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THE MOVING TARGET: 
JAPANESE CULTURE RECONSIDERED*

ROBERT J. SMITH

In The Study of History, Arnold Toynbee singled out Japan as a classic case of cultural conflict between the “Herodians” and the “Zealots” [confident, we may assume, that one was destined to win out, the other lose] . . . The former group, named after Herod Agrippa, who ruled Galilee for the Romans in the first century, wanted to assimilate foreign learning and civilization as thoroughly as possible. The Zealots, named after the Maccabees and the early Jewish zealots, were champions of traditional indigenous culture, hostile to foreigners, and uncompromisingly opposed to foreign importation or cross-fertilization. Toynbee evidently had second thoughts about the fitness of applying these terms to Japan [for in the end he described] the Meiji Restoration [of 1868] as a pursuit of the Zealot end by Herodian means.¹

Writing of the tactics employed by the Meiji oligarchs, Marius Jansen has put it more succinctly: “Seeking revolution, they preached restoration.”²

And only 30 years after the restoration, Basil Hall Chamberlain commented on its apparently revolutionary outcome: Whatever you do, don’t expatiate, in the presence of Japanese of the new school, on those old, quaint, and beautiful things Japanese which arouse your most genuine admiration.³ [For] all this is [today regarded as] merely a backwater. Speaking generally, the educated Japanese have done with their past. They want to be somebody else than what they have been and still partly are.⁴

Nevertheless, he is led to conclude that it:

is abundantly clear to those who have dived beneath the surface of the modern Japanese upheaval that more of the past has been retained than has been let go.⁵

Like most of us who spend a lot of time trying to think about Japanese culture, Chamberlain would have his cake and eat it too. Many who have spent less time on the puzzle nevertheless have

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come to roughly the same position. Writing on the emergence of modern states in the last 200 years, Eric Hobsbawm echoes Chamberlain and all his successors:

A "modernization" which maintained the old ordering of social subordination (possibly with some well-judged invention of tradition) was not theoretically inconceivable, but apart from Japan it is difficult to think of an example of practical success.6

True. And so it is more the pity that not one of the contributors to the volume The Invention of Tradition that he and Terence Ranger7 edited so much as mentions the one instance of practical success! But we in the Japan field are accustomed to such slights from our European and American colleagues, which makes your invitation to me to speak at your annual meeting all the more gratifying.

As it happens, I am more interested in the distinction drawn by Hobsbawm between custom (mere usages) and tradition, which requires both ritual and symbol. It is a distinction I find appealing, so you may imagine my delight when I encountered the following exchange in Maxine Hong Kingston’s Trij/master Monkey, His Fake Book.8 Wittman Ah Sing, the Chinese-American anti-hero of this deadly serious antic work, has brought his new wife to meet his family. Finding his grandmother’s room empty, he immediately suspects that his mother has put her in an old folks home without telling him. As they leave to go search for the old lady, Wittman Ah Sing says to his Caucasian bride:

"See how neglectful of her family my mother is? I wouldn’t put it past her to give Grandma the old heave-ho."
"You have the same custom as the Eskimos?” asked Tana. [. . .]
"I don’t know. How many times does something have to be done for it to be a tradition? There has to be a ceremony. You can’t just toss a grandmother on an iceberg, and run."9

He might also have asked how long it takes for something to become a tradition—and to what extent customs and traditions must necessarily reflect established cultural predispositions and constructs.

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This evening, I want to speak of life—weddings—and death—funerals—in Japan. I shall have reference to the style of wedding ceremony in which virtually everyone is married today—the typi-
cal, *increasingly traditional* wedding. In sharp contrast, I shall have reference to the funerals of emperors, for which there are few parallels anywhere in Japanese society. In the contemporary ordinary wedding and the contemporary extraordinary imperial funeral, are revealed something of the nature of Japanese culture, why I have called it a moving target, and what forces appear to cause it never to reach stasis but often make it seem highly conservative in character.

Here let me enter a disclaimer—or make an affirmation—as you wish. I think my approach will produce quite similar results in any society. Japan is only a particularly striking instance of the seemingly boundless capacity for invention and malleability that easily can be represented as cultural conservatism. In stressing the fluidity and flexibility of culture, I am greatly modifying an older anthropological stance, for as Edmund Leach wrote just before his death:

> Ever since the days of Herodotus ... ethnographers have written as if customs were normally static. When change occurs it has to be explained as if it were an anomaly. But historical records everywhere suggest that what would need to be explained is an ethnography that did not change. Why should anthropologists take it for granted that history never repeats itself but persuade themselves that, if left alone ethnographic cultures never do anything else? The answer is that it is often convenient so to believe. Malinowski believed that the Trobriand *kula*, as he observed it, had been working like that for hundreds of years. He mentions this belief only in a footnote. The evidence is that it had in fact been in existence for less than 50 years and was changing rapidly all the time.18

To which we may reply: So what if it had been in existence for only 50 years, or 10, or 500? Would it have made the slightest difference in Malinowski’s functionalist analysis? I doubt it very much, but knowing how deep or shallow the history of a cultural practice is cannot but have overwhelming relevance to any analysis of *change*, an issue of little concern to the functionalists.

Which brings me to my image of the moving target. It is a metaphor with one very clear implication, as I have argued in other contexts—we must recognize that we have lost our anchor in time.11 Contrary to what was once received wisdom, culture has never depended on genuine antiquity to lay legitimate claim to authenticity. Perhaps it is even better to argue that the proper study of culture actually *requires* us to slip our moorings in history,
setting in motion all points once thought to be fixed. Sally Falk Moore has put it this way:

... the continuous making and reiterating of social and symbolic order is ... an active process, not ... something which, once achieved, is fixed. [I take the view that existing orders are endlessly vulnerable to being unmade, remade, and transformed, and ... even [when they are only] maintaining and reproducing themselves, staying as they are, [that, too] should be seen as a process.\textsuperscript{12}

* * * *

And so we begin with weddings. Were you to ask a young Japanese to describe a typical wedding, it is virtually certain that you will be given an account of a ceremony of no great antiquity, whose major components assumed their present form not much more than a generation ago. That the ceremony has been devised recently in no way makes it less Japanese, for its like is to be found in no other society. Is it also traditional? Well, it is rife with ritual and symbol—some appropriated from the Japanese past, some taken from the pasts of others, and some pure inventions as recent as yesterday. The history of how this came about is thoroughly documented.\textsuperscript{13} Running through most of the surveys of the history of Japanese wedding ceremonies over the past 120 years, say, is the story of how the old commoner classes strove to emulate the customs of the dominant warrior class, especially after the Meiji Restoration of 1868. It is a pattern well attested in this as in many other matters of etiquette and ceremony.

But today's weddings actually owe far less to the traditions of the old warrior class than to a single event—the wedding of the Crown Prince, later the Taishō emperor, in 1900. It astonishes most Japanese to learn that this was the first occasion on which a wedding ceremony was held at a Shinto shrine. Why the surprise? Because today, virtually all weddings have two components: what is called a "religious" ceremony specifically Shinto in character, followed by a very secular reception. This contemporary pattern has only the most tenuous roots in pre-twentieth century Japanese practice, when all weddings were held in the home. The only "religious" portion of those lengthy domestic proceedings, significantly, was the presentation of the new member of the house to the ancestors, whose memorial tablets were displayed in the household's Buddhist altar. No services of a priest of any
description were required; the chief officiants were senior members of the household itself.

Today, however, almost all weddings are held in a commercial wedding-hall, and begin with a Shinto ceremony. The standard establishment has a shrine-room in which a Shinto priest (trained and certified by a shrine, but not necessarily of a priestly family) is assisted by two miko (shrine-maidens). These women are in fact office workers with no other religious functions to perform, who receive no training other than that given them by the management of the wedding-hall. The shrine-room contains an altar and a standard array of ritual paraphernalia. Indeed, most of the rites performed in this room are drawn directly from past traditions, but their juxtaposition is strictly contemporary. Some elements are an engaging mix of old and new, such as the reading of the wedding vows by the groom alone. The vows themselves are very new, having no precedent in the past. That the bride is required only to acquiesce in them silently is tribute to the persistence of strong cultural predispositions concerning gender-linked propriety. The rites conclude with a double-ring ceremony, recently introduced. The rings are borne to the couple by one of the shrine-maidens in full Shinto regalia. The ceremony completed, what today is the typical wedding party moves on through the photographer's studio into the banquet hall. There, inventiveness has made of the secular ceremony what has been aptly described as a production of which the couple are the stars.

Now, there can be no doubt that the rituals performed at weddings and funerals contain many of the core symbols, and are designed to embody some of the most deeply held convictions, of the members of any society. It is a commonplace, however, to remark that things change rather rapidly in Japan, even things so basic—so fundamental. We may set aside the question as to whether they really do change more rapidly in Japan than in other countries, and note only that not only foreigners appear to think so. When my student Walter Edwards mentioned to a Japanese sociologist that he proposed to study weddings by working in an urban wedding-hall, the sociologist advised him to find instead a remote village where, he said, they still might have real weddings, in the home.

Advice of this kind is unambiguous. Those who seek the real Japan must always look to the past or in places where remnants of
the past may still survive. What we see all around us, therefore, is dismissed as less Japanese or more Western than it used to be, or—hardest judgment of all—spurious. But I think the observer is too easily distracted by what appear to be glaring inconsistencies (to which the Japanese may be particularly prone, or which simply may leap more readily to the eye in Japan). It is hard to ignore, I would confess, such apparent anomalies as the double-ring ceremony presided over by a Shinto shrine-maiden, the young Buddhist nun with her hula hoop, or the chorus line in spangled tights kicking its way through a routine before the great bronze image of the Cosmic Buddha at Nara's Tōdaiji—in celebration of the 1200th anniversary of the temple's construction!

But all this is mere fluff, borne past our fixed vantage-point on winds so powerful and currents so deep that we find it difficult to focus on them. The wedding ceremony, carefully observed, remains as it has always been a great deal more than the product of commercial invention. In post-war Japan, it is true, it no longer centers on the household, nor is it any longer held in the home, near the hearth and in the presence of the ancestors. Instead, it has come to center on the couple who, it is constantly reiterated during the rites, are destined to found a family and become parents, and thus full-fledged members of society. To be sure, part of it is all gussied up in the Shinto idiom and elaborated by entrepreneurs who have devised ingenious ways to make its secular rites ever more costly. But imbedded in it, as in all other forms of the Japanese wedding of the recent past, are principles and cultural values that, taken together, represent a remarkably consistent and conservative view of what marriage entails. Some of what it entails is affirmation of gender inequality, males being deemed superior to females in every respect save in the domestic realm; complete interdependence of husband and wife, achieved through faithful exercise of their mutually complementary abilities; and a host of indicators—symbolic, structural, rhetorical—that deny autonomy to the individual and stress the ultimately social nature of the person.16

I began with Hobsbawm's observation that Japan's modernization may well represent a uniquely successful blend of old orderings and judicious invention of tradition. Recent events in that country provide an opportunity to explore what some of the contemporary consequences of that blend might be. The death of
an emperor, almost by definition a momentous event, is likely to set in motion forces of equal moment. Earlier this year, the death of the Shōwa emperor precipitated heated debate over two major issues raised by the necessity to conduct the first imperial funeral in 62 years. The issues are inextricably intertwined: Should he be given what was termed a “traditional Shinto funeral” in accordance with the ancient practices of the Imperial Family, and if so, who should pay for it? For many Japanese, the answers were determined by the provision of the postwar constitution clearly separating church and state. Given that the deceased emperor, like his father and grandfather before him, in effect had been the high priest of State Shinto for the first 20 years of his reign at least, they argued that the state could now neither sponsor nor pay for a “traditional Shinto imperial funeral.”

The government eventually arrived at an uneasy compromise, saying that it wished to observe immemorial tradition, preserve the constitution, and honor the late emperor. It therefore specified which segments of the 14-hour rite were to be considered private (conducted by and for members of the family) and those which were to be considered public (defined as the State Funeral). Thus it came about, for example, that two ceremonies were held at the Shinjuku Gyoen, formerly an imperial garden. They were differentiated by the display of sakaki (Shinto’s sacred plant) and the erection of a torii—the distinctive gateway to spaces defined as sacred in the Shinto view—to mark the private portion, and their removal prior to the state proceedings, at which visiting representatives of foreign governments paid their last respects. The Japan Communist Party boycotted the entire affair; the Japan Socialist Party boycotted the rites designated as private; the Liberal Democrats attended them all. Everything went off without a hitch and the emperor was entombed at night—as is the ancient custom—near the mausolea of his parents at Hachiōji.

I find it remarkable that the multiple ironies of this debate and its uneasy resolution have drawn so little attention. Forgive me if I insert here the barest outline of relevant Japanese history. Legend has it that the present imperial line—the only dynasty Japan has ever had—was founded in 660 BC by Jimmu, descendant of the Sun Goddess. In the 8th century AD, historical Japan emerges clearly with the building of the capital city of Nara, its brief removal to Nagaoka, and its final location at what is now
called Kyoto. The court converted to Buddhism early and the blending of that religion with indigenous Shinto proceeded uninterruped for a thousand years. Imperial power waned in the 11th and 12th centuries, and the first of the military hegemons established the Kamakura shogunate at the close of the 12th century. Successive shogunal houses ruled Japan for the next 700 years, but no usurper ever laid claim to the throne. Thus, the Imperial Court remained at Kyoto through the entire period, which ended only when the Tokugawa shogunate was brought down by an alliance of imperial loyalists. Members of the warrior class themselves, they brought about what is called the Meiji Restoration in 1868.

The story that follows will involve four emperors: Kōmei (who died in 1867), Meiji (1912), Taishō (1926) and Shōwa (1989). In discussing the recent funeral with Japanese friends and colleagues, I encountered few who knew that the first officially Shinto imperial funeral was that of Taishō—father of Shōwa—in 1926. Shortly before Taishō's death, the Imperial Mortuary Rites Law (Kōshitsu sōgi rei) has been passed, with the explicit aim of reviving the "ancient rites" of pre-Buddhist times. Even fewer knew that the tomb of Shōwa himself is built in a style revived by his great-grandfather Kōmei only a little over a century ago.

Wittman Ah Sing asked, how many times does something have to be done for it to be a tradition? The answer seems to be—at least once, possibly twice.

How did it happen—and who made it happen—that contemporary Japanese could be so thoroughly uninformed about the traditional mortuary rites of a dynasty that counts the current emperor the 125th in the line? Once again, a bit of background is required. Almost everyone says that most Japanese today practice both Shinto and Buddhism, for the simple reason that there is a division of labor between the two—weddings are performed by Shinto priests in shrines and births are announced there to the deities; funerals are performed by Buddhist priests in the home or in temples or in mortuary chapels. Thus, whether a person is "religious" or not, priests of both kinds will be called on to officiate at their respective rites—Shinto having to do with life, Buddhism with death.

The new Meiji government, at the end of the 19th century, would have had it otherwise, but failed in its efforts at reform.
What the Meiji oligarchs had in mind was the creation of a state religion (called *kokka shintō*) whose high priest would be the emperor himself. All rites—public and private—henceforth would be Shinto. These imperial loyalists began at the top, instituting a program designed to rid the Imperial institution itself of all alien accretions and restore Imperial Rule to the pristine state of its legendary founding by the first emperor in 660 BC. As legends are notoriously poorly documented, they had to rely on a much later legal code (the *Taihōryō* of 701 AD) for a model for imperial government. In that code they found a Department of Shinto, which they reestablished in 1868, and in April of that year, the Grand Council of State issued an edict effectively disestablishing Buddhism. It required all shrines to purify themselves by discarding all Buddhist images and objects. Further, it ordered all temples to eliminate any Shinto names given to Buddhist images; all shrines were to eliminate Buddhist names given Shinto deities at any time in the past.

Having purified the shrines of Buddhist influence, the government set about purifying the Imperial Palace as well. During the centuries when Buddhism had been the official religion of the court, a room in the palace had contained altars bearing the memorial tablets of the ancestors of the household. It follows that the funerals and memorial rites of the Imperial Family were Buddhist as well. Since the eighth century, members of the Imperial Family had been cremated in accordance with Buddhist practice as observed by the elite, but anathema to the Shinto worldview.

In pursuit of its aim, then, the government had built on the palace grounds a Shinto place of worship at which the deified Imperial Ancestors—now *kami* (Shinto deities) rather than Buddhist *hotoke*—were to be worshiped by the emperor himself. The first ceremony of this kind was scheduled for February 1, 1870, New Year’s Day by the calendar then in use. The following year, all Buddhist objects were removed from the palace, and a few months later it was announced that Buddhist ceremonies no longer would be commissioned by the court. It marked a major rupture with traditional practice of almost a millenium. The unity of worship and government had been achieved.

But even before all this had got under way—indeed, even before the fall of the Tokugawa—another train of events had
been set in motion that was to converge with the plans for a state religion. I do not know why the Kōmei emperor became interested in the graves of his ancestors, but he did. In 1853, perhaps under the influence of the Nativist Scholars who had long urged purification of the Imperial institution, Kōmei asked the Kyoto agent of the Tokugawa shogunate to see to the repair of a number of Imperial Mausolea, including that of the first, albeit legendary Jimmu. Restoration—perhaps revival is the better term—was in the air, and the Tokugawa complied. The court at once reestablished the ancient office of Caretaker of the Mausolea. But there was a problem—and it was potentially a very embarrassing one. More than 600 years had passed since any agency had taken responsibility for the care of imperial graves. The fact of the matter was that even the location of many of them was unknown. Nonetheless, the authorities set about attempting to find them all.

And then in 1867, Kōmei died. The graves of his 14 predecessors, all marked by Buddhist stupas, lie within the compound of the Sennyū-ji on the outskirts of Kyoto. Separated from them, but still on the temple grounds, is the tomb of Kōmei—the first in the Shinto style to be constructed in centuries. This major rupture with prevailing tradition was compounded by the decision to entomb rather than create—on the grounds that it was sacrilege to disfigure the kyoku-tai, a term reserved exclusively to refer to the bodies of emperors.

Clearing shrines and palaces of Buddhist objects; identifying the tombs of past emperors, even the mythological ones; establishing Shinto rites where it suited their purposes—all these steps could be taken successfully with little difficulty compared to the last remaining barrier. For the separation of Buddhism and Shinto—which, you will recall, entailed the disestablishment of the former—left with them a problem so serious that it has not been resolved satisfactorily to this day. The problem, put simply, is that a Shinto funeral is a contradiction in terms. Shinto abhors pollution in any form—that is virtually its only tenet—and along with blood and excreta, the corpse is held to be among the most ritually polluting objects in nature. Early in the Meiji period, it appears, there was already some concern about what to do in the event of an Imperial death. How was the newly Shintoized Impe-
rial Household to deal with death and the pollution resulting from it?

The problem was this. During the period of government-supported Buddhist dominance, even the priests of Shinto had been given Buddhist funerals. Over the years, however, many Shinto priestly families and those of high-ranking warrior families had petitioned for the right to choose their own ritual. So it came about that by the early 19th century, these households observed purely Shinto rites. But their funerals were almost pure invention, modeled closely on the Buddhist prototype, as far as one can tell. The numerology is different, as we shall see, but the patterns are remarkably similar.

Throughout the reign of the Meiji emperor, the Imperial Household continued to serve as examplar of the practice of what was called “pure Shinto,” representing the perfect fusion of rites and government. The funerals of members of the royal family, from 1868 on therefore, were conducted in a remarkable syncretic fusion of diverse practices, but called Shinto. We have a detailed account of one of these—that of Prince Arisugawa in 1895—left by the English wife of the Vice Grand Master of Ceremonies Sannomiya. In many particulars it parallels that of the Shōwa emperor, just concluded, but the interment took place in the precincts of the great Buddhist temple Gokokuji, where the families of all the princes of the blood still maintain gravesites. The Baroness Sannomiya nonetheless refers to it as a “pure Shinto” rite: what she describes is, in fact, a blend of ancient court practice, Buddhist elements—both intact and transmuted—and European royal usage of the 19th century.

And so we come to the heart of the matter—to the “traditional Shinto funeral of the Imperial Household”—anathema to many, who see in it a reversion to the totally discredited past—an unwelcome reminder of the heyday of Japanese authoritarianism and imperial conquest. In that light, some quite remarkable features of the ceremonies deserve brief comment before I conclude.

The emperor died on January 7. The funeral was held on February 24. Quick calculation shows that 49 days had elapsed. It is not a random number nor is it merely coincidence that in Buddhist mortuary rites as practiced throughout Japan, seven ceremonies are held immediately following a death—one on each
successive seventh day. On the 49th, the memorial tablet for the deceased, now somewhat relieved of the contamination of death, is placed with those already in the household altar. Standard Shinto practice, among the few who observe it, is to mark that transition over a period of 50 days—5 tenth-day ceremonies—at the conclusion of which the tablet is raised.

At the private portion of the ceremonies at the Shinjuku Gyoen, the offerings of food and textiles were preceded by the performance of a lament called Ruika. The style is that of court music originally derived from that of T’ang China, but as it happens this dirge was composed for the funeral of the Meiji emperor in 1912. Those who heard it, thinking that it comes directly out of the mists of ancient Japanese history—for so it sounds—would have no way of knowing precisely in what sense the performance is traditional.

And what of the offerings? They include many quite predictable items, appropriate to the vegetarian sensibilities of Buddhism and the Shinto preoccupation with purity alike—washed rice, glutinous rice cakes, sake, seaweed, vegetables and fruits, and sweets. But among the 21 trays of offerings were some bearing uncooked fish and fowl—common enough in ordinary Shinto ritual, but quite astonishing at a funeral. The absence of the flesh of four-footed animals can be explained either by the specifically Buddhist prohibition against it or by the Shinto abhorrence of blood. We are left, nevertheless, with the puzzle of the fish and fowl. One unconvincing explanation is that, because the emperor was particularly fond of these foods in life, they were offered in an effort to comfort his spirit. Indeed, offering a person’s favorite foods is a very common practice in Buddhist memorial rites, but it usually is done at the household altar or at the grave on the anniversary of death. It is highly unusual to bring them out at the funeral itself, which is an occasion for the symbolic severing of the lingering ties of the recently dead to the living.

There is one more thing. In the cortege and at the altar before the coffin were several officiants, dressed in Shinto priestly robes of somber hue. The chief ritualist, similarly clad, presided over the placement of the offerings, read a brief eulogy in archaic Japanese, and assisted members of the royal family as they passed through the torii to pay their last respects. But the robes of Shinto priest are white, which is also the color of mourning. In point of
fact, so great is the abhorrence of the pollution of death that not one of these men was a Shinto priest—all were surrogates. The rites were conducted by palace chamberlains (jijū) and the coffin borne by members of the Imperial Guard. To that extent, what we have is a kind of family affair, for the emperor's obsequies are conducted almost exclusively by those who served him directly in life. Viewed in this light, the proceedings are entirely consistent with a wide range of Japanese ritual occasions that involve kin but dispense with the services of religious specialists, just as weddings once did. Bear in mind, however, that the Imperial Household as repository of Shinto traditionalism and exemplar of ancient Japanese cultural practice is a creation of the government, which began to design it only a little over a century ago.

Let there be no mistake, however. Much of the pomp, costumes, and paraphernalia of Shōwa's funeral do come directly from the earliest periods of Japan's court rituals, and are well attested in archival sources. The palanquin in which the coffin is carried, the design of the banners, halberds and shields carried in the procession, the style of footwear borne by an attendant for the use of his spirit—all are very old forms associated with the royal family and the nobility. So is the practice of depositing grave-goods in the tomb before it is sealed. These included things Shōwa had used in daily life and objects of which he had been especially fond. I cannot resist mentioning, for I think this audience will find the item particularly arresting, that he had almost completed the revision of another monograph on marine biology. It was so close to publication, in fact, that the galley proofs could be placed in the tomb as well. Now, all these mortuary traditions of the court spring from Chinese sources. Sanctified as Japanese imperial practice by over a millennium of usage there, they have long since vanished from their country of origin.

Conclusion

How then can we possibly think about Japanese culture as anything but a moving target? Given what we now know about ordinary weddings and extraordinary funerals, shall we dismiss both as spurious because they are not old or not indigenous? Surely not. As I have remarked already, neither occurs in any other society, so at some fundamental level they both must em-
body and reflect Japanese cultural constructs and predispositions.

Ah, comes the rebuttal, but these weddings are not real Japanese ones. Real weddings, city folk tell us, are to be found only in the remote countryside. But I was told by the villagers among whom I lived 40 years ago on Shikoku that the weddings they invited me to were very different from the way they used to be. John and Ella Embree heard the same thing in rural Kyushu from the villagers they lived among in the mid-1930s. And so, surely, back further and further in time.

The documentation on funerals reveals that they have an equally varied history. Like weddings, they exhibit no marked tendency to stasis of form, but as the substitution of palace chamberlains for priests in the imperial rites shows, powerful cultural understandings still profoundly affect substance. At some point—in about a year, in fact—real priests will perform rites to honor the deified spirit of the Shōwa emperor, but only because sufficient time has passed to bring about the cleansing of his spirit of the lingering pollution of its association with his corpse.

What these two instances of fluidity suggest is that we must avoid the trap of thinking of "a culture" as an immutable set of practices, beliefs and meanings. In an earlier anthropological discourse, it was common to speak of "Zuni culture," "Zande culture," and even "Chinese culture." It was a more comfortable world then, in which entities could be thought of as so self-contained that we could speak of "cultures coming into contact." Today, I would suggest, the concept of culture has changed so radically—and perhaps the nature of the world as well—that the metaphor of the moving target is quite apt.

That is to say that the culture of the Japanese in 1989 is like that of 1889 in some ways, but obviously different in others. Whether or not the elements of the culture of the Japanese today (or a century ago, for that matter) are newly acquired items, traditions of long standing, or hybrids of highly diverse origins is of no real moment. Let me offer just one favorite example of what I mean. In recent years it has become a tradition in Japan to schedule performances of Beethoven's Ninth Symphony to usher in the New Year. For contemporary Japanese, it is as much a part of routine observances of the season as are glutinous rice-cakes (kagami mochi), Buddhist temple bells pealing 108 times to ring out...
the old year (*joya no kane*), and all the other festive activities enumerated in countless guidebooks. “But it’s not JAPANESE!” my students protest, when told of the integration of Beethoven’s music into the complex. True enough, but then neither were glutinous rice-cakes or Buddhist temple bells, once upon a time. They are not Japanese in the same sense that Christmas trees and *A Christmas Carol*—or, more appropriately, *The Nutcracker*—are not American.

I do not mean to say that there are no continuities at all, however, for there is something about the moving target that I call “Japanese culture” that commands our attention. At any given time, it represents the current state of assumptions, attitudes, meanings, and ideas (as well as ideology in the non-pejorative sense) of the people of that society. What each generation thinks of as its culture is made up in important ways of what it has been taught and learned. For all the slippage, there will necessarily be overlap and continuity at some very basic levels.

In a hundred years, at the 118th Annual Meeting of the International Society for the Comparative Study of Civilizations, there may well be a panel on “Comparative Perspectives on Ritual.” If there is a paper on funerals or weddings in Japan—and if there is a Japan—I submit that, while there is no imagining what their formal content might be, there is every reason to suppose that they will be regarded as emblematic of Japanese culture—and probably traditional as well.

What I am saying is that we have no choice but to accept other people’s definitions of their culture. I have noted a growing tendency among those who study Japan to adopt a stance toward that society and its people and that can best be characterized as a judgmental jeer. The Japanese, it is said, are abandoning their culture. The reasons for this developing attitude are surely complex, but I find the drift toward condescension extremely disturbing. What Japanese culture are they abandoning? The one that was in place at the end of the Heian period, 800 years ago? The culture of the warrior-class hegemons of the shogunates? The Japanese culture of the 1920s—or 1930s—or of wartime Japan? They are not abandoning their culture: they could not do so if they tried, for culture is a construct made up of all the things people do and say.

I have known actors of the Noh theater, dedicated to the
perfection of their incredibly demanding art, who off-stage delighted in pipe and tweeds, pizza and jazz. Who is to say that the combination of interests is specious or that one is more genuine, the other more spurious? Bruno Taut saw the issue clearly in his book *Houses of People of Japan* where the reader will find the Bauhaus's appreciation of Japanese use of materials, admiration for the proportions of interior spaces, and treatment of all those things about Japanese architecture that astounded the Europeans—and a chapter on kitsch. For Taut saw that the sophistication of the Katsura Imperial Villa of the 16th century and the excesses of ornamentation in country inns of his day were equally expressions of Japanese taste and therefore equally cultural data. 

Who is to say that Japanese culture today is more or less authentic than it ever was? Not, I think, any member of a society that has allowed “Rudolph, The Red-nosed Reindeer” to displace “Silent Night” in the children’s Christmas concert. But, of course, one of these is American, the other not—clearly the problem of authenticity is a knotty one. Ah, but now it is I who am being judgmental, jeering at my own culture. That I do so surely can easily be explained. It is because for each successive senior generation in all societies, the pace at which the target moves appears to accelerate, and its very shape to change as it passes out of our control and into the hands of others.

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NOTES

17. See Hori and Toda 1956, from which most of the following information on these policies and their implementation came.
19. For details, see Mainichi shinbun sha 1989. Much of my information on the funeral is gleaned from the many hours of television programming taped for me by Susan Klein and Karen Brazell.
20. Sannomiya 1896, lists fish, birds, vegetables, fruit, cakes, rice and sake. This suggests that the favorite foods thesis is off the mark.
21. From several accounts (see footnote 19) it appears that favorite foods were offered the spirit of the deceased, for there are references to the “five dishes” placed at the coffin in the palace before it was removed for the ceremonies conducted at Shinjuku Gyoen.

SOURCES CITED


