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BUDDHIST POPULAR MANUALS AND  
THE CONTEMPORARY COMMERCIALIZATION  
OF RELIGION IN JAPAN

AN INVESTIGATION of the contents and of the recent diffusion of religious self-help manuals will enable us better to understand the so-called secularization of Japanese modern society. Moreover, a general view of these contemporary manuals is useful as an indication of which religious elements are thought by their authors to be most suitable for commercialization<sup>1</sup> and diffusion by the mass media. Before examining this point in greater detail, I would like to consider the similarities between modern handbooks and earlier works within the popular religious tradition. It may be mentioned here that the mere fact of the existence and wide sales of the manuals indicates a breakdown of community-centred or hereditary transmission of tradition. For many, and in particular for urban Japanese, it has become necessary to acquire such knowledge independently.

Historically, religious manuals are not entirely new in Japan. It is possible to trace certain characteristics of contemporary literature in this genre back to the *Nihon ryōiki*<sup>2</sup> (end of the eighth century), a collection of narratives of

1. By commercialization I mean the emphasis on the sale of religious services by religious institutions or by individual practitioners directly to clients, in contrast with the pre-modern form of financial support of established sects. Modern commercialization, moreover, relies heavily on marketing techniques made possible by the mass media.

2. The full title of this work is *Nihonkoku genpō zenaku ryōiki* (literally, An Account of Abnormal Instances of Retribution for Good and Evil in Japan); see Nakamura 1973.

extraordinary events which, as indicated by the title, are said to have taken place in Japan. According to most scholars, this work was compiled to serve as an aid to Buddhist preachers. At this early period it was important to proselytize; the vivid stories in the anthology were collected to lend credibility to the relatively new doctrines of Buddhism, and especially to the concept of karmic causation.<sup>3</sup> In Buddhist teaching karma is said to work in three ways: in one's present existence, in the next rebirth, and in action continued throughout several later lives. Instead of a philosophical exposition of the subtleties of this doctrine, common in the monastic texts of the time, the *Nihon ryōiki* is a series of illustrations of what might be rendered more faithfully as 'abnormal spiritual events' (*ryōi*) which serve to prove the actuality of the workings of karma in this world.

In Japan, however, this doctrine came to be partially assimilated, in popular practice, with the indigenous idea of *tatari*, externally induced spirit-retribution, said to be inflicted by *kami* or by spirits on those who displeased them. *Tatari* may assume the form of communal calamities (such as floods, famines or epidemics) or of individual misfortune, such as disease, madness, or death. Like the modern texts I shall be considering, the *Nihon ryōiki* is an example of Japanese syncretism between orthodox Mahayana Buddhism and local pre-Buddhist concepts.

This blend of traditions is to be found also in medieval anthologies such as the *Shasekishū* (A Collection of Sand and Pebbles), by the monk Mūjū, or in the *Konjaku monogatari*.<sup>4</sup> Present-day Buddhist preaching also relies on the syncretic background of popular religion as well as on anecdotes, often based on current events which, if correctly interpreted, are shown to demonstrate the truth of the teachings. The aims of the authors of modern religious manuals are ostensibly the same. Their works moreover replicate the structure and the subject-matter of earlier books. It might be thought that it would no longer be necessary to explain karmic causation in a country exposed to Buddhism for a millennium and a half, and yet this is the intention proclaimed by the authors. To prove their case conclusively, the writers of the handbooks resort to two potentially contradictory sorts of legitimation: the claim of historical continuity (e.g. derivation from the ancient religious knowledge of India), and the correspondence between their own personal discoveries in the spirit world and scientific research 'carried out by English and American doctors'. The books include visible proof of such convergence by reproducing 'spirit-photographs' (*reisha*) of ectoplasm or of soul-auras and so forth. Moreover some authors attempt to reassure the lay reader in their prefaces by including statistics and scientific terms.

In his *Guide to the Famous Eerie Places of Japan* (*Nihon kaiki meisō annai*), for example, Hirano Iumao claims to have written out of a desire for knowledge as

3. Karmic causation is a moral principle by which every thought, speech and deed is said to be both an effect of previous thoughts, words, and acts, and to give rise to future acts and intentions.

4. Book 27 (An Account of the Evil Spirits of This Country) of the *Konjaku* collects stories that were current in the 12th century. However the publication of cheap, easily readable *kana* versions of exemplary tales (e.g. Suzuki Shosan's *Inga monogatari*, Stories of Cause and Effect) began only at the start of the Edo period. Karmic causation was also expounded in texts by Buddhist priests directed towards a large public such as the *Ojōyoshū* and the *Tannishō*.

well as to 'anticipate the future directions of science' (1976: 7). Another author, Nakaoka Toshiya, in a book entitled *The World of the Afterlife* (*Shigo no sekai*) addresses his readers as follows:

Do you think that when people die they go to the world of the afterlife? According to a recent poll conducted in our country 22.7 per cent of interviewees said that they did, whereas 42.4 per cent believe in presentiments of death [*mushi ga shirasu koto*]....

Nakaoka ends his paragraph with a rhetorical question, asking readers whether in this age of high-growth economy and materialistic civilisation... even a little more understanding of the spirit world might not give us a better life? (1979: 14-15)

The statistics cited may have been included to reassure the reader that he or she is not dealing with superstition (*meishin*, literally a 'divergent' or 'confused' belief) but rather with attitudes shared by many other people. To strengthen this contention the geographical area considered by modern authors has been considerably widened in comparison to that covered by the compilers of early collections such as the *Konjaku*, which includes edifying episodes from the 'three countries', i.e. India, China and Japan. Contemporary accounts of supernatural events are instead said to take place also in South America, remote England or, perhaps as a final proof of rationality, even in Germany. Moreover, as in Nakaoka's previously mentioned book, there are numerous descriptions of visits to the other world or, more specifically, to hell. Interestingly enough, to my knowledge, modern handbooks do not feature journeys to paradise which, indeed, are also less common in the early anthologies.

Another innovation introduced into contemporary religious handbooks is the first-person account, the personal testimony or true story narrated by the protagonist. These may include seemingly inexplicable cures of various diseases, the reunion of divided couples, or extraordinary luck in one's business, all attributed to supernatural intervention. Needless to say, stories of the woeful consequences of the neglect of one's religious duties also abound. Many of these narratives appear to have been transcribed verbatim from 'question and answer' sessions supposedly initiated by the author of the volume in which they appear, while others purport to be letters from anguished readers.<sup>5</sup> This technique creates an instant intimacy between the authors and their public. Although it is possible that Nakaoka and other writers have embellished or even invented these letters, the wide sales of the manuals and the large clientele of religious centres operating on the same principles ensure the existence of an authentic correspondence at the time of the writing of subsequent volumes.

The authors, who are described as religious specialists (*shūkyō senmonka*), propose sure solutions to the problems recurrently outlined by their correspondents: rituals for previously neglected ancestors, for the souls of one's own aborted children, and for the re-siting of family tombs or even the entire

5. *The Miraculous Mizugo Spirits*, for example, Sugiura's second manual on the subject (1981), starts with ten pages of letters reprinted verbatim and continues with a series of discussions by various pseudonymous women of such issues as 'how must one care for the tombs of the ancestors?'

family homestead. Between the pages of these slender paperbacks the circle of the commercialization of religious activities is complete in that the manuals, like mail-order catalogues, end with a list of suppliers, i.e. of religious practitioners who will perform the rituals required to pacify neglected souls, re-position tombs or re-orient buildings.

The 'specialists' appear to be resourceful and hardworking. The veteran Nakaoka, as we are told on the dust-jacket of *The World of the Afterlife* (Nakaoka 1979), has written more than one hundred books, whereas Sugiura, a practitioner specializing in the memorialization of the spirits of aborted foetuses (*mizugo rei*), is the author of at least four books on this subject alone. His first book, *Mizugo rei* (1978), went through six editions in ten months—a success repeated by many other authors. It is difficult, however, to make reliable estimates of the overall sales of the manuals. Inquiries at several publishers reveal an average of 30,000 copies but several books seem to have sold over 100,000 copies. Each book also contains listings of works on related themes. *The World of the Afterlife*, for example, is part nine of the series 'To See the Fourth Dimension', which includes *The Fear of the Spirits of the Dead* (parts I and II), *The Fear of Evil Spirits*, *The Fear of the Spirit World* and a volume simply called *Invader!?* (the latter is introduced as a 'fundamental examination' of UFO).

I have discussed the authors and contents of *mizugo rei* manuals, and the subject of abortion in Japan, elsewhere (Picone 1982). Sugiura's texts on the *mizugo* spirits, however, also include a section devoted to a different form of explanation of misfortune: tomb-siting (*bōsōgaku*). According to Sugiura, the location, shape, colour, layout, and other material details of a family's grave monument influence the fortunes of the surviving members of the household. 'Karmic ties', he writes, 'link the tomb and the *ie*.' A grave site, moreover, should not be in a valley or in the shade, because the ancestors will suffer if deprived of the sun. Nor should the headstone be placed under a large tree, because raindrops would collect on the branches and wear holes in the stone. Other detailed prescriptions follow (e.g. if a black gravestone is erected 'there is sure to be a 99 per cent rate of cancer in the family'). Properly constructed tombs, Sugiura concludes, are similar to human habitations. 'As we have an entrance to our houses, so there should be one also in the tomb, because the grave is the dwelling-place of the ancestral spirits; if there is no entrance they cannot stay' (see Sugiura 1980: 233–8; 1981: 200–210).<sup>6</sup>

There are obvious connections between the methods for diagnosing misfortune described above. First, both tomb-siting and the memorialization of ancestors and of *mizugo* spirits are aspects of the cult of the dead. Secondly, at a more abstract level, the proper construction of tombs and the correct performance of memorial rites are said by the 'specialists' to be governed by immensely complicated rules. It is enough to break one unwittingly for calamity to strike.

6. The existence of minutely detailed prescriptions for all rituals is demonstrated once again by Matsunaga Kazuto's article in this volume. It should be remembered, however, that doubt in these matters may arise in the absence of a manual—purportedly a comprehensive text—because, in all probability, no single person within a given community will know *all* the rules.

Within systems of explanation of this type, a seemingly unimportant act such as choosing the colour of a gravestone may have disastrous consequences. The 'specialists' manuals, however, provide a series of counter-prescriptions which are said to annul the effects of the transgression of the rules they have themselves established.

We possess only fragmentary information concerning the source of the specialists' expertise. In contrast with Buddhist priests, who might be induced to propagate the cult as a means of re-establishing the finances of their temples, the lay specialists entered their present profession only after a varied apprenticeship in the occult. Both priests and specialists, however, take full advantage of modern technology by self-sponsored advertisement on television, for example, or by pre-recording the words of advice offered to their clients. Although the authors of the manuals lack the tradition-based authority enjoyed by the Buddhist clergy, they compensate their customers by adopting a more eclectic approach. A particularly striking innovation in this respect is their use of 'scientific' terms and methods.

In a recent Who's Who, the *Nihon no reitōryokusha* (Psychic Specialists of Japan), we are provided with a list of '19 persons of spiritual experience' [*sic*] who 'solve human suffering' (Ōishi 1981: dust-jacket). In a few pages of text each 'miracle worker' describes his or her secret methods of healing and diagnosis and provides the address of a 'research centre' for eventual consultations. The organizations listed include the Japanese Scientific Spirit Association (*Nihon shinrei kagaku kyōkai*), the Japanese Divine Spiritology Research Centre (*Nihon shinreigaku kenkyūjō*), the Religious Psychology Research Centre (*Shūkyō shinrigaku kenkyūjō*), and so forth.

A single example of the potted biographies of the specialists included in this volume may suffice—that of the founder of the last institution on my list. His name is Yamamoto and he claims to have obtained a Ph.D. in literature. In contrast to the various theories propounded by more traditional faith healers elsewhere in the book, Yamamoto's learning has enabled him to understand that the origin of psychic powers is scientific, being constituted by waves of energy. This all-pervading force is measurable by a machine, which appears, bristling with wires, in an accompanying photograph. All is made clear when we are told that this energy had in fact been discovered long ago in ancient India and identified by Yogin as the seven *chakra*, or centres of energy within the human body.

In a final section Yamamoto relates episodes from his early life, presumably with the intent of showing that natural abilities and childhood training had also fitted him for his future exploits in the spirit world. His mother and stepmother took him to perform ascetic exercises under a great waterfall where, because of his strong belief, Yamamoto explains, the resident *kami* (deities) did not allow him to be hurt and deflected the powerful stream of water from his head (ibid.: 206–11).

Other specialists also describe childhood experiences, the most common being prophetic gifts and illnesses. Kumamoto Akira, for example, the author of *The Great Spirit World* (*Dai reikai*), foretold as a boy several misfortunes which affected his family as well as the suicide of a classmate. The cure of his father, who was

suffering from a serious disease, by an ascetic performing the *kitō* rite (prayers of exorcism), and the future specialist's own victory over the spirits which had caused him to be ill, confirmed him in his vocation (Kumamoto 1976: 130-1).

In later life the specialists generally study religion or paranormal phenomena. Sugiura, for example, deepened his knowledge of Indian Buddhism in Tokyo and, at a precocious twenty-five years of age, established the Tsunoda Research Centre for Spiritual Knowledge. Subsequently he widened his activities to include the previously described tomb-siting and the memorialization of the *mizugo* spirits (Sugiura 1981: dust-jacket). Both of these appear to be very lucrative, to judge by the spacious building that houses his present centre, where I visited him in 1981.

Before summarizing the aims and contents of the manuals, it may be useful to make a few brief comments on changes in the membership of established religions in Japan, which have frequently been interpreted as evidence of massive secularization. The wide sales of the manuals indicate that the change is to be found in patterns of affiliation rather than in a lack of interest in the resources of religion, particularly in the request for *genze riyaku* (this-worldly advantages). Religious adherence is constantly shifting away from the parish system (*danka seido*), instituted in the Tokugawa period, towards membership in lay groups, which may be small and informal, e.g. the *kō*, or very large and closely organized, e.g. the Sōka Gakkai (see Davis 1980b: 262-70).

Transitory adherence, however—the religious behaviour of the users of manuals or of occasional, *ad hoc* pilgrims to temples and/or shrines—is perhaps most common. Moreover, in a poll questioning how many members of the new religion Mahikari Kyōkai had previously belonged to other groups, Davis (1980a: 307) found that at least a quarter answered affirmatively, and that all members had a high drop-out rate.

Finally, what may be termed 'vicarious affiliation', e.g. mothers performing rites for their children, or wives for their husbands, is also very widespread. The letters received by the specialists suggest that the users of the manuals are most frequently women who, being largely deprived of the means of effective action in society, are more likely to resort to rituals performed in isolation within the home to ensure the safety of their families.<sup>7</sup>

To summarize: all the manuals seek to prove the existence of a 'spirit world' (*reikai*) or of an after-life, most frequently in one of the traditional Buddhist hells. The souls of the dead, moreover, are said to haunt the sites where murders have taken place or to appear in ancient execution grounds. In handbooks like the *Guide to the Famous Eerie Places of Japan*, a detailed map of the ghostly world is superimposed onto the everyday urban landscape, allowing readers to indulge in a sort of sensational alternative tourism.

The majority of these slender paperbacks, however, reflect the authors' attempt to instil fear and guilt in their readers. While explaining the causes of

7. In respect to the individual's age and/or sex a connection to religion may be expressed by special status (e.g. children described as *kami*) or by specialization in religious tasks within the family (e.g. elder women).

misfortune, they furnish a more or less complex description of a para-medical spirit-pathology, then assuage the dread they have awakened by proposing a cure effected by the psychic agents they have identified. These spirits are almost always said to be neglected relatives of their victims. Conventional worship of the family dead, the specialists insist, affords little protection, because hitherto forgotten categories of souls, e.g. affines, adopted members of the *ie*, one's own aborted children (or those of one's mother-in-law, or of one's husband's mistress, and so forth ad infinitum), may all cause 'spirit hindrance' (*reishō*) and must be pacified.

The teleology of the manuals does not entirely contradict the doctrine of karmic causation. On the contrary, it serves to complement popular concepts of karma by instituting a variant of *genpō* (karmic punishment in one's present existence), namely indirect retribution. Thus one is born as a descendant of a neglected ancestor by karma, one is neglected by one's descendants by karma, etc. To complicate the issue further, the same handbook may provide several alternative (but not mutually exclusive) theories of causation, e.g. spirit possession by foxes, or by the spirits of the living (*tsuki*) (see, for example, Sugiura 1980: 12-76).<sup>8</sup>

Why do many Japanese, citizens of a modern industrial nation, require the baroque rationalizations of human unhappiness offered by these specialists? I suggest that equating misfortune with the spiritual retribution incurred for transgressing a rule implies a constant possibility of control over events. Religious consumers faced with a seemingly incurable disease or other insoluble problems may choose a remedy among the rites codified by the specialists, and, instead of considering themselves victims of chance or of unknown psychic entities, they may manipulate occurrences in this world by means of the supernatural agents listed in the handbooks. The way of thinking exemplified by the manuals may also provide some degree of emotional satisfaction in that it both creates and at the same time lessens individual responsibility. On the one hand the specialists' clients admit to a ritual error or oversight but, on the other, misfortune is unequivocally traced to an external and supernatural cause.

The material presented in these pages raises a number of questions requiring further discussion. If it is possible without undue distortion to compare the behaviour of the users of the manuals to the Zande system of oracles and magic described by Evans-Pritchard, we might think that the Japanese concerned with the cults I have described have also adopted a closed system of explanation. However, if the Western scientific and 'open' concept of knowledge, which admits of chance, has been refused, why outline several different comprehensive theories of causation within the same book, often even on the same page?

8. The *yakudoshi* belief described by David Lewis in this volume is, at least potentially, another theory of this kind. If we consider that *yakudoshi* occur about every three years (more frequently if *maeyaku* and *atoyaku* are included), illness, statistically, is almost always 'explained'. Lewis, however, does not clarify the difference between body-centred harm to the individual (illness, accidents) supposed to occur during these periods of time, and other misfortunes (e.g. loss of employment, the illness of one's child).

We may also ask why the majority of these theories focus on the spirits of the dead as agents of causality. To this question, at least, it is possible to give a tentative answer. I had started out by saying that the manuals sell the concept of karmic causality which, in simple terms, is the continuous balancing, over cons, of individually-based responsibility for good and evil. The widespread demand for self-help religious handbooks in contemporary Japan, in combination with the dissolution of the *ie* and of various forms of institutional religion, proves the existence of a large class of solitary 'consumers of the sacred', whose channels of information, for the spiritual as well as for the material world, are not other members of the community but the impersonal mass media. These isolated 'consumers', however, recreate and multiply, as origin and cause of all events, the very family system whose disintegration has largely given rise to their need.

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