

Shinmō (Spirits of the Recently Deceased) and Community — Bon Observances in a Japanese Village —

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In the Shima region in the southern part of Mie Prefecture, which includes Toba City and Shima County, rituals for the spirits of those who died since the last celebration of the Bon festival in August, called *shinmō* 新亡, are still widely held all over the area. These *hatsubon gyōji* 初盆行事 (“first Bon observances”) are conducted at various levels: at the level of “the house of the recently deceased” (*hatsubon no ie* 初盆の家), at the level of the temple, and at that of the local community. Of course, rituals for the newly dead during the Bon period are not limited to that region alone. They exist in various places and various forms all over Japan, and those in the Shima region are certainly not exceptional. However, if we can point out one characteristic of the *hatsubon* observances in that region, it is that especially there emphasis is still laid upon the rites sponsored by the community in the amalgam of various levels of celebration. In the present paper I will focus upon that communitarian aspect and probe its ritual meaning.

Viewpoints on the Problem

In the reports on *hatsubon* observances in the Shima region at the beginning of the Shōwa era (1925– present), it is mentioned that they were often held concomitant with rites involving the destruction and removal from the community of matters symbolizing the *shinmō*, and expressing a kind of shunning of the bereaved families. There were, for example, scenes of clashes between people, even to the extent that in the middle of the Bon observances the paper banners symbolizing the spirits of the dead were destroyed. In some cases (as in Anori, Ago-chō), the banners had no specif-

ic meaning; in others, banners were prepared with the posthumous names of the *shinmō* written on them. The people were of the opinion that, if the banners were sufficiently destroyed in the fight, the deceased could attain buddhahood¹ (as in Nakiri, Daiō-chō).

Apart from this, we should call attention to the existence of rituals which signify the expulsion of the *shinmō* outside the village, similar to the rite of *mushi-okuri* 虫送り, rites of extermination of insects which harm the fields (as in Matsuo, Toba City, and Tategami, Ago-chō. Moreover, as specific behavior towards families who celebrated their first Bon after the death of a family member, it allegedly happened that in the midst of the Bon festival people threw sand at them so that they would run away (as in Sugashima, Toba City).

These customs of evading and expelling with regard to the *shinmō* offer valuable clues for dealing with the *hatsubon* in the Shima region. We can detect there an aspect of the festival which rather departs from the general image of the Bon observances as a quiet remembering of the ancestors.

It is true that in many cases a strong influence can be seen of ritual elements of the *nenbutsu* 念仏 (Buddhist invocations) which since the Middle Ages have widely permeated the populace. From this viewpoint one could interpret the Bon festival as an occasion for placating and sending off the new spirits by means of *nenbutsu* rituals and dances. Until this day, in most of the research on the Bon observances the predominant viewpoint has been that their origin is to be found in the “spirit festivals” based upon ancestor veneration. One might say that, from this viewpoint, the interpretation that they are “rites of passage” by which the *shinmō* undergo a process of becoming purified ancestral spirits is central.

My viewpoint in this paper is not that of trying to give a symbolic interpretation with regard to this process of pacifying the spirits and of turning them into ancestral spirits, or an analysis of the spirits in such terms. I will direct my primary attention instead to the Bon observances as social sanctions on the level of the community and will therefore focus upon one particular case, that of Tategami in Ago-chō, Shima County.

The Bon Observances in Tategami

The schedule of the Bon observances in Tategami, centered upon the houses celebrating their *hatsubon*, is as follows:

August 7: Start of the veneration of the *shinmō* in each household, and *sekisadame* ritual at the temple. Other families prepare for welcom-

¹ “Buddhahood,” in this context, refers to the model state for those who have passed away.

ing the ancestors.

August 13: *Segaki* rituals at the temple. (In ordinary houses, start of the ancestors festival.)

August 14: Production of the *sōhai* 総牌 (“memorial monument for all the recently deceased”). *Dainenbutsu* 大念仏.

August 15: *Segaki* rituals at the temple. (In ordinary houses, sending away of the ancestral spirits.)

August 16: *Tōrō-okuri* 燈籠送り (*shinmō*).

August 21: End of the Bon festival.

The ceremonies in the *hatsubon* families start in fact on 7 August, with the veneration of the *shinmō* at the house altar. In the ordinary houses preparations start for welcoming the ancestors, but the real start of the festival is actually on 12 or 13 August. From this day on public funerals are prohibited in the district.

In the evening of 7 August, the *sekisadame* 席定め or “place designation” rite is held at the temple. This is something characteristic of Tategami and is a meeting of great importance. There the ranking order is determined for the memorial services of the *shinmō* during the *hatsubon* observances starting on 14 August. In other districts of the Shima region, the ranking order mostly depends on the age of the participants or on the date of decease. But in Tategami a new hierarchy is established among the deceased of the past year depending on the type of funeral held, the posthumous name given, and the degree of meritorious services.

As a prerequisite for elucidating the social background of this *sekisadame* custom, I should first give some explanation about funerals and posthumous names in the area. To start with, funerals are basically divided into five ranks according to the number of officiating priests. The ordinary, middle rank is called *namisō* 地葬. The highest rank is called *kaigōsō* 会合葬 and is usually held for deceased members of head families or the like. In other words, it is limited to the social stratum with a wealthy background. The designation of some specific families as *kaigō kabu* 会合株 – although not official – clearly indicates that to a certain degree there exists a fixed family status in that society of extended families. Of course, it is not merely family status that counts. The economical background is also an important element.

Connected with the form of the funeral, the corresponding “rank” of the posthumous name given to the deceased is also of importance. However, the giving of a posthumous name depends on more than the form of the funeral, i. e. on the social status of the family. The deceased individual’s social achievements, namely the degree of services rendered to the com-

munity and the temple, are an element taken into consideration for deciding on a posthumous name. Therefore, it is possible that after the Bon festival is over, a first-rank posthumous name is given to a highly meritorious person independent of the fixed system of social class.

Those criteria for deciding on the form of the funeral and on the posthumous name are not unique to Tategami. They also apply in other areas. It is, however, very clear that compared to other areas, in the case of Tategami, people are very much conscious of the difference between funerary rites and posthumous names, correlative to the degree of meritorious services towards the village and especially the existence of family status. We can say that this strong awareness is especially manifested in the *sekisadame* custom. However, it is only until the Bon festival that this ranking becomes a social problem. It appears typically in that one cannot freely change the rank of the posthumous name, closely related to the form of the funeral, until the Bon is over.

For example, somebody who has rendered many services to the temple but whose funeral was a *namisō* cannot receive a posthumous name corresponding to the *kaigōsō*. However, if because of a special concern from the side of the temple the posthumous name is changed, this has to be done after the Bon observances are over. The same also applies to an individual who would himself request the temple to have a posthumous name changed. In this way, one can say that in the Bon observances a deceased person is located within the social regulations that have been in force since the funeral. The *hatsubon* rituals thus constitute an important point of partition. Also, with regard to the posthumous name of an individual, one can say that the Bon festival is the limit after which the social restrictions in force disappear.

The *sekisadame* meeting, then, has the meaning of locating the dead, who at the time of the funeral received a ranking on the basis of family status and achievements, again in the community as such. It seems that because the criteria for evaluating somebody's achievements are different from temple to temple, the decision of rank was sometimes difficult to make and that the consultations went on until the next morning. Before and after World War II war the general criterion for receiving a special posthumous name was mostly to have been meritorious as village head, as medical doctor, war dead, public official, etc., or to have rendered service to the temple. The ordinary people were to become the object of this *sekisadame* ritual, even if he received a special memorial tablet.

On 13 and 15 August, *segaki* 施餓鬼 rituals for the hungry spirits are held according to Buddhist doctrine in the two parish temples of the district.

With the head of the self-government association and the *kunin-yaku* 九人役 (“nine performers”)² in attendance, first a service is held for the dead of the ordinary families, and then for the *shinmō*. On the evening of the 14th, the *dainenbutsu* is performed at a public place near the Yakushi-dō. This is done in the presence of the head of the self-government association and the temple priests, who do not perform any religious rites. The *kunin-yaku* act as the central performers. All the families of the district are supposed to attend. The members of the *hatsubon* families are in charge of serving the performers and the spectators. In former times, this ritual was also called *bon-zake*, referring to the rice wine provided by the homes with a *hatsubon*. This indicates that *sake* was served in great quantities to those who attended, just as at the time of the New Year shrine rituals.

Another characteristic of the *dainenbutsu* is that this ritual vividly reflects social structures. In fact, there is a ranking decided upon by the *sekisadame* described above. Another point is that within the ritual, prominence is given to art performances called *jibayashi* and *sasara-odori* for those among the *shinmō* who rendered special services to the village.

Before the ritual starts in the evening, the *hatsubon* families bring a kind of parasol to the Yakushi-dō, the place of the ritual, decorated with articles left behind by the deceased and symbolizing their spirits. Also a *sōhai*, a memorial monument with the posthumous names of all the *shinmō* in the ranking order decided upon by the *sekisadame*, is placed in the center of the ritual space. The role of the *kunin-yaku* is to perform the *nenbutsu* towards each of the *shinmō* according to this ranking order. Afterwards, the *nenbutsu* cult associations of the district perform their rituals. Every five years, the *jibayashi* and *sasara-odori* are performed after those *nenbutsu* are finished. Finally, the *kunin-yaku* perform the *kai-nenbutsu* 買い念仏 (“bought” *nenbutsu*), paid for by the families which have requested them for venerating their ancestors. Together with what those *kunin-yaku* received for the shrine observances at the New Year, the money they receive for performing those *nenbutsu* constitutes an important part of the income earned with the annual ritual observances.

The *tōrō-okuri*, or “sending away of the lanterns,” on August 16 is a ritual in which the lanterns symbolizing the *shinmō* and the papers on which their names were written in ranking order are brought to the border of the village in the evening and then burnt. In former times, this was also called *shinmō-okuri* or “sending away of the spirits of the recently deceased.” Further, the *Bon-okuri* or “sending away of the Bon,” on the 21st takes on a

² These “nine performers” are responsible for the religious events of the community.

form similar to that of the *mushi-okuri*, i. e. the ritual to get rid of harmful insects. It is a ritual in which people run around all over the district with torches, which are then thrown away at the village borders. This ritual is also called the “sending away of the spirits who visited for Bon,” and is the finale of the Bon observances.

Final Observations

A basic element for interpreting the meaning of the *hatsubon* observances in Tategami is that we see how, for the new spirits, those rituals constitute a great demarcation point in the series of public events after the funeral. Their meaning can also be inferred from the fact that, with the *hatsubon* observances as a borderline, public sanctions with regard to the posthumous name disappear. The posthumous name itself has a public nature as a social measuring rule towards the individual, as seen in the *sekisadame* custom. That this is not merely a private affair is symbolized by the fact that the posthumous name cannot be arbitrarily changed until the *dainenbutsu* of the first Bon after the funeral is over. As mentioned above, the problem here is not only one of a difference between the criteria for the rank of the funeral and the posthumous name originating in social backgrounds. Precisely for this reason it symbolizes that the public character of the dead is to be continued until the Bon observances. For the families of the *shinmō* this means the elimination of the non-ordinary daily situation which has prevailed until then, and for the dead themselves it becomes an occasion for the abolition of their public character, while on the other hand it can also be a reconfirmation of the social order, in this case clearly reflecting social classes.

Moreover, if we may attribute a special meaning to the public performance arts, we have to point out again how in the case of Tategami the aspect of honoring those who rendered meritorious services is very strongly emphasized. How all this will change in the future is unclear. At present, those performance arts are sponsored by an association for the preservation of cultural assets and enacted every five years without relation to the deaths of meritorious people. Also the criteria for deciding on ranking in the *sekisadame* are presently under revision and, instead of family status and meritorious services, order of age seems to be acquiring increasing importance. It remains true, however, that at the present moment room is still left for the *kunin-yaku* and for giving special consideration to those who rendered special services.