

## Some Personal Notes on Shintoism and Japanese Buddhism 神道と日本仏教についての個人的覚書

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中国から日本に来て3年もしない内に、祭典委員会への入会を勧誘された。祭典委員会は地域での祭礼、月次祭、初参りなどの行事を担う組織である。様子がよく分からないので躊躇したが、日本人の妻の薦めで入会することになった。ところが祭典委員会の行事の煩瑣な活動で、仕事の時間と私的な時間バランスが崩れ始め、会社の休みまで取らざるを得ないことになった。仕事をやめて勉強に専念しようとしたら、今度はPTAの役員までやらせされた。もうこれ以上我慢できないと爆発する寸前に日本の宗教と出会った。日本の宗教的な精神の影響で、急にこれらの非営利的な活動が好きになった。本論文を通じて、私の心境の大変化は日本の宗教及びこの宗教を担う文化の影響が原因であることを示したいのである。

To live in Japanese society, most of the adults have to participate at least 2 or 3 major activities in their spare-time: to play a role in a community Festival; to join a club doing studies or sports in order to associate with their friends, colleagues, and classmates; and to take part in volunteer community services. If one becomes a serious participant of these actions, it seems to me he or she may have no time to conduct his/her personal activities. In comparison with the Chinese or the Australians, Japanese are overdoing these non-beneficial, burdensome businesses. During the past 10 years I have been a member of the local festival organization, carrying the huge portable shrine; being a waiter to look after the members' eating and boozing; and visiting all the families in the region to bring them 'good luck' (*oharai*).

The biggest hassle for doing this was that the festival was held on two week days, which indicates that I had to ask my boss to give me 2 days off. In my former company,

there were only public holidays, and it is basically tabooed to take extra holidays. For this sake I almost got sacked for a few times. It was a great mental affliction to ask for the day-offs. Then roughly 2 years ago, after I quit my job and became a student, I was elected as the vice-president of the festival committee without my personal agreement. Furthermore, I was forced to become one of the leaders of the PTA association and the local children's club. It was too much for me. I felt my time was robbed, hence my life. I resented this deeply, and for once I even wanted to go back to the country of my origin.

In order to finish a report for Prof. Grandon (lecturer of Nihon University), I accidentally got the opportunity to read some books on Shintoism and Japanese Buddhism. Deeply affected by the ideologies of these religions, I suddenly felt I was lucky for having the chances to participate these activities. Now I feel happy and proud of myself. What an unbelievable, dramatic change it is! If you want to know the reasons, please finish reading this article.

Till these days I am still involved in a Japanese tradition, **matsuri** (Festival), which is a major religious activity of the 'local community Shinto' (only recently I got to know this term). **Shinto** (Japanese pronunciation), rather than Shintoism, is an accepted term in English. In Japan, 'Shinto can roughly be divided into imperial Shinto, shrine Shinto, sectarian Shinto, and local community Shinto' (Kojima & Crane 1987, p.317). To me the Festival held once a year is a playful event with accompanying feast, booze, and people. I was a businessman needing to meet a lot of people for the introduction of my business. I could not wait to be invited. Now I am on the 10th year serving this religious service and have become the vice-president of this **matsuri** organization. In my district (**Kamiguchi-Choo**) which used to be a village, there are two Shinto shrines and three **mikoshi** (portable shrines). The biggest **mikoshi** weighs about 800 kilograms while the middle-sized and the smallest ones weigh from 50-100 kilograms.

For the members of the 'local community Shinto', to conduct this Festival is a kind of physical, and spiritual challenge. This Festival is held on a Saturday in July, every year (this tradition was started about 120 years ago). Its preparation is a back-breaking job. Two temporary stages with roofs have to be assembled. One is on

the ground while the other one is set on a vehicle holding the **hayashikata** (the instrumental musicians for the process of the Festival and the folk performances). The **hayashikata** frequently rehearse through out the year. Then, the gilded metal decorations (they are made of many small components) and the phoenix affixed to the roofs of the three portable shrines have to be polished. Finally these shrines have to be tied down on a number of poles with ropes. This rope-fastening job is complicated and arduous. There are predetermined ways of doing so, and any alternative ways of doing it are not permitted. The whole rope-tying process is under severe supervision of the senior **matsuri** members.

Usually the rope-tying job of a certain spot has to be repeated again and again. For safety, the ropes must be tied very tightly at the poles. Some rope-doers end up with rubbing the skins of their fingers and palms (the callosities were broken). Then the other pains-taking job for conducting this Festival is the carrying of the portable shrines on the shoulders, especially the biggest one. Adults carry it from 11:00am to 9:00pm walking around the district shouting '**wasshoi, wasshoi, wasshoi**'. It is called a '**mikoshi** parade'. The **mikoshi** is heavy and the wood poles are very hard. The poles hurt the shoulders harshly. After finishing the Festival, the carriers' shoulders (of course including me) are swollen and extremely sore. This painfulness lasts for about a week or two.

Then, from time to time the above 'carrying job' can cause physical injuries and can even threaten human lives. In one carrying process, which is called **aore** (to instigate), the whole weight of the **mikoshi** is put on the single side (see Picture 1 in page 29). This means only half of the carriers have to support the whole weight. I have seen a few occasions in which the carriers doing **aore** could not sustain the weight and dropped that huge portable shrine. Fortunately everybody could escape from the collapse in time, and no one got hurt. I was told that in the past a few guys broke their fingers or toes because of the collapse. They do this **aore** for about 10 times during the **mikoshi** parade. All the carriers know about the risk and danger. But they intend to do so. I thought they were crazy. I felt the whole process of the **matsuri** is tiring, boring (during the process a Shinto priest performs a lot of rites and everyone has to stand under the

scorching sun listening for about 5-6 times), and dangerous.

**Picture 1:** The 'aore' scene



**Note:** The first person from the left, who is carrying the shrine, is me.

I have asked some of those **matsuri** members if they felt the same way as I did. Surprisingly, they felt the opposite. They said the Festival is exciting, honorable, and the **aore** is not a risk but showing male muscularity. I told them my feelings, and they got angry. They seriously criticized me and required me to work harder. But none of them explained to me why they felt that way. In order to understand this folk culture and my friends' feelings, for almost 13 years I have been observing a lot of Festivals and talking about it to other Japanese including some academic people. Again none of them told me that the Festival is rooted in Shinto. Ironically, because of writing this paper, I had to read reference books, and among these books Hiro S.'s *Buddhism and Shintoism (50 Q&A on Their Differences)* provides me the most convincing answers to my above prolonged puzzles. Now I understand why my fellow **matsuri** members have even risked their lives to carry that ponderous **mikoshi** because this has something to do with the religious belief of Shinto. A religious belief can sometimes turn some people into emotional and even irrational ones.

Here, let us briefly analyze the **mikoshi**. This is a 'sacred palanquin bearing the emblem of the deity enshrined in it' (Kojima & Crane 1987, p.210). According to Shinto, 'this deity can be a local one (of course with a certain name) quelling evil spirits and soothing the dwellers' sufferings' (Mitsuhashi 1993, p.93). On this special occasion of the year, this deity is collectively exalted, thanked, and worshiped. The **mikoshi** parade proceeding through the streets from and to the local shrine serves the purpose of warding off evil spirits. This is the first purpose of the Festival. But they do not have a deity in the community (**Kamiguchi-Choo**). It is said that the purpose of the Festival is to worship ancestral souls (this can be the second kind of the Festival intention). 'According to Shinto, worshiping the souls through a splendid **matsuri** event can make them happy. These souls come to meet and mingle with them (the descendents) during the Festival period. And to make or to keep ancestral souls happy are important because the descendants need their protection from bad fortune, disasters, and bad agricultural harvest' (Ono 1987, p.225). According to the same religion, 'when an ancestor died, he became a ghost or **sirei**. But through the offspring's everyday worship and the grand worship rites in the Festival, these ghosts can become ancestral souls or **sorei**. The **sorei** are as powerful as the deities' (Hiro 1983, p.60).

According to Hiro S. (pen name), 'Shinto has not got a founder of this religion. Religious services (e.g. **matsuri**, everyday ancestral worship at home, **tanabata matsuri**, etc.) and rites are more important than the religious doctrines. The political or the military rulers were also the directors of **Shinto** in the past. The **Shinto** salvation is rather for everyone in the community or the society than for individuals. **Shinto** is regarded as a national religion belonged to the so-called <pure> Japanese only. It is said all Japanese natives are born as Shinto believers. Foreigners and even naturalized ones are not accepted as Shinto followers. Shinto is a religion centered on wishing gods' blessings of some practical benefits for the earthly life. It is said the Shinto population numbers 115.6 million (p.42)' (1983, p.13-5).

I have talked a lot about my involvement in Shinto and its characteristics. It is my obligation to provide some more details on this religion. 'Shinto literally means the ways of gods. It is the indigenous folk religion of Japan, characterized by the worship of

myriad deified nature spirits, mythological ancestors and historical figures. Rooted in the beliefs of the agricultural people of ancient Japan, Shinto involves fertility rites as well as purification for protection from evil spirits. Natural phenomena were the first objects of worship and gradually shrines came to be constructed. The introduction of Buddhism and Confucianism from China led to the designation of the term Shinto for combined indigenous beliefs. Shinto has survived in combination with Buddhism. In the 17<sup>th</sup> century, Shinto was revived as a national religion, with the Sun Goddess Amaterasu Omikami considered the original ancestor of the Imperial Family and the most important deity. From the Meiji era (1868-1912) until the end of World War (1945), shrine Shinto, as distinguished from sectarian Shinto, was adopted as the official state religion in an attempt to boost patriotism...'(Kojima & Crane 1987, p.317).

In the above passage the expression, 'combination with Buddhism', has appeared. So it is time for us to examine how Buddhism has been affecting the Japanese spiritual lives. According to Fujii Y., 'The Imperial Family believes in Shinto, while the **samurai** believe in Confucianism. Then the masses believe in Buddhism' (1987, p.62). Why is this? But I only try to answer why 'the masses believe in Japanese Buddhism'. A brief introduction on the characteristic of the Japanese Buddhism starts from here. 'Buddhism was introduced to Japan in the sixth century and took root through the support of Prince Shootoku (574-622). It enjoyed national patronage in the Nara period (646-794). The Tendai and Shingon sects appeared in the Heian period (794-1185), and the Jodo, Nichiren and Zen sects, etc., in the Kamakura period (1185-1336). Since the Edo period (1603-1868), when the parishioner system was enforced by the shogunate, Japanese Buddhism has emphasized ancestor worship' (Kojima & Crane 1987, p.26).

As mentioned above, because Japanese Buddhism is emphasizing on ancestor worship which has been being faithfully performed since the 6<sup>th</sup> century (ancestor worship is influenced by Chinese Taoism), the Japanese masses have eagerly accepted Japanese Buddhism. That is the reason why many families in Japan have a Buddhist household altar and a household shrine.

In the above quotation, the term, 'Japanese Buddhism', appeared. Then in the first paragraph of the article I also used the same term. Why is this? There are three

reasons: 1) Japanese Buddhism has a lot of differences from the original Buddhism created by India's Shakyamuni. 'More than 1,000 years after Shakyamuni had invented this religion, Buddhism was introduced into Japan by the Chinese and the Korean. Before Buddhism entered Japan, it had to pass through central Asia, China and Korea' (Hiro, p.17). As far as I know, some Indian monks went to China to spread Buddhism while some Chinese monks also went to India to learn the doctrines and brought the sutras back in Indian language. The Chinese monks worked extremely hard to translate the sutras and to interpret the Indian monks' teachings while recording them. The translation was totally based on personal understandings. It is impossible for a translator to exactly convert all the original meanings of a foreign language into a native language. This is a common sense.

Furthermore, at that time there were few people understanding Indian. I doubt there was any proof-reading on the translation work at all. And also, much of the Buddhist literary works were the followers' recordings of their master's (e.g. a sectarian founder) oral teachings. Whether the followers could correctly or totally record the teachings or not is another dilemma. So, just as Hiro pointed out, 'The Buddhism which came down from the above two countries to Japan is completely different from Shakyamuni's teachings' (p.17).

Here let us look at the second reason. Japanese Buddhism's fundamental view on how to become a Buddha (a self-enlightened person) is quite different from the original Buddhism by Shakyamuni. Shakyamuni claimed, 'If one wants to become a Buddha, one has to abandon the family life (**shukke**). This means one has to abandon his wife, property, and home. Only by this way, one will not fear aging (**roo**), diseases (**bio**), death (**si**), thus get the salvation' (Hiro, p.19). Regarding to this matter, Japanese Buddhism teaches, 'One could obtain the salvation by two ways: a) by using self-strength (**jiriki**), b) by using other's strength (**tariki**). The way of **jiriki** is also called <the way of Zen> which requires meditation. This meditation or relying on self-strength might lead to a self-enlightenment. But this is a very difficult experience. Normal people can hardly reach this goal' (Hiro, p182-3).

The teachings of Japanese Buddhism continued, 'Thus, one has to choose the

**tarik** way. This means a person should borrow the Buddha's strength. To borrow this strength is not a big deal, but just by calling out <**namuamidabutsu**>. By doing so, anyone can be reborn in the <Paradise of the Pure Land in the West Heaven> after one will pass away. In the Pure Land anyone can get educated, and can become a Buddha. **Namu** means to obey or to follow. **Amida** or **nyorai** means Amitabha (Sanskrit), the Lord of Infinite Light and the Buddha in Mahayana Buddhism, who is worshiped as the central being in the Jodo and Jodo-shinshu sects in Japan. **He** is believed to reside in the Paradise of the Pure Land' (Hiro, pp.19-20). Japanese Buddhism further teaches that 'a Buddha or a **hotoke** can be an in-house or a **zaike** (the opposite of **shukke**) monk, and this monk can get married' (Hiro, pp.182-3). So, because of this different point of view on **shukke** or **zaike** Buddha, we can identify this as Japanese Buddhism. In China, almost all the monks are **shukke** ones.

Here comes the third reason. Buddhism in Japan is not treated as a key human spiritual guidance or the teaching of a profound, noble philosophy. 'Instead of seeking for Buddhist spiritual guidance, the Japanese people believe that the Buddhist prayers or **juryoku** are very powerful and efficacious. Hiro says, 'By the time when Buddhism was introduced into Japan, the Emperors, the nobles, thus the folks have been ignoring the Buddhist thoughts and philosophy, but emphasizing the **juryoku** which is believed for being able to bring in the protections from civil wars and foreign invasions as well as being able to bring in the country's prosperity, the Imperial family's safeties, and good harvests. Because of this peculiar thinking towards the religion, the Japanese are enjoying the monks' reading aloud on the Buddhist sacred books or **keiten**. The pronunciations on the language in these books are thought to be beautiful. And the Japanese believe these attractive sounds can become powerful prayers for the above purpose. They enjoy these sound effects more than being able to understand the meaning of these words' (p.71).

I think it is enough having presented the major differences. Now let me shift the topic towards two sensitive issues. A writer and bio-chemist, Yasuo Fujii, raised a question, 'Is Shintoism high-class (superior) or low-class (inferior)?' in his book called *Deities, Buddha and Science* (p.38). About 13 years ago when I was a student at

'Curtin University of Technology' (Perth, Australia), I studied a course called History 241. In this course we have exactly discussed the same question as Fujii's. I can not remember how the other students have answered that question. But I can remember mine very well. At that time I was an open Christian and I concluded that Shinto is a low-class religion. The reasons were that Shinto believers worship idols, which is completely forbidden in Christianity; and it has not got a system of thoughts and doctrines like the Bible, Sutras, and Koran. The further reason is that Shinto believers do not go to do a public religious service one day every week like the Christians do (on every Sunday). And I regarded this lack of frequent services was the indication of insincerity. These were my opinions towards Shintoism 13 years ago.

Now let me show you how Fujii answered that question he raised to himself. He said, 'The Japanese people, who believe in Shintoism, cherish peace and harmony. No war has been ever raised in the name of religious differences. The Shinto people believe they are all **ujiko** or 氏子 in kanji which means all of them are the descendents of **ujigami** or 氏神. In other words they believe they are brothers and sisters by nature from the same ancestor and they must love each other. Because of this religious belief, the Japanese society is a harmonious, cooperative one. Furthermore, being influenced by the religion, the Japanese are extremely hard-working people. Because of this wonderful work ethics, plus the reconstructions of the modern political system after the World War , the Japanese people have created the world's second biggest economy in 3 decades. The world is astonished by this success. And no one can deny this success, too. This miracle is created by a nation whose people believe in Shinto. So I would like to let my readers to answer that question' (Fujii, pp.38-42).

Although Fujii has not directly answered that question, it is not difficult to conclude that Shinto is no least inferior to the monotheist Christianity or Islam. Now I completely agree with this conclusion. The reason why I have dramatically changed my mind after so many years is because I have been living in Japan for more than 13 years and experiencing things. During this period, I have been being able to observe how the people in my community or the parents of my children's classmates voluntarily devote their time and energy to do public works, and to see how friendly

the people living around me are.

I have mentioned some tasks that my community **matsuri** members have to accomplish for the Festival in the previous parts of this essay. But there are much more that need to be done. Some people have to use their trucks to transport huge tents and tables preparing three places as temporary restaurants to accommodate the **mikoshi** carriers, senior residents, the priest, community leaders and so on. Some people have to set up the lanterns while others go shopping and cook. Finally every family should donate money to run the Festival. Everyone in the region seems to enthusiastically and happily conduct these tasks. According to Shinto, besides of the two key activities (service and rites), the playing and sharing a role or **yakuwaribuntan** in the community services are also very important. I think because of this religious belief everyone can work so dedicatedly.

Other community services include running the children's club, collecting recyclable wastes, and PTA (parent & teacher association) activities. Because of the religious drive, everyone seems to take part in these non-benefit activities willingly and actively. Because the Japanese believe they are **ujiko**, they treat each other very politely. I am often greeted by the unknown when I walk in the streets near my home. And I have not encountered any major theft in my community.

In conclusion, to study Shinto and Japanese Buddhism makes me realize the cause and effect of the **matsuri** that I am involved in. There are some striking differences between the two religions. But the Japanese are ignoring them because they have peacefully combined and make harmony of them, and they feel comfortable about this fusion. The peace is reflected through the Shinto's incorporating with Taoism, Confucianism, Buddhism, and Christianity.

Shinto teaches seeking opportunities through hard working, the importance of family link, and community benefits. It is a practical, energetic, free-willed religion. The Japanese, who have this religious background, have finally made the world recognize them as hard-working, intelligent, successful and peaceful race, several decades after the World War .

The Japanese found that Buddhism introduced by the Korean and Chinese monks

had two major, indispensable values: to raise the intellectual level of the race and to counterbalance the religious view of Shinto. The Chinese characters in the Buddhist sacred books were borrowed to create the Japanese language. The Buddhist philosophical teachings about the sufferings of human lives were accepted as the supplements to the Shinto optimist view on chances and natural blessings.

Through writing this essay, I personally have grown spiritually. I am deeply impressed by the Shinto attitude towards working and peace. From now on I will work even harder for the local **matsuri** committee, the PTA (I am a section leader), the local children's club (vice-president, too). Prince **Shootoku**, who worshipped Shinto and Buddhism, has left these words, 'Treat peace as most precious' (or in Japanese, 和を以て貴しと為す), which were written as the first sentence of the first Japanese constitution. These words have become my motto.

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