

Though it is called children's day, but this festival is really only for boys.

Families with boys hang streamers depicting carp outside their homes as symbols of strength, display samurai dolls and armor inside, and celebrate by eating rice cakes.

TANABATA FESTIVALS

Celebrated on July 7, or in some places on August 7, the Tanabata Festival has its origin in a Chinese folk legend about the romantic once a year meeting of two stars in the Milky way; the cowherd star (Altair) and the weaver star (Vega). On this festival day people write their wishes on strips colored paper, which they attach to branches of bamboo.

BON FESTIVAL

The Bon festival traditionally took place for several days around July 15 on the lunar calendar, when the souls of the dead are believed to return to their homes. These days it is usually held around August 15. Many people make trips back to their hometowns at this time of the year to visit the graves of relatives. During this festival people set up lanterns to guide the souls of the dead to and from their homes make offerings of food to the deceased, and enjoy a special kind of dancing called bon odori. The lanterns are often floated down rivers.

It is also a Buddhist tradition for people to pay respect at the graves of their relatives during the vernal equinox around March 21 and the autumnal equinox around September 23.⁹

FIREWORKS

(Hanabi). Fireworks, along with firearms, were introduced to Japan by Portuguese at the end of the 16th Century. The first recorded fireworks display was held by shogun tokugawa Iyasu in 1613. Eventually fireworks were adopted by the common people for their own amusement. Commercial fireworks manufacturers appeared, and specialty shops, such as the Tamaya and Kaguja in Tokyo, became widely known. Occasionally fireworks displays were prohibited because of the danger of fire. With improved manufacturing techniques, innovative Japanese projectile types and set pieces were constructed. The summa fireworks on the banks of Sumida River in Tokyo have been famous since they were first staged in 1733. Toy fireworks originated in the 18th century. Many varieties, including sparklers and "mouse" fireworks that dart about on the ground before they expire with a bang, are popular diversions for children on summer evenings.¹⁰

CONCLUSION

In the end we can conclude that Japanese society is no doubt a society, which is still religious and traditional. Religion and customs play an important role in every society and Japanese society is not an exception to it. Though Japanese society being an urbanized one is still following religious festivals as well as traditions.

In spite of the changes in the social structure the Japanese are found of fairs and festivals. Many traditional festivals still exist and are fully celebrated by them.

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