

Japanese Traditional Religions and the Internet

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NOTICE: This is a presentation paper for the panel entitled “Japanese Religion Meets the Internet: The Presence, Meanings and Implications of Cyberspace Religiosity” (organizer: Ian Reader, co-organizer: Birgit Staemmler, chair: Petra Kienle) held at the 2nd International Convention of Asia Scholars in Berlin on August 9 2001. Quotation or citation is not permitted without the consent of the author.

Abstract

The spreading power and interactivity of the Internet would not be necessary for the traditional religions that adhere to the communities in Japan. But such communities are changing or vanishing in the modern society. So these religions still need some method to hand over (tradere) their meanings and values to the next generation. Then the Internet comes out as one choice.

We will take notice of a Shinto shrine using the Internet as one tool for reorganizing *Ujiko* (parishioners) region, and a Buddhist denomination which investigated a gap in the expectation for Buddhism or Buddhist temples between the users of the Internet and the traditional *danka* (parishioners) organization.

1 Introduction

If one asks whether the Internet is regarded to function effectively for propagation and enlightenment of religious activities in Japan, just as Christianity in the United States, that is not always the case. This is because Japanese traditional religions, that is the mainstreams of Shinto and Buddhism, have centered the practices and rituals that adhere to the communities of *ie* (house) and *mura* (village), that were established somewhere between the end of the medieval times and beginning of the early modern ages. However, the communities that convey these practices and rituals have disappeared or varied in the process of modernization. But looking for believers away from these places means changing into a different religious group. Traditional religions are groping about for coping with the problem of how to convey the meaning and value of themselves to the next generation, in a critical situation in the support basis. Accordingly, Internet comes out as one choice.

In this presentation, we first take notice of the case where Shinto shrines are using the Internet as a tool for reorganizing the *Ujiko* (parishioner) region. Next, based on an investigation that was carried out by a traditional Buddhist body, we look into the difference in what the traditional *Danka* (parishioner) organization and the Internet users respectively expect for the Buddhist temples. Through these, we study the meaning that the use of Internet by traditional religions has to the Japanese society today.

2 The Case of Shinto Shrines: The Reorganization of Parishioner

First, let us look into the kinds of shrine activities that we can see on the Internet.

On the famous search engine, Yahoo! Japan (<http://www.yahoo.co.jp/>), 156 Shinto-related sites are registered at present on July 11 2001, but this does not even make a tenth of the overall 1634 websites that are classified in separate religions. On the other hand, Christianity has 726 sites and Buddhism has 610. Although it is insufficient to examine the tendency of the religious use of Internet by looking at the number of websites, it is

evident that there exists a large variation when we compare this with the religious population distribution in Japan [Agency of Culture 2001].

In this way, shrines take upon only a part of the religious use of Internet in Japan. However, in any case, we can give two things of how the typical use should be. The first one is the "public relations activities" through the Internet, and the second is the "mutual communication" through mailing lists and bulletin boards.

In "public relations activities," shrines of various scales provide information on history, events and prayers. The advantage is that they can send the information by lower costs than using the usual media.

In "mutual communication," there are some groups where the Shinto priests who use the Internet dispute with one another or exchange information (inaugurated in 1997), and some bulletin boards where Shinto priests and ordinary people who are interested put up questions and answers about Shinto.

In the case of shrines, "public relations activities" holds the main part, and since my first investigation in 1998, there has been no major change in this tendency [Kurosaki et al 2000: 114]. However, websites with bulletin boards have been increasing from about this year.

2.1 Jōgū Tenmangū

The broadening of "public relations activities" and "mutual communication" by people who do not share residential areas are products brought from the Internet, but are things that, by that alone, would probably not be useful for the shrine activities supported by the existing community. Then in what case does the shrine, that opened these websites, place the Internet as useful? Let us take a case here [Kurosaki 2000].

Jōgū Tenmangū is an independent shrine in Takatsuki City, Osaka, the bed-town of Keihanshin Area, one of the largest urban spheres in Japan. This shrine deals with events and activities in the local communities other than the normal annual and monthly festivals, such as the Tenjin Festival (February 25, 26) and the Tenjin Take Akari (April 3).

The homepage of Jōgū Tenmangū (<http://www.tcn.zaq.ne.jp/jogu/>) is organized in three large parts, "Find out," "Utilize," and "Participate."

"Find out" introduces the Gods, history, and events of the Tenmangū, and "Utilize" introduces the price list of prayer ceremonies and the guidance of "new parishioner system." And "Participate" introduces the local activities and the project of changing the bamboo forests into a scenic spot.

In August 1999, I had an interview at Jōgū Tenmangū with the Administrator of the shrine as well as the representative officer, Mr. Mori Yoshikazu, and a Shinto priest of Jōgū Tenmangū, also a university lecturer at that time.

Mr. Mori, who had a business career of corporate management, put reexamination of the parishioner system into practice. In order to reexamine the parishioners, who support the shrine from the "contribution rate" perspective, he classified them into those who live in the parishioner city as "*chien* parishioners," general users as "*goen* parishioners," and those who contribute to the shrine with various expert abilities as "*kagemori* parishioners." "*Kagemori*" is a coined word by Mr. Mori himself, which is said to mean guarding the others from behind, quietly. For example, beside the person who assists the festivals, this is said to include the physically handicapped person who returned the moss garden to life, the woman who cleans the grounds precincts everyday, and the person who writes the words on the notice board.

In the background of this reexamination of the parishioners system, there is the declining of population in the parishioners' town, and the inflow of population to the neighboring boom residential quarters since the 1960s. On one hand there was a decrease in the economic "contribution rate" due to the population decrease in the parishioner town, that is, the "*chien* parishioners." On the other hand, people who flowed in to the boom residential quarters,

that is the "goen parishioners," became to visit for festivals such as an infant ceremony (*shichi-go-san*). Therefore, a new means of public relations activity became necessary in order to correspond to the population movement in the parishioners' region. Using the Internet is also a part of the chain.

Now, the Internet can also connect a relationship with someone completely far away from the *chien*. However, a young Shinto priest who assists Mr. Mori, takes a prudent attitude coping with this.

On the Internet, there are websites called "virtual visit," where one can simulate the conduct of a visit to the shrine. This Shinto priest feels rejection that these things are set up as something "to utilize easily," in the same rank with other web pages. This is because he regards the special "pure place" and "fine place" as important.

However, he also grasps the collapse of the region that has supported the shrines as the collapse of human relations, and is anxious from a more moral point of view. And he says that it is necessary to first set "the regeneration of the regional community or the creation of a new community" as an object, and then to utilize the Internet on top of that to play "second fiddle to create a point of contact to meet."

In short, Mr. Mori and his young Shinto priest assistant both look at the change or the collapse of the support base parishioners' region; the former mainly from the economic point of view and the latter mainly from the moral point of view. And they position the use of Internet as to cope with this. At the same time, this accompanies a new understanding of the shrine itself, which intends to support the parishioners' region.

3 The Case of the Traditional Buddhism: Difference in Expectation

On the other hand, when we change our focus from shrines to traditional Buddhist temples, it may be thought that temples deal more actively with the use of Internet, as far as we look at the number of sites on Yahoo! Japan that was mentioned earlier.

However, when we actually look into this in detail, we can find a large difference. There are pages that Buddhist priests, who happened to be detailed in computers, opened as an extension of their personal hobbies and left alone without renewing them. Then there are pages that are actively renewed as a part of the propagation activity of the organization, and pages where communications between Buddhist priests and believers, or believers and believers, are materialized.

Fukamizu Kenshin [Fukamizu 2000] investigated the religion-related websites in Hiroshima Prefecture, where the number of believers in Japan's largest Buddhist denomination, Jodo Shinshu Honganji denomination, occupy an overwhelming majority in the religious population. And he compared the Shin Sect sites, Zen sites, and Christian sites, and stated that these functional differences are brought from the background of how the religious activities in reality should be. In short, websites are not functioning so effectively for religious bodies that secure existing believers. On the other hand, he says that the websites are functioning effectively for religious bodies that lack in existing believers, and attempt to spread from this point.

Mr. Fukamizu focused on the quantity factor, the number of believers. But not only that, we should not overlook the qualitative factor, that is, the religious activities that holy order people and believers have priority over and expect, as well as how well the characteristic of the Internet and media meet each other.

It is interesting to ask the kind of problems that Buddhist priests who actively use the Internet are aware of, but here we have the data of what the believers side expect for the religious activities: what existing believers in middle and upper ages in the parishioners' region expect, and what young believers who use the Internet expect. Here we have an investigation result that has clarified the difference, so let us look into this.

A religious consciousness investigation that Chiba diocese of Jōdoshū, one of the enormous Buddhist denominations in Japan, carried into effect in 1997, was titled "Jōdoshū Chiba diocese religious consciousness investigation: Looking for what temples should be in the 21 century" and was published in 2000 [Jodoshu 2000]. This

put the consciousness investigation in practice by asking the same questions to parishioner believers, university students, and Internet users. According to this, as for the question, "What do you think that temples should do in the future?" there were four options: "hold funerals and memorial services thoroughly," "teach the teachings of Buddhist plainly," "actively perform local community activities," and "consult with people's hardships." Of the four, the parishioner believers answered the first two the most, rating 43.9% and 35.9% respectively. On the other hand, the Internet users and university students answered "actively perform local community activities" the most (Internet users 41.5% and students 51.5%), and the outcome is completely contrastive. Also, it says that younger people in the parishioners' believers support the "actively perform local community activities."

Having the outcome, the Reverend Imaoka Tatsuyu, who was in charge of investigating the Internet users, recommends to "hold funerals and memorial services thoroughly, and act kind to those who visit the grave, as an extension of the present" for "the near future," but suggests that they would be demanded to actively perform local community activities as a theme in "the far future."

We cannot indiscriminately say that funeral ceremony does not match with the Internet. This is because services that provide participation to the funeral and visit to the grave on the Internet have actually started. There may not be such a resistance in pressing hands together in prayer in the virtual image. However, predicting that these services would expand as it accompanies the spread of Internet presupposes that the expectations that believers have had toward Buddhist temples until now would be directly inherited to the next generation.

However, as far as we look at this investigation outcome, this presupposition has swayed greatly. Rather, it is said that now there are expectations toward the Buddhist temples concerning social activities that adhere to the region, such as welfare of the old. The trend in the future is noteworthy — whether the temple side would practice activities that correspond to these expectations and use the Internet as a means to support this, or use the Internet to reiterate the conventional image.

4 Conclusion

I have mentioned the use of Internet in shrines and in traditional Buddhist temples, the former focusing on the reorganization and new understanding of the parishioner region from the people of the holy order's point of view, and the latter focusing on the change of expectation from the believers side toward the people of the holy order's side.

In 1987, before the Internet was popularized, Professor Ian Reader analyzed in his thesis titled "Back To The Future," how the advertisement and publication of Japanese traditional religions have effectively formed the value of a nostalgic yearning toward a traditional image in this industrialized society today. He concludes that this is not only to be defensive against influence from outside, but that that itself shapes the cultural identity and provides a means to correspond, as we enjoy the convenience of the world today.

As we have looked at shrines here, this analysis also seems adequate in the use of the new advertisement media, the Internet. If there should be a new element added, it should mean that the mutuality of the Internet has given the scope for urging change in the forms of more grass-roots activities, such as the reorganization of the parishioner region and dealing with local community activities. However, whether this movement would hold the main current, or repeat the same pattern as the traditional revolution in the usual media, is a case that we must investigate further in the future.

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