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Ancestor Worship in Contemporary Japan

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Abstract

This article examines the transformation of ancestor worship in the context of socio-political and religious conditions and identifies the characteristics of worship in contemporary Japanese society and the changes in the form of practices and functions of this worship occurring today.

Ancestor worship is not a phenomenon unique to traditional societies: in the 21st century Japan, ancestor worship rituals are practiced by a large part of the population. After World War II, Japanese veneration practices underwent significant changes. The post-war modernization and urbanization of Japanese society played a major role in these changes, leading to the breakdown of the traditional family system. The concept of ancestor itself changes: the concept of ancestor tends to expand and begins to extend bilaterally (to both the husband and wife lines). There has been a transition from the "obligatory" concept of an ancestor, which includes all deceased ancestors in the direct line of succession regardless of personal preferences, to an "optional" one, which limits the concept of "ancestor" to close relatives whose memories are dear to the descendant. With the change in the concept of the ancestor, the functions of ancestor veneration also undergo a transformation: the former functions of veneration rituals contributed to the stability of the *ie* system, while the new ones consist in relieving psychological tensions between the living and the dead and bringing comfort to particular people. There has been a "privatization" of ancestor veneration, i.e., a growing dominance of personal functions in veneration. Diversification of family types, especially pronounced in the first decades of the 21st century, is also reflected in the rites of ancestor

veneration: alternatives to traditional funerals and new forms of burial and storage of remains are appearing.

The article concludes that, despite changes in the functions and forms of ancestor worship, the place given to the dead in their lives by the living remains invariably important. And the individualization of veneration practices and the undying belief of a large part of the Japanese population in the power of ancestor spirits indicate that the ancestor cult in contemporary Japan is apparently at the next stage of its unfolding, but by no means of extinction.

Keywords: contemporary Japan, Japanese society, ancestor worship, ancestor veneration, funerals, commemoration, death studies.

Introduction

Ancestor worship is a unique cultural phenomenon commonly found not only in traditional societies. We may see that contemporary people of different social tiers, levels of education, and income practice rites and ceremonies associated with ancestor worship. This testifies to the deep foothold of existential and religious need in such practices. This phenomenon of spiritual life in Japan has a complex structure: practices and beliefs connected with the relationship between the dead and the living had existed there before the arrival of Buddhism and, after some transformations, continue to retain their importance.

At present, we have an opportunity of observing modifications of Japanese ancestor veneration brought about by social changes in Japan. The new society allows us to individualize to the maximum our relations with dead relatives and adapt them to our needs. Looking into ancestor veneration rituals as a method of organizing social existence and one of the conditions for public being, we come to the understanding of human social nature. Hence arouses the need for a complex study of ancestor veneration in Japan's contemporary society, identification of its essence and forms of manifestation.

Ancestor Worship as a Phenomenon

Ancestor worship can be found far and wide where primitive or traditional culture and beliefs have survived in this or that form. The ritual practice most evidently associated with this worship is observed among traditional communities in Asia, Africa, North and South America, Oceania and Australia. According to the interpretation provided in the Oxford Encyclopedia of Religion, ancestor worship refers to rites and beliefs directed at dead relatives of those who practice these customs [Hardacre 2005, p. 320]. Ancestor worship in the narrow sense of the word refers to specific actions performed during rites related to propitiation of the dead and/or ministration to their needs.

It should be specially noted that the group of "passed" or "dead" is much wider than the group of "ancestors." Although the division between the two is not always very strict, ancestor worship rites do not usually imply ceremonies for the dead who are not relatives; neither do they include beliefs in the dead per se, without any indication of relationship.

Ancestor worship is closely connected with cosmology and mentality of the practicing community. It also plays a defining role in continuity and inheritance principles within this community. It is important to say that ancestor worship is not regarded as religion as such. It is often practiced along with other religious rites, often being just an element of the religious system. As a rule, there is no formal doctrine or religious concept in ancestor worship; the texts used in some practices are just liturgical guidelines. Priests not related to the relevant group do not usually participate in rites, with rare exception. Attempts to involve outside persons in the worship are not observed either, as practices are limited to an ethnic group [Hardacre 2005, p. 321–322].

There are various opinions among researchers on the expediency of using various terms to refer to ancestor worship practices. This paper will apply the word combination "ancestor worship" as the established English term for the phenomenon as a whole, and "ancestor veneration" as the one specific to Japan.

Choon Sup Bae, an anthropologist from South Korea, who explored ancestor worship in countries of Asia and Africa, provides the following short definition of the "ancestor": this is "a dead person who has influence on their living descendants". A more detailed definition is as follows: "these are transcendent creatures that represent religious, ethical, and institutional values of their community. Their whereabouts and influence are within (and this may vary) the physical and spiritual worlds" [Choon Sup Bae 2007, p. 23].

As has been already mentioned, the words "ancestor" and "dead" cannot be considered synonyms. In order to be regarded as an ancestor, the dead is to have some features and status in the relationship system. These features vary depending on the culture in which worship is practiced. Thus, in Japan, the spirit of a dead person is to go through several particular stages to be considered an ancestor. Some peoples have the opposite rule: a long while after death (about 4–5 generations) the spirits of the dead become "nameless" and lose the ancestor status.

It seems impossible to give a straight answer as to when and how ancestor veneration emerged in Japan. A number of scientists insist that the Japanese borrowed ancestor worship from China; others are sure it is based on original beliefs, and, consequently, rituals of veneration had been practiced long before Buddhism and Confucianism reached the archipelago. At any rate, we can say with some degree of certainty only that there must have existed in the protohistoric period in Japan a whole number of beliefs and practices associated with relations between the living and the dead.

Japanese society of the early historical period apparently consisted of multiple consanguine units called *uji* (氏), in which protective deities *uji-gami* (氏神) were worshipped. It would appear that each *uji* in early Japan had their own ancestor worship and relevant myth; it is only with the appearance of the Yamato imperial family hegemony that these odd worships merged into a single system. As a result of the imperial family *uji* rise, its family deity Amaterasu became the main deity of the entire pantheon.

Some epigraphic monuments of the Kofun period also testify to developed ancestor worship. For example, one of them is a sword from Inariyama (late 5th or the first half of the 6th century) that has listed on it eight generations of ancestors of a certain Wowake-no Omi, who served as the head of swordsmen [Meshcheryakov & Grachev 2010, p. 25].

Whatever was the early form of Japanese ancestor veneration, it is clear that Buddhism, which started its spread in Japan in the 6th century, had a tremendous influence on it. By the time the Japanese adopted Buddhism, the religion had already incorporated the Confucian principle of filial piety and rituals associated with ancestor worship. The family altar *butsudan* was also introduced under the Buddhist influence in 685. Emperor Temmu issued a decree ordering "Buddhist temples shall be built in every house and every province, Buddhist images and sutras shall be placed therein and Buddha shall be worshipped and offerings shall be made" [Nihon Shoki 1997, Vol. 2, p. 257].

The *Nihon Shoki* provides many other records testifying to the importance of conducting rituals related to the dead. For example, back in 606, Empress Suiko decreed to observe ceremonies of the holiday devoted to commemoration of the departed in all Japanese temples. "That year all the Buddhist temples arranged for the first time prayer meetings with gustation of fasting food on the 8th day of the fourth lunar month and the 15th day of the seventh lunar month" [Nihon Shoki, Vol. 2, p. 98] – this is the first evidence of the *Bon* ritual. The concept of the holiday is based on the *Urabon-kyō sutra* that was first mentioned in 659, during the rule of Empress Saimei: "The 15th day [7th lunar month]. Officials received an order for the *Urabon-kyō sutra* to be read in all Buddhist temples of the capital to give thanks to seven generations of ancestors" [Nihon Shoki, Vol. 2, p. 183].

Buddhism and ancestor veneration were inseparable for a millennium. The situation began to change when every family in Japan of the Tokugawa Shogunate period had to establish formal ties with a particular Buddhist temple. The decisive role of political forces in the development of ancestor veneration was played in that period by introduction of *terauke seido* (寺請制度), from *terauke*, the temple

certificate to be received by each Japanese; it proved that they belonged to the sect the teaching of which was allowed. The policy of isolation and persecution of Christians in the first half of the 17th century set off changes in ancestor veneration. To make sure that no Japanese was converted to Christianity, the government demanded that each household should be assigned to a particular Buddhist temple as its parishioners. Tokugawa's early religious registers state that not all family members were to belong to one temple or even one and the same Buddhist sect. It was only later that the entire family as a unit began to serve as a temple parishioner. Tokugawa's administrative restraints created a bond between a family (household) and a temple, cancelling the earlier connection between a temple and an individual.

Prior to the introduction of *terauke seido*, ancestor veneration rituals were conducted by the family itself, without participation of Buddhist priests. Now neither burials nor memorial services could be held without Buddhist priests. The government also entrusted them with a controlling function: now Buddhist priests had to oversee the ardor with which ordinary people carried out not only burial services, but also the *Bon* festival, as well as the spring and autumn equinox ceremonies. Parishioners began to perceive the temple as the place where ancestors were venerated, and the priest of the local temple as the main conductor of ancestor veneration ceremonies. These ceremonies served as virtually the only source of Buddhist clergy's income and the situation has not changed much since that time. Ancestor veneration in the Meiji era was closely connected with the political ideology of the time, primarily with the *kokutai* concept (国体). The ideological basis of the concept was a family system with the central idea of obedience to parents and filial piety. The sense of duty to one's family and ancestors was extended to the national scale. Filial piety and loyalty to the Emperor merged into an inseparable whole. From 1903, the Meiji Ministry of Education fully undertook compilation, publication, and dissemination of textbooks for primary schools. The slogan "Venerate your Ancestors!" (祖先を尊べ, *sosen wo tattobe*) was introduced into public education, while special sections devoted to this subject appeared in school textbooks on ethics

[Morioka 1990, p. 63]. American anthropologist Robert Smith, the author of the fundamental work *Ancestor Veneration in Contemporary Japan* (1974), cites an excerpt from a history textbook used until 1920, where the essence of relations between the Emperor and his subjects was explained to schoolchildren: "Amaterasu-Ōmikami is the ancestor not only of the Emperor's family but also of all the Japanese. If we begin to clarify our genealogy, the largest share [of us] will appear to be Imperial Family descendants. <...> Our relations with the Imperial Family are based on the debt repayment in the form of gratitude to our ancestors [Smith 1974, p. 31–32].

The Meiji government that adopted Shinto as a national religion made attempts to replace Buddhist burials and cremation by a Shinto ceremony during the period of suppression of Buddhism. Nevertheless, Shinto burials did not gain credence among the people: most Japanese of that time continued holding funerals and burying their relatives in line with Buddhist traditions [Shimada 2022, p. 81–84].

In 1898, the Meiji Civil Code took effect. The government tried to stipulate relations within the family law so that they would best reflect patriarchal relations in the State per se, this "macro family" with the Emperor-"father" at the head. The basis for the family law was the family concept named *ie seido* (家制度). The power of the family head together with the family belongings is inherited by the eldest son (Article 970). The Code also provides for the family head inheriting the records about the family origin and family members' burial sites (Article 987) [The Civil Code of Japan 1898, p. 262]. A family, as per Civil Code, was conceived as an integral whole, a minimal social cell, and its members were to sacrifice their personal wishes and accept all decisions of the family head.

The state of affairs changed only after World War II. The new Civil Code of 1947 no longer considered a family as a social unit but focused on a particular individual. Abolition of the family system brought about changes in practicing ancestor veneration rituals.

Ancestor Concept in the *Ie* Traditional Family System

Lyudmila M. Yermakova, one of the leading Russian researchers of Japanese antiquity, notes that the notion of an ancestor per se as well as the forms of veneration thereof prove to be dependent "on the relation of local cults and Buddhist beliefs at the given time and in the given place, as well as on the system of kinship accepted "here and now," on the family structure and many other things" [Ermakova 2002, p. 44]. We will consider ancestor veneration in the context of the *ie* traditional family system.

There is no complete equivalent in the Russian language to the term *ie* (家); it is usually translated as home or family. Japanese sociologist Morioka characterizes *ie* as a social institute not interrupted in the male line over many generations [Morioka 1984, p. 202]. Continuity is to be regarded as one of the main qualities of *ie*. It should also be stated that *ie* includes all family members: the ancestors who have already passed away but have not yet been forgotten and even descendants not yet born. Middle and younger sons who mature and start families leave the *ie* system and become heads of family offshoots (分家, *bunke*).

As to who could be regarded as an ancestor in traditional Japan, the *Minzokugaku Jiten folklore dictionary* (民俗学辞典) says that the notion of an ancestor (先祖, *senzo*) in the *ie* context denotes one particular spirit or a group of spirits of the dead connected with descendants through the direct line of descent; this notion is based on the ties between parents and children, which, in their turn, proceed from the shared bloodline or adoption [Tokumaru 2014, p. 508].

Thus, the traditional patriarchal family system (家父長制, *kafuchōsei*), where the eldest son enjoys inheritance privileges (the majorat), considers the spirits of the diseased family heads in each generation and their spouses as ancestors. This notion is perceived wider in nuclear families and extends bilaterally to the husband's and wife's line. Drawing a line between an ancestor and simply a deceased

person, Morioka notes that “every ancestor is dead, but not every dead person is an ancestor” [Morioka 1990, p. 67]. An ancestor’s descendants hold services (供養, *kuyō*) to commemorate him. A dead person becomes an ancestor through these services. Therefore, if a dead person has no descendants, he is unable to become an ancestor [Morioka 1990, p. 67].

A dead person who is unable to become an ancestor in the absence of descendants who will hold relevant posthumous rites becomes a *muenbotoke* 無縁仏 (from 無縁, *muen* – “a dead person having no relatives, abandoned”). According to Japanese folk beliefs, *muenbotoke* is a cause for troubles, hardships, and diseases. In case of a relative’s death, his family members try to make sure all posthumous rites and burial services are conducted as they fear the above-mentioned misfortunes. Morioka tells a story of a *muenbotoke* mass emergence in the Sengoku period, when many people died in battles and in other violent ways. Many of them had no relatives who could conduct a relevant burial service, which gave rise to a countless number of *muenbotoke* [Morioka 1990, p. 67]. The fear of *muenbotoke* comes from the belief in *mitama* or *goryō* 御霊, where epidemics and natural disasters are an evil sent by the souls of enemies or people who died a “bad death”; it is necessary to relieve these souls in order to avoid troubles. It is necessary to hold a funeral service for them to relieve and calm down the *goryō*.

There are many discrepancies between Japanese ancestor worship researchers as to what rites precisely belong to this category. For example, the *Minzokugaku Jiten* enumerates the following rites (according to [Tokumaru 2014, p. 509]):

- burial of a particular dead family member;
- commemoration services for a particular dead family member;
- purification of ritual death uncleanness and other purification ceremonies;
- memorial services for spirits of the dead (死者供養, *shisha kuyō*);
- rites with the purpose of helping the spirit of the dead to merge with the host of ancestor spirits;

– annual festivities of ancestor veneration, such as *Bon* and *Higan*;
– veneration of family deities as ancestors;
– veneration of home deities (屋敷神, *yashikigami*), forest deities (森神, *morigami*), etc. (It is still disputable whether home, forest, and family deities could be referred to as spirits of ancestors);
– veneration of a particular ancestor out of fear for their (the ancestor's) rage in order to appease and pacify them.

Morioka also refuses to include memorial services (供養, *kuyō*) for a particular dead person into the set of these ceremonies [Morioka 1990, p. 66]. L. M. Ermakova writes the following to this effect: "In fact, various cultural phenomena can be attributed to ancestor worship or its traces – from the burial service to, in the extreme case, performance of testamentary prescriptions, or even cultural continuity" [Ermakova 2002, p. 43].

This article will consider the following rites:

1) memorial services for a particular dead person;
2) daily rites for a group of ancestors;
3) annual festivities for veneration of [all] ancestors.

A dead person does not obtain the status of an ancestor right after their death; this process consists of three stages: from the spirit of a dead person (死霊, *shirei*) to what is called the spirit of an ancestor (祖霊, *sorei*). Robert Smith describes these stages in the following way:

1. The first 49 days after a person died are regarded as the period of uncertainty for the dead person. During these days, *ihai*, a memorial plaque with their name is placed separately in the front part of the *butsudan*.

2. On the 49th day, the plaque is moved inside the *butsudan* to other *ihai*. As soon as this happens, the soul is believed to have passed on to the next stage and may be regarded as *niisenzo* (新先祖), i.e., a new ancestor. The spirit can remain at this stage for many years (most frequently for 33 or 50) until it reaches the final stage.

3. On the 33th or 50th anniversary of death (弔い上げ, *tomuraiage*) the spirit loses its individuality and joins the super-individual, total

group of ancestors from prior generations. The spirit becomes a full-fledged *sorei* (ancestor's spirit) and does not undergo any changes afterwards. The individual plaque at this stage is removed from the altar and placed inside the *butsudan*, adding to the plaques symbolizing the nameless group of family ancestors from different generations [Smith 1974, p. 40–41].

The rites focused on the group of dead ancestors differ from memorial services for a particular dead person (法事, *hōji*), as the rites are usually held daily and ancestors are not regarded as separate persons. Daily rites are considered to be internal family ceremonies, and a Buddhist monk's presence is not required. These rituals as well as presentations of offerings placed on the *butsudan* are usually conducted in the morning and evening time, but some families hold them only once a day. Rituals are normally held before the family sit down at the table. They light incenses and put offerings such as rice, tea, and water onto the *butsudan*. These daily rituals include prayers, talks to ancestors, reports made to them on the family's current affairs. The most widespread form of participation in the ritual is a short formal bow with hands folded in front. Any member of the family can use *butsudan* for addressing ancestors at any time of the day.

The major calendar holidays closely associated with ancestor worship in Japan are *O-bon*, New Year, and *Higan*, which is held twice a year on the spring and autumn equinox days.

O-Bon (お盆). Bon in contemporary Japan is one of the most important Buddhist holidays. In most regions, it is held on August 13–15, i.e., in the middle of the 7th month of the lunar calendar. Researchers of Japanese religions often point out the dual character of the holiday. It may be explained by the imposition of Buddhist traditions on some archaic rites that were conducted on the islands in pre-Buddhist Japan and apparently were aimed at ritual communication with ancestors. The Buddhist aspect of this holiday includes several ideologemes, including the legend of how Buddha's disciple Mokuren saved his mother from hell with the help of offerings.

Bon has not lost its importance in contemporary Japan: even now it is a major holiday associated with ancestor veneration. L. M. Ermakova calls it the central rite not only in the sphere of ancestor worship, but, probably, one of the central culture-shaping rites in contemporary Japan [Ermakova 2002, p. 48]. Ancestors return to the house of their descendants from the other world for the time of the holiday. It is believed that they simply stay among their family members at this time as it was when they were alive. These days provide family members with an opportunity of feeling the spiritual bond with their ancestors and between themselves.

New Year (お正月, *oshōgatsu*). The New Year in contemporary Japan is not perceived as a holiday associated with ancestor veneration. Nevertheless, some researchers believe that the New Year and summer festival of ancestor spirits (on which *Bon* was superimposed later) were closely connected in pre-Buddhist Japan. Yanagita Kunio, the founder of Japanese ethnography, was the first to express this idea. He asserted that these holidays, being exactly six months apart from each other, represented one cycle, and both were devoted to meeting ancestor spirits returning to the world of the living [Smith 1974, p. 18–19].

Higan (彼岸). *Higan* rites, performed throughout the week including the days of spring equinox (春分の日, *shumbun-no hi*) and autumn equinox (秋分の日, *shūbun-no hi*), are fully concentrated on ancestor veneration. The name *Higan*, meaning "the other shore," refers to Buddhist perceptions that our world and the next one are divided by a river filled with suffering and illusions, and only the one who can overcome those may reach the other bank. It is customary during *Higan* in contemporary Japan to put graves in order, decorate them with flowers, leave edible offerings, light incenses, and read sutras.

The *ie* system, like other social institutes, gradually changed over the century following the Meiji restoration. The reforms implemented after World War II and in many respects initiated by the Occupation authorities are most remarkable: the *ie* system underwent greater

changes in the first postwar decade than in the entire preceding century. The family system's changes brought about a shift in ancestor veneration practices.

The new Constitution of Japan came into effect in 1947. Its Article 14 stipulated equality of all people before the law, forbidding any "political, social and economic" discrimination "regardless of race, confession, gender, social status and origin". The cornerstone of the revised Civil Code, based on the 1947 Constitution, is an individual, not *ie*. Permission of the family head is no longer required for marriage (see Article 731 of the Civil Code). Assets earned during marriage belong to each of the partners and not solely to the husband (Article 762, Section 1); the husband no longer disposes of the wife's property. The notion of the *ie* family head stipulated by law no longer exists. The family assets are no longer inherited by the eldest son exclusively: all children of the family have equal right to them (Article 900, Paragraph 4).

The postwar Constitution and alterations in the Civil Code, along with modernization and urbanization of Japan's society, played their role in the dissolution of the traditional Japanese family. In the early 1960s, the share of those who advocated the equal division of parental assets amounted already to 50 percent, and only an insignificant minority continued insisting on the necessity of bequeathing the entire property to the future *ie* family head. Over 50 percent of the respondents do not consider it necessary to adopt a child in case the family does not have their own children to continue the line. The idea of *ie* mandatory continuity is becoming less and less popular [Morioka 1984, p. 204].

Nuclear families gained popularity in Japan after the war. A nuclear family consists of spouses and children or only spouses, with relations between spouses rather than between parents and children coming to the forefront. As we see, this type of family is opposed to the traditional Japanese extended family *ie*, where the most important element was continuity of generations. Morioka states that, in postwar Japan, even families consisting of several generations of spouses (for example, three generations living together) look more like two nuclear families

living under the same roof, and each of them has their own household [Morioka 1984, p. 205].

Drastic changes in the *ie* system, that can be called virtually a disintegration of the traditional family, eventually depleted ancestor veneration as well. Nevertheless, public opinion surveys conducted in the 1960s and 1980s showed that decline of involvement in ancestor veneration rites was much less than expected by researchers who studied this problem: from 77 in 1953 to 72 percent in 1978 [Morioka 1984, p. 205]. It was probably due to changes in the concept of the word "ancestor," as a new understanding of who could be regarded an ancestor, free from the *ie* system pressure, emerged in the first postwar decades.

As mentioned above, the traditional patriarchal family considers dead family heads in each generation and their spouses ancestors. We will see further that in nuclear families, which came to domineer in postwar Japan, the notion of an ancestor strives for extension and spreads bilaterally: for the husband's line as well as for the wife's one.

In the 1970s and 1980s, S. Yonemura and R. J. Smith conducted large-scale field studies of ancestor veneration. The data obtained by Yonemura in the Okayama prefecture in 1974–1975 prove that over 70 percent of the respondents hold on to the traditional interpretation of the notion of an "ancestor": they see them as a family founder, the one who headed the family from the time of its foundation, the ancestor of the main family branch. Nevertheless, for the remaining 30 percent, ancestors are either all dead people belonging to the family, or all dead family members whose memory was preserved with the help of *butsudan*, or dead parents, etc. Blood affinity for these 30 percent of the respondents was more important than the linear principle of inheritance [Morioka 1984, p. 205].

In 1963, R. Smith studied *ihai*, memorial plaques with the names of the deceased, in Tokyo, Kyoto, and Osaka, as well as in rural families from Iwate, Mie, and Kagawa. According to his research, 93 percent of *ihai* contained names of ancestors from the main family line (on the husband's side), while plaques with names of ancestors outside the

main family line, including those on the wife's side, amounted to some 6 percent of the total number. As the share of plaques not related to the main family line in cities was higher than in rural areas, Smith concluded that plaques with dead relatives outside the main family line represent a recent tendency – they maintain ancestor worship focusing on the contemporary family rather than *ie* [Smith 1974, p. 152–186].

Morioka explains these changes by transition from the "mandatory" concept of an ancestor, including all the dead in the direct line of inheritance regardless of personal preferences, to the "optional" one, i.e., limiting the notion of an "ancestor" to close relatives the memory of whom is dear to the descendant [Morioka 1984, p. 206].

Ancestor veneration functions undergo significant adjustments along with the changes in the ancestor concept. Initially, ancestor worship functions were social: social status legitimation (ceremonial attention to ancestors proves that the current family head inherited their social status after their ancestors legally), or increased motivation towards providing for future generations. Prior functions of ancestor veneration rituals promoted *ie* stability, while new functions imply removing psychological tension in relations between the living and the dead through positive remembrances and providing consolation to particular people.

As we remember, ancestor veneration ceremonies within the house are usually conducted before the Buddhist altar. Morioka gives the following statistics: according to comparative studies conducted in three regions in 1956–1966, the share of families that still had a *butsudan* was 92 percent in agricultural communities of the Yamaguchi prefecture, 69 percent in the Tokyo business quarters, and 43 percent in the Tokyo areas inhabited by "white collars." Regardless of where the family resided, nearly 100 percent of extended families still had a *butsudan*. As for nuclear families in rural areas, 80 percent of them had a *butsudan*, while this figure did not exceed 31 percent in the districts where "white collars" resided. Morioka made repeated studies (only in Tokyo this time) in 1967, which showed that nearly 100 percent of

extended families had a *butsudan* installed in the house. As for the houses inhabited by nuclear families, a *butsudan* could be found twice as rare there [Morioka 1984, p. 207]. The lowest number of *butsudan* was recorded in salaried employees' nuclear families. As the number of such families evidently grew in postwar Japan, the total share of families with *butsudan* decreased. By 1981, according to a survey made by the *Asahi* newspaper, only 63 percent of the families had a *butsudan* installed in their house [Morioka 1984, p. 208].

In 1964–1965, another comparative survey was conducted: pupils in the senior grades of elementary school were asked questions as to whether older members of their families held ancestor veneration ceremonies. The results were as follows: only 26 percent of nuclear families practiced ancestor veneration rituals, while 48 percent of all those surveyed had a *butsudan* at home; as for extended families, 66 percent practiced those rituals and 97 percent had a *butsudan*. According to the data obtained, nearly 30 percent of families having a *butsudan* do not practice ancestor veneration rituals, thus, in fact, neglecting their *butsudans* [Morioka 1984, p. 209]. Nevertheless, Morioka warns that no hasty conclusions should be made: it is quite likely that the level of practicing is approximately the same as before, but practices have changed [Morioka 1984, p. 209]. Although the number of families carrying out traditional rites of veneration (*Bon* and *Higan*, daily ceremonies for a group of ancestors; memorial services for a particular dead person) went down in the postwar decades, this does not mean that other practices – less formal but based on personal affection – are not used instead.

Smith confirms this guess: "As the influence of institutionalized Buddhism weakened, families could no longer be so much concerned [about the form of veneration rituals] as they had been before when veneration was formally mandatory. Now families can practice veneration the way they consider proper, in the most effective and suitable form" [Smith 1974, p. 113]. Thus, "privatization," using the term suggested by Morioka, takes place, which is nothing other than growing dominance of personal functions in veneration.

Ancestor Veneration in Our Days

As it has been mentioned above, the second half of the 20th century in Japan saw transition from the traditional patrilineal family system to a nuclear one, i.e., a family of spouses with unmarried children or of spouses alone. Until recently, such families were the majority in Japan. But in 2010, Japanese sociologists announced that, for the first time in the history of the country, the most common type of families became families consisting of only one person (単独世帯, *tandoku setai*).[1] The next population census confirmed the trend towards diversification of family types. Today, four main types can be identified:

– families consisting of one person – 34.6 percent of the total number of families;
– families consisting of spouses (of the same generation) with children (i.e. nuclear families) – 26.9 percent;
– families consisting only of spouses (of the same generation) – 20.1 percent;
– families consisting of a single parent and a child/children – 8.9 percent.[2]

The number of families consisting of one person (they include widowers as well as divorcees and single people who have never been married) has grown by 7 percent since 2000, and the number of nuclear families has decreased by 5 percent for the same period. Inoue Haruyo, a Japanese sociologist who specializes in death sociology, notes that all these changes have led to the situation when nuclear families have been gradually losing the function of a unit of the collective in recent decades: the focus is gradually shifting from

[1] Heisei 22 nen kokusei chōsa. Jinkōtō kihon shūkei kekka. Kekkai-no gaiyō [2010 Population Census. Main Summary Results by Population. Summary of Results]. Sōmushō. P. 30.

[2] Heisei 27 nen kokusei chōsa. Jinnkōtō kihon shūkei kekka. Kekkai-no gaiyō [2015 Population Census. Main Summary Results by Population. Summary of Results]. Sōmushō. P. 37.

the family to an individual [Inoue 2013, p. 123]. This transition could not but find reflection in the rituals associated with ancestor veneration.

In recent decades, more and more city funerals are held according to a "shortened" scheme: traditional funeral rites are ignored, with only cremation remaining mandatory. Inoue calls such funerals "direct" (直葬, *chokusō*) [Inoue 2013, p. 124]. There are many interpretations of a "direct funeral": it can be a funeral to which only the closest relatives and friends of the deceased are invited (even a Buddhist priest may not be present). Others liken direct funerals to "family funerals" (密葬 *missō*, lit. "secret funerals"), that are not even officially announced.

Let us compare traditional and contemporary funerals, using the table below for clarty:

	Traditional ceremony	**Contemporary ceremony**
Present	Family and relatives: acquaintances from community and company	Family, close relatives
Ritual unit	Family members	The deceased
Ceremony	Buddhist	Ceremony in a free form; traditional rituals are reduced

Previously, when the collective evidently domineered over the personal, the presence of local community members, managers of the company where the deceased had worked, and numerous relatives was compulsory at the funeral. Now the Japanese more and more frequently refuse to invite to the funeral those who did not know the deceased well and, therefore, are unable to feel the loss in full. Many contemporary funerals are attended only by people close to the deceased because it was the latter's wish. Time has come when people can not only live, but also die "the way they wish."

With the most widespread family type being a family consisting of a single person, it becomes evident that the traditional form of burial –

placing ashes into a family grave – with its principle of inheritance does not conform to the contemporary Japanese' requirements, and many of these graves may be abandoned in the next few decades and dismantled afterwards due to the absence of heirs of the deceased.

As early as in the 1990s, Japan's funeral industry saw emergence of some new burial forms aimed at replacing traditional graves or, at least, equalling those as one of the available ways of burial. The most popular among them are scattering of ashes (散骨, *sankotsu*), quite widespread in other countries as well, and the phenomenon of *temoto kuyō* (手元供養, lit. "memorial at hand, at home"). At the same time, what is called natural trends or eco-burials give rise to, along with scattering of ashes, burials under trees (樹木葬, *jumokusō*). Below is a more detailed description of the latter two types.

Temoto kuyō. This is a form of burial when a part of the deceased's ashes is separated and kept by relatives in the house as if "always nearby, at hand" – hence the name of the practice. Standard burial urns that were placed into traditional family graves were first used for keeping the remains of the dead at home; by the late 1990s, those had been replaced by special urns. Currently, there exist various forms of keeping remains – from placing them into nice ceramic vessels to inlaying pendants and bracelets with precious stones made from the ashes.

Burial under trees (樹木葬, *jumokusō*). The main feature of burial under trees is the absence of a tombstone: a tree is used as a marker instead; it is planted over the remains of a dead person placed into the earth. Another important element of this type of burial is lack of the need for an heir or descendant: unlike a family grave, *jumokusō* burials do not require regular care, and the "subscription fee" for a place in such a cemetery is independently paid in the vast majority of cases by the Japanese, who are used to starting preparations for their own death in advance, during their lifetime. It should also be noted that burial under trees is much cheaper than arrangement of the traditional family grave, and a certain share of the Japanese undoubtedly chooses

this way as the most affordable. Definitely, the number of cemeteries, fully or partially designated for burials under trees, is still very small: various researchers provide figures from 100 to 200 in 2016. Yet, thanks to their affordability and other advantages, *jumokusō* procedures, along with other new burial methods, have already proven to be a real alternative to family graves in Japan [Avdiushenkova 2018, p. 403–404].

As has been mentioned above, urbanization and the young generation's movement to cities increased the number of families without *butsudan* Buddhist altars at home. Most families had such altars in the past and placed *ihai* memorial plaques on them. Those plaques could symbolize one particular dead family member, as well as a married couple, or an entire generation of the deceased. Some families kept *ihai* despite the absence of *butsudan*. That happened because of the special attitude to plaques: it was believed that they were repositories of the dead's spirit. In contemporary Japan, as Japanese religious studies scholar Suzuki Iwayumi asserts, *ihai* functions are taken over by the deceased's photos [Suzuki 2013, p. 141].

Photos displayed in postwar Japanese houses were limited to portraits of the deceased, while contemporary photos show the dead and the living who may be family members or friends. People tend to display only photos of those who are especially dear to them. Thus, displayed photos serve as an evidence of strong relationship within the family, with relatives, and close friends. Changes in the arrangement of photos go hand in hand with changes in the space in which they are placed. Photos are moved from the walls next to *butsudan* to the habitual home space.

Suzuki notes that, apart from photos of those whom we can recognize as ancestors, the Japanese often display photos of other dead relatives, such as aunts, uncles, grandaunts, and granduncles. As to the places where photos of the dead are placed, nearly 24 percent of the total number of photos were outside the "Buddhist space" – in a cupboard, a wall closet, or a bookshelf – or they were just hung on the walls. Suzuki believes that the living use these "non-Buddhist"

spaces to place photos of the dead they were close with emotionally and not just related to [Suzuki 2013, p. 146–149].

Also of interest is that some 40 percent of photos of the dead placed outside the "Buddhist space" receive offerings similar to those performed on the *butsudan*. The main difference between the "Buddhist" and "non-Buddhist" space is the assortment of offered foods: it is much wider in the "non-Buddhist" space, often including the dead's favorite dishes [Suzuki 2013, p. 150].

With regard to "communication" with the dead, over 60 percent of Suzuki's respondents regularly spoke to them in their everyday life regardless of where the photo was located. Most of the appeals were similar to usual communication that occurs between living people, such as information about events taking place in life, greetings and goodbyes, requests for advice. These actions show the attitude of the living to the dead: they communicate with them in the same way as if the deceased continued to live next to them. About one fourth of the appeals are prayers or requests, for example, about protecting the family from troubles and diseases; descendants also often ask for help with passing exams. We see that this type of appeals is equivalent to resorts to protecting deities, while photos as well as *ihai* appear as an object of the protecting deity's residence (依代, *yorishiro*).

The Japanese actually believe in the magic power of ancestor spirits, which is confirmed by relatively recent public surveys conducted across the country. For example, according to the data of a survey conducted in 2008 by the research bureau of NHK, the largest public-state television and radio broadcasting company in Japan, 47 percent of the respondents, replying to the question "Do you believe in the power of ancestor spirits?", answered "Yes, I do" or "I rather do" [Nishi 2009, p. 71]. It is surprising that, among those who gave a positive answer to this question, the majority are young and middle-aged people: for example, 71 percent of women in the age of 30–39 believe in the power of ancestor spirits. Judging by this data, anthropologists should not worry that ancestor veneration practices are at the stage of extinction in contemporary Japan.

Conclusion

This article has examined the transformation of ancestor worship in the context of socio-political and religious conditions, described the main rituals of worship in traditional Japan, as well as identified peculiarities of worship in contemporary Japanese society and changes in the form of practices and functions of this worship occurring today.

Ancestor worship can be found everywhere and, as we have already mentioned, not only in traditional societies: thus, the rites associated with ancestor veneration are practiced by the bulk of the population in the 21st century Japan. The key conditions for considering a dead relative an ancestor are as follows: a deceased person who had a significant status when alive and has descendants remembering and venerating them through particular rituals.

As for Japanese ancestor worship specifically, we can say with a certain degree of certainty that there was a whole number of beliefs and practices associated with relationships between the living and the dead back in prehistoric Japan. Buddhism, that began to spread in Japan in the 6th century, exerted great influence on the early form of Japanese ancestor veneration. A thousand years later, during the Tokugawa period, the decisive role in the development of ancestor veneration was played by the introduction of the *terauke seido* system, where each household was forcibly assigned to a particular Buddhist temple as parishioners. No ancestor veneration ceremonies could then do without a Buddhist priest's participation. The Meiji era brought about other important changes in ancestor veneration, when the worship of ancestors virtually merged with that of the Emperor, while the traditional patriarchal family concept *ie*, underlying the Meiji family law, raised the importance of ancestor veneration to the national level. The Tokugawa and Meiji periods finalized the traditional forms of ancestor veneration and formulated the concept of an ancestor: the *ie* patriarchal family system, where the eldest son enjoys inheritance privileges and the spirits of the dead family heads in each generation and their spouses are regarded as ancestors.

Japanese veneration practices underwent great changes after World War II. This was brought about by postwar modernization and urbanization of Japanese society; those were followed by disintegration of the traditional family system. The concept of an ancestor changed as well: the ancestor concept strives for extension and begins to spread bilaterally (both to the husband's and the wife's lines). The "mandatory" concept of an ancestor, including all dead ancestors in the direct line of inheritance regardless of personal preferences, evolves into the "optional" one, i.e., one limiting the concept of an "ancestor" to close relatives whose memories are dear to descendants. Changes in the concept of an ancestor bring about transformations of veneration ritual functions: the prior functions of veneration rituals promoted *ie* stability, while new ones imply removal of psychological tension in relations between the living and the dead through pleasant memories and consolation provided to particular people. Ancestor veneration rituals in contemporary Japan also change significantly: those dictated by Buddhist dogmas give way to less formal ones, based on personal affection. "Privatization" of ancestor veneration is under way, i.e., personal functions in veneration are increasingly dominant. The diversification of family types, especially conspicuous in the first decades of the 21st century, has also found its reflection in ancestor veneration rituals: new alternatives to traditional funerals emerged, as well as new forms of burial and storage of remains, the most outstanding examples being burials under trees (*jumokusō*) and *temoto kuyō*.

The above discussed allows us to conclude that, despite changes in the ancestor veneration functions as well as the transformation of burial and commemoration forms, the place allotted to the dead by the living in their lives is still very important. The individualization of veneration practices and the enduring belief of virtually a half of the Japanese in the power of spirits of the dead testify that ancestor worship in contemporary Japan is likely to be at the next stage of its development rather than extinction.

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