



Satsuki Kawano, *Ritual Practice in Modern Japan: Ordering Place, People, and Action*

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THIS IS A BOOK that aspires to be many things in its brief 152 pages: an overview of religious practice in contemporary Japan; a treatise on the power of ritual to instill and perpetuate a sense of moral order; an ethnographic analysis of festival activity in the city of Kamakura (drawing in particular on the strategic use of historical images), and a more focused case study of an annual festival in one particular section of the city and why it failed at achieving the purported aim of social solidarity.

The introduction informs us that the book will privilege action over belief, asserting that people's lives are ordered by the *doing* of ritual rather than by the pondering of theological concepts. In other words, ritual, as the embodiment of meaning, is more effective at instilling morality than passive study of texts alone. The focus here is on non-specialists—what ordinary people seek to gain through their participation in ritual. The author notes that despite a decline in the number of self-professed

religious “believers” in Japan there has been no comparable decline in ritual activity—people continue to visit temples and shrines and to participate in festivals. Thus the book will explore “ritual’s meaning and relevance for those who maintain no strong commitment to religion” (13).

The first chapter provides a brief outline of the religious milieu in Kamakura, where the author spent fourteen months conducting ethnographic fieldwork. Kawano notes that Shinto is oriented toward territorial affiliation and protection, while Buddhism is concerned with caring for the ancestral spirits. Thankfully, however, she does not dwell excessively on the distinction between the two religious traditions as they are manifested through ritual. Whether people are addressing kami (Shinto spirits/gods) or *hotoke* (buddhas, ancestral spirits), the ritual forms they employ are quite similar. In either case, meaning is ascribed through two complementary processes: “embodiment” and “emplacement.”

“Embodiment,” the subject of Chapter 2, refers to the imposition of certain attitudes upon the human body through the repetition of prescriptive movement. Here the author distinguishes ritual behavior into two types: “key ritual actions” and “restricting ritual actions.” The former refers to gestures and movements that are routinely incorporated into daily social activity, including bowing, cleaning, purification, gift-giving, and the sharing of food and drink. “Restricting ritual actions,” on the other hand, are the more specialized activities—often performed in religious contexts—that most people would identify as formalized ritual. Kawano provides several examples having parallels in both Shinto and Buddhism: joining one’s hands in front of one’s chest as a gesture of reverence to *hotoke*, or clapping to draw the attention of the kami; offering incense to *hotoke* and evergreen branches to kami; the Buddhist chanting of sutras and Shinto utterance of *norito* (formalized prayers). These are actions that distinguish formalized ritual from the ordinary or mundane. So while key ritual actions create affinities between ritual practice and ordinary routine, “restricting ritual actions differentiate and highlight the very presentation of the embodied order in a privileged manner” (53). In either case, meaning is embedded through the medium of bodily movement or physicality rather than the mental faculties alone.

Chapter 3 takes up the concept of “emplacement,” or inscribing meaning onto physical space. Again, this is accomplished through the two types of ritual, as alluded to above. Removing one’s shoes before entering a home (key action) distinguishes the “purity” of the domestic realm from the polluted outside world. Likewise, enclosing an area within a special rope called *shimenawa* (restricting action) designates that area as sacred space. Interestingly, Kawano acknowledges a reciprocal relationship in that physical space, having been ascribed with special meaning, then exerts an influence back upon the body, which is obliged to assume the appropriate attitude or demeanor when entering therein.

Though informant anecdotes and observations are introduced throughout, the ethnographic project begins in earnest in Chapter 4, using the city of Kamakura to illustrate the mechanisms just described. Kamakura, of course, was the site of the

ancient capital under the Minamoto shogunate, and thereby acquired considerable historical prestige. In more recent times, however, it developed as a pleasant seaside resort for wealthy residents of nearby Tokyo. These two narratives, Kamakura as old capital and Kamakura as famous resort, offer competing versions of the city's identity. Kawano invokes Bourdieu's notion of cultural capital in explaining how local actors manipulate images of Kamakura's past to their own advantage, particularly through the performance of the city-wide festivals that are interspersed throughout the year. "Thus people compete to give meaning to Kamakura by employing culturally specific emplaced order and historically specific place-making discourses" (93).

Chapter 5 narrows the focus even further into the neighborhood of Sakae, where the author lived while conducting her fieldwork. Here the book addresses the local festival as the embodiment of wider social, economic, and political relationships. Even within this limited area there is internal differentiation. The shops and houses of self-employed merchants face the main thoroughfares, offering easy access to their customers, while the wealthier residents, mostly households of salaried employees who commute to work in other areas, occupy the quiet interior sections. This distinctiveness is further reflected in the local festival; the self-employed merchant households are the major participants, while the salaried residents locate their identities in other contexts and are less inclined to join in.

Many of the author's observations have been well-documented already, and neither scholars of Japanese religion nor of ritual practice will find any big surprises. One exception, however, is in Sakae's annual festival. This, we are told, is a case where the ritual failed. "Failure" here means that it was unable to draw the residents, especially the households of salaried employees, into full participation—to define the neighborhood as an integrated community. In an age of affluence, the festival is no longer the anxiously awaited event it once was, and the salaried households are drawn to opportunities outside the residential area. Due to declining population, the self-employed shopkeeper households are no longer able to provide a sufficient number of able bodies to carry the portable shrine that is used to mark the territorial boundaries of the neighborhood. Thus "internal stratification among residents gives rise to social tension rather than solidification" (111).

The concluding Chapter 6 is an attempt to draw the ethnographic material into wider theoretical debates on the nature and significance of ritual. Here at the end the author introduces a range of complex issues surrounding ritual and its employment, but her arguments are somewhat obscured by a number of seeming contradictions. For example, the following appears on page 115: "Rituals are not texts open to an infinite number of interpretations. Participants have unequal access to the various layers involved in rituals." But later in the same paragraph we are told that "there is a great diversity in people's interpretation of rituals or ritual sites. Multiple layers of meaning and uneven access to them contribute to this diversity." It may be that the festival itself is full of contradictions due to the fact that it involves large numbers of people with varying perspectives. If this is the case, however, why not dispense

altogether with the notion that rituals are fixed—that is, that participants have little recourse but to mechanically reproduce the preestablished patterns?

This impression of “fixity” may well derive from the lack of a time dimension in the ethnographic project. Looking at the development of the festival over the long term would undoubtedly reveal that participants are not simply going through the motions but are actively adapting the performance to their changing needs (as the author herself suggests, almost in passing, on pages 111–12). One notable example is the recent participation of young women as bearers of the portable shrine, which was once an exclusively male activity. While to some extent necessitated by declining population, this nevertheless reflects changes in women’s status, and may even have helped to usher in such changes. What is missing here is any sense of the festival as a public forum for the introduction and testing of new ideas—of ritual as an ongoing performative discourse.

This in turn calls into question the attribution of Sakae’s festival as a failure. It seems to me that the festival “failed” only according to a strict social functionalist interpretation. In a larger sense it may have succeeded perfectly well by demonstrating the lack of widespread appeal. Now the sponsors can assess the outcome and modify their efforts—either catering more heavily to the interests of the holdouts, condensing the festival into a more parochial event, or abandoning it altogether in favor of more productive pursuits. The author herself suggests that the self-employed residents of Sakae have not given up on the festival—that they are now in fact investing in its future by encouraging the participation of white-collar children (112–13).

Finally, there is the question of the representativeness of the data. The book purports to be about ritual practice in modern Japan, though the fieldwork was conducted exclusively in Kamakura. Of all the varied people and places within the Japanese archipelago, how representative is an ancient capital and seaside resort? Likewise, to what extent are the district of Sakae and its failing festival representative of Kamakura as a whole?

In general, however, the book provides valuable insight into ritual as practiced by ordinary people in their everyday lives. The argument on ritual’s effectiveness in instilling morality is well-presented and persuasive, and the demonstration of parallel patterns within both Shinto and Buddhism is a sensible approach. These two features together should help to clarify the lack of exclusive adherence to one religion or the other, which non-Japanese, especially in the West, seem to find so perplexing.

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