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## The Price of Ritual

*Regularly and irregularly occurring events at which surprisingly high degrees of physical and mental energy as well as large quantities of goods and money are required, and need to be procured in forms hardly open to individual choice and deliberation, abound in Japan. The corresponding complex rules are especially conspicuous on the level of direct interpersonal exchange, where the uninterrupted balance between outgoing investment and incoming return on investment is considered essential to maintain the close-knit social order that constitutes not just tradition but quite specifically the normative basis for Japan's self-image as a leading post-war economic power. In many ways this close-knit order contrasts with concepts we might hold about a modern, pluralistic society. Today we face a situation where the continued propagation of correct rules for supplying goods, money and personal energy stands in increasing conflict with the economic and structural means to do so, and with any calculated interest in specific social contexts thus to be maintained.*

Forty years ago in a Japanese home, I could not ignore presents – jewelry, crockery, towels, foods – spread around the room or placed before the house altar. I could also not fail to notice the amount of time and energy spent by the housewife to keep written account of all these items and list the persons they came from and the return presents given.

With a degree of surprise, I noted that gifts received and given included envelopes with money. And with a slight feeling of bewilderment I also noted that gifts were given to persons other than individuals I thought would take pleasure in receiving them. In Japan I was clearly in an environment where high investments (of money and objects) were being made and at the same time balanced by high returns on these investments.

Once at a gasoline station in 1984, I received as an advertisement a pocket diary titled “Manners for giving and receiving” (*Go-sōtō no manā*). In the appendix were lists describing points in time for presents and return presents, together with rules for the appropriate envelopes and wrappings and for the physical shape of their handover. The appendix included elaborate tables indicating the sums of money to be given by whom to whom in an endless sequence of ceremonial occasions. In my home country, only very special bookstores might have some rudimentary information on the manners of giving and receiving, but certainly would not touch upon gifts of money. It was evident that carefully shaped and costly rituals of exchange were a core element in planning daily life in Japan.

### The Term “Ritual” in English and Japanese

In the following I will use the term “ritual” for elaborate performances which are both predictable and precise in timing, shape, content, and effort. In this ritual I see the will to adhere to something like a world order removed from debates of individuals in order to secure the long-term requirements of the social entity.

However, “ritual” for us is an ambivalent term, and I have some doubts about how far we may apply it to the Japanese context. Consider the very first statement on ritual the anthropologist and Japan scholar Joy Hendry makes in her *Introduction to Social Anthropology*; it runs as follows: “Ritual is sometimes described as ‘empty’, or meaningless, and there are people who make conscious efforts to pare it away. [...] In each case, there is an expression of rejection of the more complicated forms which may be regarded as wasteful of time and resources, or unnecessary adornment of the event” (Hendry 1999: 65). This statement should make us aware that our daily speech has a notion (namely the notion of ritual) which describes physical performance situated on the borderline between a positive and a negative connotation: ritual, for us, can be wasteful. However, the Japanese language has no comparable notion for anything that might be both formal and wasteful.

Of course it is intellectually stimulating when scholars point out that our actual lives are full of ritual, and that we are far from being self-determined, but this is carrying the term “ritual” beyond the scope of its common usage. Japanese scholars who wish to join this debate therefore have little option but to use the foreign word *richuaru* (ritual); they have no term of their own to denote what English “ritual” implies today.

In Japanese dictionaries the English “ritual” is always explained in the sense of *shūkyōteki gishiki* (a religious set of actions performed collectively and having fixed patterns and form) and *shūkanteki gyōji* (events habitually performed). However, our word “ritual” in fact often comes close to Japanese *keishikiteki* (formalistic), yet “formalistic” in Japanese does not really denote something unnecessary or wasteful of time and resources. Rather, it denotes something lacking in personal, sympathetic feeling. In short, the English “ritual” does not fully mirror the emic level of elaborate performance in Japan which is precise in shape and timing but removed from individual judgment.

### Ritual and its Costs in Japan

“Ritual” in the following shall denote in a neutral and unambiguous way actions in which an unquestioned order becomes visible. In it, energy, objects or money are required to maintain the flow of exchanges which makes up life. However, though return on one’s investment is the aim, it would be wrong to think of the performances of exchange as simple coercion. Rather, rituals act out the performers’ shared belief in an order of things, and this in the end should work out so everyone gets his or her share of reward or profit. In turn, this belief in eventual reward and

profit is the very reason for the high precision of the ritual performance, a lack of which would spark fears that the expected return on investment might not ensue.

Precision of a complex set of actions is costly with regard to the physical and mental energy it requires, while the goods and money involved are costly in a more material sense. As mentioned, the proper execution of costly rituals forms a prominent aspect of life in Japan, regulating as it does the relationship between self and other in a way that should not be individually debatable. We may say that the worry about ritual correctness in Japan exerts considerable pressure on individuals and constitutes a central element of emotional life.

Before turning to concrete examples in which both precision of shape and timing and careful consideration as to the sums involved are required, I will first introduce a differentiation between high-cost and low-cost rituals, and then focus on the high-cost ones.

(Relatively) low-cost rituals include many that are performed in accordance with the requirements of the season; details can be found in compendiums called *Saijiki* ("year time chronicles", basically associated with seasonal references to be made in poetry, but nowadays also referring to characteristically seasonal types of food, clothing, and any imaginable form of activity which takes on ritual character through its indisputable link to a framework of temporal order in which it should be performed). Among these rituals we will find the visits to the family grave (*haka-mairi*) during the spring and autumn equinoxes, or the decoration of the house for the girl's festival (*momo no sekku*) at the beginning of March and the boy's festival (*tango no sekku*) at the beginning of May with appropriate dolls and streamers. A high level of importance is also attached to the rituals to honor the spirits of one's ancestors at *o-bon* (mainly) in August, and here we can find a huge regional variety of dances performed and decorations and lanterns placed on or around the graves. Throughout the year most regions and communities also have at least one shrine festival (*matsuri*), which calls for investment of money and energy for the preparations, and expenses for learning the arts of the drum, the flute, or dancing.

### **"High-cost Rituals" – Exchanges between Self and Other**

Rituals of exchange, in contrast to the rituals described above, ask for favors and protection not from transcendent powers but from concrete human beings and need to be performed in accordance with their expectations and feedback. As parents, teachers, and elders tell their children, improper performance would bring shame (*haji*) upon those who do not perform correctly as well as upon those who are responsible for monitoring correct performance. Thus rituals of exchange can be spoken of as high-cost with regard to stress, energy, and expenditure.

I will attribute regularly recurring high-cost rituals to three categories: *Kurashi no naka no o-tsukiai* (exchanges with others in daily life), *Shūgi* events (events for celebration), and *Fushūgi* events (sorrowful events).

1) *Kurashi no naka no o-tsukiai* – Exchanges with others in daily life

New Year greeting cards (*nengajō*) are imperative, even if they are now sometimes replaced by elaborate Internet e-mails. “Greeting cards at the time of the greatest heat” (*shochū mimai*) are almost equally important. As for the visits at New Year to people one has received past and from whom one expects further favors, details are given in scripts about “Manners for visits at New Year”, while the rules for mid-year visits to one’s village and family grave are outlined in “Manners for returning for the *o-bon* festival”.<sup>1</sup> Though the observance of these rituals of visit has become irregular with the loss of ties to a native village, and with the younger generation lacking time due to holiday jobbing, the Internet is still full of calls from people seeking advice on how to conform to the rules of such visits.

Regular expenses are incurred for seasonal gifts such as the mid-year gift (*o-chūgen*) and the year-end gift (*o-seibo*), which ought to be given to parents, relatives, one’s superiors and one’s private teachers in arts and other accomplishments.<sup>2</sup>

For New Year, children expect little sums of money from their relatives (*o-to-shidama*). At the visits to the family graves during the spring and autumn equinoxes, payments to the temple are expected, and in August, when visiting one’s native region, gifts to the relatives there are due, and these in turn prepare objects for the visitors to take back.

Irregularly recurring expenses include *senbetsu* (send-off gifts), *o-miyage* (bring-back gifts), and *o-mimai* (inquiries after a person’s well-being, usually combined with a visit).<sup>3</sup> *O-mimai* can be categorized into *by byōki mimai* (in the case of illness), *saigai mimai* (in the case of disaster), *kinka mimai* (in the case of a fire in the neighborhood), or *jinchū mimai* (in cases when someone is in great stress to achieve

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- 1 It does not make sense to quote concrete sources, as the production of such materials in the form of books and pamphlets, as well as on the Internet, is huge and continuously brought up to date. Basically, the contents are always the same, differentiation being mainly on the level of layout and illustration. However, below I will more concretely touch upon materials that are not in line with the general pattern.
  - 2 To give an example here, Hayai (2006: 117) indicates the following sums normally spent for gifts (all sums of money indicated should be thought of in terms of an exchange rate of about 100 Yen = 0,988 Euro (as of September 24, 2012). A stands for people in their 20s and 30s, B for people older than 40): to one’s superior (4000-5000 yen by A, 5000-7000 yen by B), to parents and relatives (3000-5000 yen by A, 5000-6000 yen by B), to the go-between at the time of one’s wedding (4000-5000 yen), to the teachers of artistic and other accomplishments (3000-4000 yen by A, 4000-6000 yen by B). The most commonly given gifts are indicated as being gift certificates, beer, fresh foods directly from their place of production, coffee, soap, edible seaweed, and dried fish.
  - 3 The prefix *o-* found in many Japanese expressions (usually called an honorific prefix) indicates a particularly high level of esteem and a high degree of emotional importance attached to the word thus marked. Words with the prefix *o-* could be spoken of as “sacred” in that the object or situation they describe is removed from the every-day debatable sphere. In some cases, *o-* can be omitted when just referring to the thing itself, without any emotional connotation. However, the absence of *o-* in certain expressions has various reasons and must not be taken to indicate a lack of esteem.

a goal). *O-mimai* gifts of money to relatives, members of one's office, and to friends range – depending on the relationship and the situation – from 5000 to 30.000 yen, and except in case of disaster they require return gifts within two weeks in the form of objects worth about one third of what was received (cf. Hayai 2006: 126-129).<sup>4</sup>

Finally, not to be forgotten are the expenses for the envelopes for each type of gift of money, the rules for the handover performance, and the observation of taboos.<sup>5</sup>

## 2) *Shūgi* events (events for celebration), commonly referred to as *o-iwai*

An important aspect of *o-iwai* is that not only large expenses in the form of money are involved, but also in efforts. Thus each tiny step needs to follow precise rules which are specific for each occasion and in line with what each *o-iwai* is to celebrate and secure. Advice starts by explaining the correct degree of elaboration of wrapping, placing of an object or money inside the wrapping, and the body movements required for the correct handover.

Then follow lists of the expected gifts. For life course *o-iwai* these mostly consist of money (5000 to 30.000 yen being the norm). Life course *o-iwai* include *obi-iwai* (5 months after pregnancy); *shussan-iwai* (child-birth); *nyūen-iwai* (entering kindergarten); *nyūgaku-iwai* (entering school, distinctly divided into entering primary, secondary and high school, and university); *shūshoku-iwai* (entering a company); *eiten-iwai* (transfer to a higher post); or *chōju-iwai* (celebrations of longevity, following in steps as from the age of 61). Return gifts are mostly required, following the indications in the handbooks (cf. Hayai 2006: 89-112).

Furthermore, *o-miyamairi* (the first visit of the baby to the local shrine) will cost 50.000 yen for the priests, and *shichigosan* (visits to the shrine for three and seven year old girls and five year old boys) will cost 10.000 yen for the priests, 50.000 yen for the photographs, and 30.000 yen for kimonos.

Gifts are again expected at occasional *o-iwai* – such as *shinchiku-iwai* (celebration of a new building); *kaigyō-iwai* (celebration of opening up a new business); *jushō-iwai* (celebration of receiving an award); or *kaiki-iwai* (celebration of recovery from an illness). The latter requires a return gift of one-third of the sum received and in a form that will not remain (e.g., biscuits), implying that the illness shall not remain.

Life's most elaborate *o-iwai* is certainly *kekkon-iwai*, the wedding celebration. Hayai (2006) recommends the following calculation:

4 The sums as well as concrete gifts indicated are based on surveys conducted by large banks and insurance companies as well as by the companies who provide specific goods or services, and by consumer organizations; details are taken from Hayai 2006.

5 Examples for taboos would be, in the case of visits to a sick person, to present chrysanthemums, plants in pots (associated with something being rooted where it is), red flowers (associated with blood) or anything with the number 4 (a homophone for “dead”) or 9 (a homophone for “suffering”).

Expenses begin if one requests someone to arrange a first meeting – a small present plus 10.000 to 50.000 yen if successful and 10.000 to 20.000 yen if unsuccessful. Alternately one could acquire membership in a “firm to discuss prospective partners” (costing 150.000 to 200.000 yen) and then pay 8.000 to 15.000 yen in monthly fees. After that come engagement presents (500.000 yen), the first get-together of the two households (costing up to 10.000 yen per person); the gift to the *nakōdo* (matchmaker); the wedding ceremony itself (calculate 2.880.000 yen); costume rental (80.000 to 100.000 yen for the groom, 150.000 to 200.000 yen for the bride); the wedding meal (10.000 to 30.000 yen per person); gifts for each visitor to take home (*hikidemono*) (8.000 yen per person); thanks to the master of ceremony (*shikai*) 30.000 to 100.000 yen and to the cameraman (up to 200.000 yen); costs for the receptionists (5.000 yen per person); gratuities for the hairdresser, for helpers and drivers (3.000 to 5.000 yen each); and, finally, the expenses for the honeymoon, which could be 620.000 yen for Guam and Saipan, 1.000.000 yen for Hawaii, and 1.380.000 yen for Europe (cf. Hayai 2006: 25-88).

Also, invitation and seating cards as well as welcome boards, menus and thank-you cards must be paid for, gifts must be sent to persons who could not come, and the transportation costs for the invited guests must be covered.

This is the expenditure of the couple themselves. But weddings also mean expenditure for others in the form of gifts and money (30.000 to 100.000 yen), which need to be acknowledged by the newly-weds through return gifts of about half the value received.

### 3) *Fushūgi* events (sorrowful events)

Here expenses are similar in nature to those of *o-iwai* in that they should ensure well-being, now for the deceased person and those left behind. As many in Japan see themselves in continued responsibility for the deceased, who are often thought of as being on a path of trans-migration,<sup>6</sup> or – following the old household (*ie*) concept (cf. Torigoe 1985) – seen as vital elements of household identity, this can involve a large amount of money and effort spent for the dead over a long period of time.

Guidebooks start out with the rules for presenting money to the bereaved family, which include: fold money properly in a cloth wrapper used for occasions of bereavement; use money with creases so as not to give the impression of having prepared for the occasion; don't use regular postage stamps; don't send anyone New Year's greetings after a death has occurred in your family.

Then come the actual costs: calculate 10.000 to 50.000 yen for offerings (*kubutsu*) and 10.000 to 50.000 yen for flowers; calculate about 20.000 yen for the night vigil (*o-tsuya*) plus 12.000 yen for each helper and 5.000 yen for food for each guest; calculate about 1.500.000 yen for the funeral including coffin, the funeral

6 Any instruction book on *hōyō* (memorial services for deceased persons) and *kuyō* (mortuary rites, offering and expression of gratitude) will provide basically the same view and give the same instructions on how to relate to one's deceased ancestors as time goes on.

hall, cremation, transportation of guests, photographs, and gratuities for the helpers. The payment for the priests depends a great deal on the posthumous name you request and varies between 150.000 and 1.350.000 yen. The grave and gravestone will cost between 200.000 in a public cemetery and between 400.000 and 7.000.000 yen in a temple or a private cemetery, plus yearly recurring expenses.

The amounts others must give in the form of condolence money (*o-kōden*) is between 5.000 yen when not related and 10.000 to 100.000 yen when related. The family of the deceased person then needs to give a return gift (*o-kōden-gaeshi*), preferably high-quality objects with a brand name.

Funerals lie at the core of a household's self-representation, bringing together not only relatives but large networks of persons linked to the deceased individual. At the same time many levels of professional help are required, including that of priests and temples. Hence high costs are not surprising, but worth calling attention to in the context of the topic discussed here. Moreover, additional costs will occur for the sequence of memorial services (*hōyō*) and offerings (*kuyō*) that follow. Though not all services are equally elaborate, they will take place on the 7th, 14th, 21st, 28th, 35th, 42nd, 49th, and 100th day after death, and then on the 2nd, 3rd, 7th, 13th, 17th, 23rd, 27th, and 33rd year after death.

### **Understanding Japan through its Rituals**

The information presented above did not have the aim to give details of rituals or gifts. Precise descriptions of the presently valid norms can be obtained from the flood of appropriate books and magazines and, of course, on the Internet, where the Japanese keywords will as a rule also produce English-language information. It should also be remembered that in Japan there are considerable regional differences, and certain groups of the population such as Christians will consciously differ from the norm with regard to their adherence to ritual.

The point being made in this paper is on a more abstract level, underscoring the degree to which a) exchanges in daily life, b) events for celebration, and c) sorrowful events are occasions for giving money, objects, and one's energy on the basis of the requirements of the season or the occasion. Daily life throughout the year can thus said to be punctuated by a dense sequence of regularly and irregularly recurring situations at which more or less heavy demands are made on what a person can produce. It is no surprise, therefore, that a structure of time characterized by such a sequence of expenses is highly supportive of thinking in terms of networks in which outgoing expenses can be balanced by a flow of incoming investment in a planned and predictable way.

Comparable patterns of exchange exist elsewhere too, so we should avoid thinking of Japan as particular. However, it is legitimate to ask what can make adaptation to Japanese ritual difficult for us. I have already drawn attention to the ambiguity of our word "ritual" which may find no equivalent in Japanese. Also, we can point to extremely intricate rules in Japan for marking self-other relationships