

**TEMPLES FOR LIFE AND TEMPLES FOR DEATH:
OBSERVATIONS ON SOME SHINGON BUDDHIST TEMPLES
IN TOKYO**

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Introduction

WHAT sort of comparisons, if any, are appropriate between cultures is a perennial issue in anthropology. More specifically, within regional traditions of scholarship, who has the right to speak authoritatively and which questions it is permissible to ask have also been longstanding problems, if less frequently addressed (Fardon 1985). Among specialists of Japan, both foreign and Japanese, there has been, it seems to me, a tendency to downplay links with Asia and, implicitly or explicitly, to pursue instead comparisons with, and explanations in terms derived from, 'the West'. I am certainly not the first anthropologist whose primary expertise lies outside Japan to suggest that aspects of Japanese culture and society might be helpfully viewed in the light of models derived from elsewhere (Duff-Cooper 1991, Bloch 1992).¹ In the present case I aim to examine similarities in the practice of

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two traditions of Tantric Buddhism, the Nepalese and the Shingon in Japan, which are distantly related historically.² A second aim is to compare the different ways in which these forms of Buddhism relate to their non-Buddhist contexts. The Japanese material is given centre stage here since the Nepalese material has been presented in detail elsewhere.³

Shintoism and Buddhism

Are Buddhism and Shintoism separate religions, or two aspects of one Japanese religion?⁴ There are arguments on both sides. It depends whether one is talking about priestly families or lay people, and the relationship between Buddhism and Shintoism has changed dramatically since the Meiji Restoration of 1868. It also depends, of course, on what one means by 'religion'.

Opinion polls appear to show that the Japanese are one of the most secular peoples of the world, with 65% regularly claiming to be without religious belief, whereas anything between 60% and 90% claim to have religious belief in such countries as Britain, France and the USA (Reader 1991: 5). This simply shows how unreliable opinion polls are. If one asks about observance, 75% of Japanese pray to the *kami* (Shinto gods) at New Year, although only 21% affirm that they believe in their existence (ibid.); in other words, 54% of Japanese worship entities whose existence they are at best doubtful about. It would be a mistake to conclude that there is something particularly Japanese about worshipping an entity one does not believe in: according to research in the USA reported in the *Guardian* (11 February 1992, p. 5), 10% of those who do not believe in God pray to Him (or should that be It?) daily. If we look at what Japanese *do*, instead of ethnocentrically confronting them with questions about *belief*, we see that most of

would be impossible to thank them all, but I must mention in particular Ishii Hiroshi, Tanaka Kimiaki, Togawa Masahiko and Hiramatsu Reiko; the last two acted as exemplary assistants and interpreters. The priests of the temples I discuss may prefer not to be named, but I would like to record their unfailing politeness and their spontaneous and warm hospitality. It will be evident how much I owe to established specialists on Japan, and I hope, though do not expect, that they will excuse an outsider trespassing on their territory.

2. The ritual of fire sacrifice, *homa* in Sanskrit, *goma* in Japanese, is central to both. Many of the same deities are worshipped in both.

3. See especially Gellner 1992, 1995. In a separate paper (Gellner 1997), I have pursued the comparison of Nepal to Japan with reference to the question of syncretism.

4. The same question has often been asked about the relation between Theravada Buddhism and the other religious systems with which it coexists (Gellner 1990).

them most certainly do participate in Shinto or Buddhist festivals and rituals, and many participate, whether over the long term or for shorter periods, in the many Japanese new religions which amalgamate aspects of both.

The conventional view, found in textbooks (Hendry 1995: 146; Reader 1991: chs. 3 and 4), is that there is a division of labour between Buddhism and Shintoism in Japan such that Shintoism is for life and Buddhism for death. Thus, Japanese perform rituals of birth and the life stages (at the ages of 3, 5 and 7), and later get married, in a Shinto idiom and/or at Shinto shrines. All matters connected with death are carried out by Buddhist priests, and memorials to the dead are to be found in graveyards attached to Buddhist temples.⁵ Japanese homes usually have separate offering places within the home, namely the *butsudan*, where offerings in a Buddhist idiom are given to the ancestors, and the *kamidana*, where they are made in Shinto idiom to the Shinto gods.

It is the conflation of Buddhas and ancestors which is the most startling to anyone familiar with Buddhism elsewhere in Asia, since it is combined with a great de-emphasis on the doctrine of karma (rebirth according to one's moral deserts). Robert J. Smith, in his standard work on Japanese ancestor worship, declares it to be a misunderstanding, a Japanese confusion resulting from using the euphemism 'to attain nirvana' (which effectively means to become a Buddha) for 'to die' (Smith 1974: 50). The normal term for ancestor, *hotoke*, is written with the same Chinese characters as *butsu*, meaning Buddha, suggesting that they are the same. Some priests asserted to me that ancestors and Buddhas are indeed the same; others said that they were not. Certainly the widespread and highly expensive ritual of giving a 'death name' to the deceased person can be understood as the Tantric rite of revealing the true 'Buddha nature' of the person. Monks and priests do not need such a new name after death, since they have already received a 'Buddha name' on being initiated.

The separation of responsibilities and the complementary associations between Buddhism and Shintoism in Japan have frequently been represented as a series of oppositions, thus:

BUDDHISM	SHINTOISM
death rituals	life-cycle rituals
afterlife	worldly aims
temples	shrines
inauspicious/polluted	auspicious/pure
O-bon festival (summer)	New Year (winter)

Buddhist ritual specialists have had to find ways to cope with this association with the inauspicious. Many of the most polluting tasks at death are actually performed by the women of the household. The position of the *burakumin*, Japan's 'out-

5. The English 'shrine' is reserved for Shinto edifices (*miya*, *omiya*, or *jinjaljingu* in Japanese), the English 'temple' for Buddhist ones (*dera/otera* or *ji* in Japanese).

castes', is connected, among other things, to their performance of death-related tasks (Ohnuki-Tierney 1987: 80, 98).

Several anthropologists have developed this theme of the opposition between Buddhism and Shintoism. Ooms (1976), in a classic structuralist paper, argued that the series of Shinto rituals by which a child was turned into an adult paralleled almost exactly the series of Buddhist rituals by which a dead person is turned into an ancestor. Joy Hendry (1981: 229–39) explores and endorses this basic opposition in her detailed ethnography of a Kyushu village, but she ends by suggesting that weddings are such pivotal and protean affairs, with links to divination, funerals and Buddhist altars, that marriage 'temporarily [overrides] the universal opposition between life and death, just as it brings together male and female' (ibid.: 239). Jane Cobbi (1995) pursues the difference into food preferences: alcohol, salt, and strong-tasting things are associated with men, life and Shintoism, whereas tea, sweets, and mild-tasting things are associated with women, weakness and Buddhism. The associations with gender are, as one might expect, rather more complex than such a scheme would at first sight suggest: Martinez's villagers told her that 'Buddhism is for men, and Shintoism for women' (Martinez 1995: 190).

Leaving these symbolic elaborations aside, one might object that a simple opposition between life and death does not capture the full complexity of Japanese religious practice. Even so, the idea that Shintoism and Buddhism are complementary can still be defended. If one lays aside the Judaeo-Christian assumption that all aspects of religion must be provided by the same tradition, it is possible to distinguish at least seven distinct spheres:

- (1) legitimation and expression of the household or family group;
- (2) legitimation and expression of the locality;
- (3) legitimation and expression of the nation or ethnic group;
- (4) sanctification of the stages of the life cycle;
- (5) socialization of the young and provision of a moral code;
- (6) the provision of psychological and practical help in misfortune, especially illness;
- (7) salvation, i.e. a path out of all ills as such.

The Japanese may perhaps have pushed the religious division of labour further than anyone else: (1) and (7) are pre-eminently provided by Buddhism; (2), (3) and (4) by Shintoism except that Buddhism deals in death; and (5) by Confucianism. In terms of the simple picture elaborated so far, (6) is mainly a Shinto concern (but incorporating many concepts from Taoism). As we shall see, certain types of Buddhist temple also provide considerable competition in this sphere.

Kinds of Buddhist Temple

The research on which this paper is based was carried out in the locality of Fukagawa, Tokyo. Fukagawa was part of the 'low town' outside the city walls in the Edo period before 1868 (Waley 1984: 225f.). It is one of the few Tokyo localities to have several Shingon temples, including that of the famous Fukagawa Fudo. Fudo, known in Sanskrit as Achala, is a fierce Tantric deity, very popular with the Japanese; his temple here is controlled by the Narita branch of Shingon Buddhism. One of the priests described Fudo to me as 'a rough character with a good heart'. I also visited three other Shingon temples, which I shall call A, B, and C.

The four Buddhist temples considered here present quite a range of types which between them call into question the neat picture of Shintoism for life and Buddhism for death. The neat model can perhaps be accepted as a rough approximation. There are, however, two big problems with it. The first is historical: the separation of the two religions is the outcome of government action in the years following 1868. Viewing the two as distinct and separate traditions does justice neither to the situation before 1868 (which I consider further below), nor to the attitudes of most Japanese lay people at the present day (Grapard 1984).

The second problem is more ethnographic and has to do with the aspirations of the specialists who run many of the larger Buddhist temples. The neat picture assumes that all Buddhist temples are of the type known as *dankadera*, that is, temples supported by donors or parishioners (*danka*). Indeed, the vast majority of Japanese Buddhist temples are of this sort. But the large and famous ones are not. They are known as *shinjadera*, temples supported by 'believers' (*shinja*).⁶ The typical *dankadera* can be illustrated by Temple C. It is never open to the public. Overshadowed by neighbouring apartment blocks, its recently rebuilt compound encloses a single building which incorporates both the temple and the priest's house. In order to reach the main temple it is necessary to go upstairs. Behind it is the graveyard containing the tombs of households attached to the temple. Except when there is a funeral going on, or during annual festivals for the dead, the place is quiet. Immigration to Tokyo has been so great in recent generations that probably the majority of households there today have no connection to a *dankadera* in the city. Many have also lost contact with the ones in their village of origin.

The famous Fukagawa Fudo temple, on the other hand, is a *shinjadera* and is in complete contrast to the typical *dankadera*. It is open to the public all day long and there is a steady stream of worshippers, though they tend to be more numerous during the five fire sacrifices held at two-hour intervals throughout day, starting at 9 a.m. The fire sacrifices are impressive rituals involving six or more robed priests and the use of loudspeakers to amplify the prayers. On sale at the shop by

6. Alternative names for the *dankadera* are *ekôderalekôin* ('transfer of merit' temple), the term *ekô* referring both to funerals in general and to an essential part of all liturgies; the *shinjadera* are also sometimes called *kitôderalekigandera*, meaning 'prayer temple'.

the main steps to the temple is a large array of amulets for various purposes as well as *gomaki*, fire sacrifice sticks, and large inscribed boards called *ofuda*. The fire sacrifice sticks may be bought, again for various purposes, e.g. to avoid discord at home, at ¥300 for the smaller ones and ¥500 for the larger ones. They then have the worshipper's name inscribed on them and will be saved by the priests and used in an upcoming sacrifice, so that the petition will ascend directly to Lord Fudo. The *ofuda* are much more expensive: the cheapest costs ¥3000. Rather than being placed in the fire, they are waved over it and then taken home by the worshipper to be placed in their *butsudan*. The deity stands at the back of the main hall: he holds a sword and a noose and has a fierce countenance. Most worshippers advance no further than the front of the hall.

At the main entrance to the temple grounds there is a small roof over a water tank; worshippers may purify their hands using small metal cups with long bamboo handles if they wish. Behind this is a series of racks for tying *ema*, small wooden boards on which devotees write what they hope for from Lord Fudo (these too may be bought at the shop). Some record more than one wish: 81 *ema* were inspected with a total of 90 wishes. These broke down as follows: 40 had to do with success in study (either in exams, or for entrance to high school or a specific named university, or in particular subjects), 15 wished for health, 9 requested recovery from illness, 6 were for family happiness, 5 for commercial success, 4 for family safety, 3 for traffic safety, 3 for happiness, 2 for romantic love, 2 to grow tall, and 1 for the return of a missing daughter. The preponderance of *ema* directed at educational ends is apparently standard (Reader 1991: 180). To the right of the main entrance to the temple is an altar used for special blessing rituals performed on motor vehicles. The temple has a considerable reputation for this, and the ritual is supposed to ensure that accidents are avoided.

Around the back of the main hall of Fudo are three subsidiary chapels, where many worshippers rarely go. Two of them are dedicated to Dainichi Nyorai (Sanskrit: Mahavairocana), the principal Buddha of the Shingon sect, and one to Amida (Sanskrit: Amitabha). There are various wall-hangings and statues of other Buddhist figures in these chapels, including Kobo Daishi (Kukai), the founder of the Shingon sect. His birthday and death day are observed as major festivals of the temple. Most of the figures have the appropriate mantra (*goshingon*) written out in phonetic script beneath them: that for Dainichi, for example, is *on bajara datoban* (equivalent to the Sanskrit *om vajradhātu vam*). In the chapel of Amida, there are a few funeral tablets (*ihai*) of selected donors to the temple, the only place anywhere in the temple for the paraphernalia of death rituals.

Also part of the temple complex behind the main hall are a tea house for performing the tea ceremony, a room for performing *hatsumairi*, the first visit by a child to a Buddhist temple (an equivalent of the more usual first visit to a Shinto shrine), and a room used for calligraphy classes. These are all built around a traditional Japanese garden.

The impression given by this temple is that the priests have made a conscious effort to avoid any connections with death. The two main festivals for the dead,

O-bon and Segakie, are not observed. There are not even any statues to Jizo, the popular *bodhisattva* who is believed to save one from bad rebirths or a bad fate after death. Jizo statues are often found in other well-known *shinjadera* (cf. Ohnuki-Tierney 1984: 138ff.) and often in the form of *mizuko*, the childlike version of Jizo frequently erected for aborted fetuses and decorated with bibs and other childlike paraphernalia.⁷

This impression was confirmed by the head priest, who said that he always refused to perform death rituals for devotees. In five years at the temple he had only acceded to one man, who had requested him so many times that he had finally declared, 'If you ask such a thing you will fall into hell, but OK!' (he laughed as he related this). He added, quite spontaneously, that because it rejects anything to do with death, 'this temple is similar to Shinto'.

It can be seen, then, that the life-death opposition repeats itself *within Buddhism*. Here the *shinjadera* take on the characteristics of the Shinto temple, offering all kinds of help in life, offering Buddhist equivalents to Shinto life-cycle ceremonies and shunning inauspicious associations with death. Thus, a clear symbolic opposition within Japanese culture reappears within a sub-culture, in this case Buddhism. This can be represented as follows:

<i>dankadera</i> (e.g. Temple C)	<i>shinjadera</i> (e.g. Fukagawa Fudo)
members only	open to all comers
specializes in tombstones and death rituals	no tombstones or death rituals
inauspicious, so avoided for worldly needs	offers help in worldly needs including life-cycle rituals

There are, however, two other Shingon temples in the same Tokyo locality—Temple A and Temple B—which fit neither model neatly. Temple B is, in fact, as its priest openly admitted, 'mixed'. One part of it is open to the public on a daily basis: this is the temple to Emma Dai-o (Sanskrit: Yamaraj, lord of the dead). This temple has become quite well known because of its incorporation of modern technology. Nineteen offering boxes trigger different tape-recorded messages when coins are dropped into them. When you drop an offering into that labelled 'study', you are told to work hard with a pure mind and that that will ensure success. The other part of the temple is dedicated to Dainichi and has funeral tablets in glass cases down either side. It is open only when the *danka* come to perform death ceremonies. The priest of Temple B was, as his rebuilding of the Emma Dai-o temple would suggest, a dynamic innovator. He was particularly concerned, he said, with the large number of Tokyo residents who nowadays have no effective link with a *dankadera* and are easily exploited by new cremation companies.

7. See Lafleur (1992) and Hardacre (1997). I speculate that the refusal of many Buddhist priests to perform such worship of Jizo, reported by Hardacre (1997: 16-17), may in some cases be connected to a general reluctance to have anything to do with death rituals.

The last temple to be considered, Temple A, is also 'mixed', but in a different way: it is not a regular *dankadera* with tombs of donors. It has a few tombs, but only of the priests who have served there. It is open to the public every day but it does not reject all connections with death as the Fudo temple priests do. The differences between these four Shingon temples are summarized in Table 1. It will be seen that, in practice, the opposition between the two types of temple produces a spectrum, with some temples conforming to the ideal types of *shinjadera* and *dankadera* but others combining elements of both.

The special position of Temple A can partly be explained by the history of the area. In the pre-Meiji period there was a large Buddhist temple in Fukagawa with grounds far more extensive than any temple or shrine today. At that time the Fudo temple did not exist, though a statue of Fudo was brought on a palanquin from Narita from time to time when invited by *kabuki* actors or other local people. The Buddhist temple of that time incorporated in its grounds the nearby famous Tomioka Hachiman shrine, today a completely separate institution. Hachiman is the god of war and is nowadays seen as an unambiguously Shinto god. In the pre-Meiji period Hachiman was seen as a protector of Buddhism (Herbert 1967: 437) and was therefore identified as a *bodhisattva*.⁸ As his shrine was at that time part of the grounds of a Buddhist temple, his cult was controlled by the Buddhist priests. According to its priest, Temple A, small and inconspicuous though it is, is the successor of the large temple of pre-Meiji times. As all over Japan, large tracts of land were confiscated from Buddhist temples, and the priests of many temples in traditions which combined Shinto and Buddhist practices had to decide overnight to become 'pure Shinto' (Grapard 1984; Ketelaar 1990). In short, in the name of purity and nation-building, the state made a determined attempt to separate the two traditions in an unprecedented way.

Nepal

For a comparison with the Fukagawa Fudo temple, we can consider the large temple-monastery compound called Kwa Bahal (known as 'the Golden Temple' to tourists) in Lalitpur, Nepal.⁹ Like Fukagawa Fudo, it receives a regular trickle of devotees throughout the day; locals come en masse in the early morning for the high point of the daily liturgy, the washing of the god's face in a ritual mirror and the distribution of the holy water. Like Fukagawa Fudo, Kwa Bahal is located on various pilgrimage routes and so is visited as part of a set of holy sites. It has not

8. According to Waley (1984: 238), Hachiman was considered 'an avatar of the Buddha Amida'.

9. For further details, see Gellner 1991, 1992.

	FUKAGAWA FUDO	TEMPLE A	TEMPLE B	TEMPLE C
<i>Ema</i> offered	X			
Facilities for life-cycle rituals and for tea ceremony	X			
Calligraphy classes	X			
Rituals for safety of new cars	X			
Open daily for worship	X	X	Emma Dai-o hall only	
Observance of Kobo Daishi's birthday	X	X		
Observance of Kobo Daishi's death day		X		
Sale of amulets	X	X	X	
Daily <i>goma</i>	X			
Monthly <i>goma</i>		X		
Sale of <i>goma</i> sticks	X	X	X	
No <i>goma</i>			X	X
Tombs		of priests only	X	X
<i>Ihai</i> (funeral tablets)	selected donors only	selected donors only	X	X
Jizo statue(s)		X		
O-bon, Segakie observed		X	X	X
Higan observed			X	X

TABLE 1. Contrasted characteristics of four Shingon temples in a Tokyo locality
 Note: 'X' indicates the presence of the characteristic in question

developed a large range of items for sale as has Fukagawa Fudo, nor does it have a range of instrumental rites it can offer laity or pilgrims as Fukagawa or some Hindu temples in India have. Yet, unlike other local Buddhist temples, it does have a single powerful ritual for instrumental purposes that is sponsored by a wide variety of local people, namely the ritual reading of the text, the 'Perfection of Wisdom in Eight Thousand Lines' (Astasahasrika Prajnaparamita). The text is read by ten Vajracharya priests simultaneously, each taking one tenth of the text. It is believed that, uniquely, the goddess, the Perfection of Wisdom, is present in this text and that she answers devotees' prayers.¹⁰

A big difference from Japan is that Buddhist priests among the Newars of Nepal are part of a caste, with two intermarrying sections, the Vajracharyas and the Sakyas. All Vajracharya and Sakya men are members of a monastery-temple such as Kwa Bahal (though many are much smaller than Kwa Bahal). Only Vajracharyas may be domestic priests for other Newars, but in the context of the monastery Vajracharyas and Sakyas are for almost all purposes of equal status. Kwa Bahal has a very large number of members (over 3,000), a majority or near majority of whom live in the vicinity of the temple. The sons of members become members by passing through the ritual of monastic initiation in Kwa Bahal (only the sons of members by Sakya or Vajracharya mothers may be so initiated). They are then added to the membership roll, so that, eventually, in their late forties or early fifties, their turn will come to be responsible for the daily ritual for a month. Thus Kwa Bahal is, in effect, the collective property of a patrilineally defined segment of the Vajracharya-Sakya caste ('the *sā'*—i.e. *sangha* or Monastic Community—'of Kwa Bahal'). Japanese Buddhist priests of a large temple such as Fukagawa Fudo are functionaries, in effect employees, of the Narita sect, and do not own, even in an extended sense, the temple where they work. On the other hand, priests of *dankadera* in Japan do own their temples in a way very analogous to the Nepalese situation, though as far as I know the Nepalese pattern of group ownership and rotating duties is not found.

Unlike in Japan, there is in Kwa Bahal no taboo on death rituals or death offerings in the temple, though it is true that there is rarely occasion to perform them there. In Nepal *all* life-cycle rituals are performed in the family's home, and the relationship of family to domestic priest, modelled on the Hindu *jajman*-Brahman priest relation, has no necessary relationship to any temple. Unlike in Japan, Nepalese Buddhism expanded to provide a full range of sacraments, so that Buddhist laypeople as well as Sakyas and Vajracharyas (the Buddhist clergy) go through essentially the same set of life-cycle rituals overseen by their Vajracharya domestic priests.¹¹

10. For details of the ritual and the categories of people sponsoring it, see Gellner 1996.

11. The only exception here is that boys from lay castes are not entitled to monastic initiation.

Conclusion

In Japan, as in Nepal, Tantric Buddhism is a ritual system operated by priests for both interested devotees and hereditary parishioners. What is unusual from the Nepalese point of view is the dual separation that has occurred in Japan. In the first place, many Japanese tend to approach Shinto shrines for birth, childhood and wedding ceremonies, as well as for assistance in worldly matters, reserving Buddhism for death rituals. In the second place, even when Japanese Buddhist institutions offer 'Shinto-type' services, there is a division of labour. The hereditary relationship with a Buddhist temple and its incumbent pertains only to death rituals. For any other service, the devotee is free to approach whatever temple, specialist or cult they prefer.

When Buddhism co-existed with Hinduism in South Asia (as it still does in the Kathmandu Valley) Buddhist monks and priests were willing to accept gifts, particularly those associated with death, that other religious specialists considered to be tainted with inauspiciousness. But from the monks' point of view, they themselves were beyond such worldly considerations. In very strongly Buddhist societies, such as Burma, Thailand and Tibet, this monastic view came to be largely accepted by the laity as well: that Theravada monks and nuns accept offerings made on behalf of dead people in no way demeans them in the eyes of those who make them. In Nepal, by contrast, high-caste Hindu Newars are willing to use Buddhist priests as death specialists, but they do not regard them as of equal rank to Brahmans. The Nepalese Buddhist priests themselves, for their part, do not accept that their own involvement is particularly problematic. What appears to have happened in Japan, by contrast, is that Buddhist personnel *have* accepted the view of the wider society that the connections with death are inauspicious and have organized themselves accordingly. Both the strategy of the Fukagawa Fudo temple (avoiding connections with death) and the strategies of Temples A and B (combining features of both types of temple) may be seen as creative adaptations to the religiously plural context of modern Tokyo, where mass migration from the villages has meant that many, if not most, of Tokyo's inhabitants no longer have an effective link with a *dankadera*.

Buddhism began as a soteriology (religious aspect 7, of the spheres distinguished above). In spite of the various ways it was adapted to lay life, it has nearly always remained fundamentally a soteriology and has co-existed with other religious systems which have provided for at least some of the other needs of lay people. In Gombrich's classic formulation, 'Buddhism in real life is *accretive*' (Gombrich 1971: 41, original emphasis; cf. Tambiah 1970, Gombrich 1988). Thus, there is and was nothing particularly strange about the traditional co-existence of Buddhism and Shintoism in Japan. There is no reason, on this account, to claim that Buddhism was 'Japanized' out of all recognition. Indeed, in specializing overwhelmingly in death rituals, Japanese Buddhist priests remained closer to Theravada Buddhism than the Buddhism of Nepal, whose priests have expanded their ritual repertoire to cover, at least potentially, all seven aspects. The biggest

theoretical obstacle to a proper sociological and anthropological understanding of Buddhism, whether in Japan or elsewhere, has been the Eurocentric assumption that there is something illegitimate about such religious specialization and, above all, about its consequence—the co-existence of different religious traditions within a single symbolic field.

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