

Reviews

Robert J. Smith, *Ancestor worship in contemporary Japan*. Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 1974. Pp. xix + 266. Tables 34. Photos 21. Glossary. \$12.50.

No practice is more central to Japan's religious life and particular way of dealing with death than ancestor worship. That is general knowledge. And yet, no aspect of Japanese religion has been studied less. Only some half dozen extensive studies exist in any language, including Japanese. Undoubtedly this neglect is partly due to the complexity of the subject, as becomes clear when reading this book-length study, the first to appear in any Western language. The sociological and psychological dimensions of Japanese ancestor worship are extraordinarily fluid. Ancestor worship constitutes an ill-delineated "ritual universe" (Smith's term) of practices, observances, and folk beliefs of a bewildering and, one has the impression, ever expanding variety that resists facile intellectual domestication.

Smith's study stands out by its comprehensive scope. It includes a historical introduction, a general description of the world of deities and spirits, anthropological descriptions of the rites, sociological data and a psychological picture of the various approaches to the ancestors. A wide variety of material is used: previous anthropological and sociological studies, illustrative material from literary sources (nō plays, puppet plays, modern novels) and hard quantitative data. The last two chapters report the results of Smith's unique survey of 3,050 memorial tablets, which he identified with the help of 595 individuals (429 residents of five urban centers and 166 members of three rural communities). His subjects were interviewed directly (40%) or approached through questionnaires (60%).

The findings of this study shatter our common assumptions: that ancestor worship is all about ancestors; that the ancestor lines run through numerous generations; and that the practice is an eminently rural phenomenon. Smith reveals that "fully one-quarter of all tablets were for young children, ancestral to no one...about one-half were for persons not even in the direct ascent line, that is not [household] heads and their wives in each ascending generation" (p. 183). Since the latter category constitutes the traditionally reckoned household

ancestors, the importance of this discovery will strike anyone familiar with Japanese society. Unless we totally give up linguistic precision, ancestor worship as a circumscribed and central category of religious practice will have difficulty surviving the impact of Smith's findings.

Generational depth is also surprisingly low: "Just over 72 percent of the households had from one to three generations of identifiable tablets; about 12 percent had tablets but none for an ascendant; about 15 percent had from four to fourteen generations of tablets they could identify" (p. 182). On this point the city and the countryside showed a marked difference, as could be expected. In general, however, Smith found that rural-urban differentiation is insignificant and does not support our picture of the countryside as a stronghold against change. The unavoidable conclusion is that structurally and socio-logically, Japan does not have ancestor worship. What we call by this name constitutes only a minor aspect of the world of interaction between the living and the dead.

So much is indisputably clear. When, however, the author starts to assess these anthropological findings in terms of possible historical change, the results are far more elusive. For instance, what does it mean for the future that "in rural districts and the Tokyo commercial district, where the proportion of households with altars is high, the rate of telling children to venerate them is low; whereas in the Tokyo residential area, where the proportion of altars is low, the rate of telling children to venerate them is the highest of all" (p. 121)? More troublesome, Smith discovers a remarkable trend, "fairly recent and increasingly common," of venerating nonlinear tablets, which may constitute the "opening wedge of *family*-centered as opposed to *household*-centered ancestor worship" (p. 174), yet his same data also "suggest that bilaterality of tablets is by no means an exclusively contemporary phenomenon" (p. 177). Although one need not go to the author's extreme of presenting interpretations that go either way, the data are confusing when it comes to projecting trends.

This problem of interpretation arises from the multiplicity of variables that condition the shape and fate of ancestor worship. There appear to be no constant factors, sociological, ideological, or ritual, that reduce flexibility. Yet this present state of fluidity is not new. Ancestor worship has always been a particularly malleable phenomenon, flexible to the extreme; subject to political manipulation from above, as during the Meiji period; conditioned by decisions affecting

its association with Buddhism, as during the Tokugawa period when households had to register with Buddhist temples; and affected by bits and pieces of the belief systems of Japan's great traditions or of the new religions.

Although an anthropologist, Smith is very aware of the formative influence of history on present-day practices. His historical chapter, however, is more than an interesting but quite dispensable introduction. History, according to Smith, explains why ancestor worship is so resistant to intellectual organization into patterns or models. History plays thus a very central, albeit negative, role in Smith's interpretive strategy. Quoting Macfarlane (pp. 212-213), Smith holds that "functional and structural models are turned to dust by the use of historical material." This methodological position rests on a number of assumptions concerning society, history, respect for empirical data, and the nature of scholarly understanding. These assumptions need clarification and discussion for a proper understanding of Smith's work. They deny the possibility of discovering or establishing order and structure from material that at first glance appears random and scattered because history's contingent character is taken so seriously that it precludes the development not only of absolute and closed or wholly coherent systems, but almost of any detectable regularity. In this view, history's role is the purely negative one of simply providing and maintaining a vacuum where human experience shows no order, manifest or latent.

The author's position stems from the almost boundless and random microvariations that overwhelmed him when collecting and analyzing his data (pp. 50, 53, 56, 70, 106, 216). On the belief level, contradictions and ambiguities abound concerning such matters as the ontological status of the dead, the place where they reside, the nature of their power, the efficacy of ritual observance, etc. And here, as Smith rightly points out, Japanese history can inform us at least negatively about the absence of firm doctrine and of a churchlike institution, guardian of orthodoxy. In Japan, borderlines and thresholds of belief were never clearly marked. In terms of worship patterns and behavior, variations again pullulate, leading the author to conclude that "perhaps the ancestral rites are, above all, an area where individual preference is given free rein" (p. 113). Thus not only is Japanese history not conducive to structure: "sentiment" (p. 187) further undercuts uniformity.

Have we thus reached the limit of what one can responsibly say about a phenomenon such as Japanese ancestor worship? Is the only landscape that we are allowed to contemplate one of the debris of an imperfect past, further atomized by idiosyncratic behavior? If this is so, then the scholar's task seems to be limited to collecting more debris, quarrying more material without hope of ever building an edifice. Smith strongly leans in this direction.

The author's position is his solution to the difficult problem of variations, their order and meaning. To Smith variations are inviolable empirical data, all equally sacrosanct. And all information from the hard quantitative data to the softer data culled skillfully from anecdotes, testimonials, and literature, has to be taken into account when constructing a system. He assumes that any system that neglects any of this information is illegitimate. It should be noted that the accumulation of colorful softer data, while evocative of mood and feeling, further distract from structure. Indeed, they are additional proof that structure is absent or impossible to determine.

Smith's answer to the very serious question of system and variations lies at the heart of his approach. But it is possible that the problem is not the dilemma Smith perceives: of either looking for a system and dismissing variations, or respecting variations and dismissing systems as impossible. It may very well be that we have been looking for structure at the wrong level. When history teaches us that cognitive belief systems have played no formative role in Japan, then we should no longer be shocked by the coexistence of contradictory points of belief. At the cognitive level, these contradictions are irreducible and un-understandable for practitioners and observers alike. If social structure has been equally unsuccessful in fixing the boundaries of ancestor worship, then the functional assumption that the custom is merely a ritualistic mirror image of social realities is also a methodological dead end.

What are we left with then? At least this: that Japan *is* different. Smith's study drives home the overwhelming impression that the dead are not as dead there as they are in our own society. In Japan, the world of interaction between the living and dead is a very busy one. If this realm is the field par excellence of individual preference, then we can start looking for the dynamics of that acted-out dialogue. The level at which the Japanese find meaning in their interaction with the

dead is psychological. And where there is meaning, we may look for sense and systematic understanding. This psychological dimension seems like a promising tack for future research. An obvious area of study is, for instance, the nature of the feelings, ambivalent or other, expressed toward the dead, and the source of these tenacious attachments.

Moreover, an analysis of these particular psychological attachments provides a meaningful meeting ground for anthropology and history, since the order that governs Japanese behavior is undeniably historically conditioned. For one thing, it has always made perfect sense in Japan as far back as history goes to treat the dead as more alive than we do, something that is quite consonant with a life-celebrating tradition such as Shinto—even to the extent that death becomes a variant, not a negation of life. It is plausible that this psychological area, richly documented in the chapters “Approaches to the ancestors” and “The realm of personal attachments,” will lend itself to a patterned treatment that will do justice to the whole panoply of variations.

The time is also ripe for two further efforts. Smith’s data can be used in in-depth cross-cultural comparisons, especially with China, for obvious reasons of cultural proximity. Furthermore, an attempt has to be made to see whether the methodological approaches developed by anthropologists dealing with symbolic manipulations in memorialism or ancestor cults in African societies will yield new insights when applied to the Japanese case.

The above critical remarks notwithstanding, the value of Smith’s work is beyond question. Several features recommend themselves very highly: the author’s comprehensive approach, his thorough and rich documentation, and his decision to reduce technical terminology to a minimum without sacrificing precision. The author’s meticulous reference to all relevant English language material—the bibliography is virtually exhaustive for English language works and includes all major Japanese studies—greatly enhances the usability of the work for teaching or reevaluation purposes. Undoubtedly, this work will quickly find its place on reading lists in courses on Japanese religion and culture. Scholars in their disputes over methodology and interpretation easily overlook the human dimensions of their subject, but thanks to Smith’s sensitive recording, this book provides its readers with unusual insights into a totally alien experience. Hopefully we

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will not have to wait too long for a paperback edition of this important study.

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