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KAZUTO MATSUNAGA

THE IMPORTANCE OF THE LEFT HAND IN TWO TYPES OF RITUAL ACTIVITY IN A JAPANESE VILLAGE

Introduction

THE purpose of this paper is to present and interpret certain findings concerning the left hand¹ in the context of worship at a Japanese village Shinto shrine and in funeral practices. I have found that the use of the left hand is significant in rituals at a Shinto shrine and also in Buddhist funeral practices at a village near Yame City in Fukuoka prefecture. Rituals performed at the shrine are considered pure by the villagers (who are all Buddhists), while the funeral practices are considered impure and polluting. In this sense, the two contradict each other. This is illustrated by the fact that members of a family in which a death has occurred neither visit the village shrine nor participate in any of its rituals for a year, because of the pollution caused by the death of the family member. In the first part of this paper, I will describe the use of the left hand, and in the second part I will offer an interpretation. This paper deals mainly with findings made at the village mentioned, but I will occasionally refer to data from other villages.

The main agricultural products of the village have traditionally been rice (rice cultivation begins in May or June and ends in October or November) and wheat (cultivated between November and May), although horticulture has recently been introduced also. There are 98 households in the village, with a population of

1. Left hand does not mean just 'hand' itself in this paper but also foot, as shown by Hertz (1960). Hertz also refers to 'foot', despite the title of his paper. Thus, for example (p. 104), 'A holy place must be entered right foot first. Sacred offerings are presented to the gods with the right hand.'

548 (1984). About two-thirds of the inhabitants were born in the village, while the rest are newcomers from the nearby city, but both groups jointly maintain the annual rituals of the village shrine.

The three main rituals of the year are held at the beginning of the summer and in the autumn. There are two rituals at the beginning of the summer. One is called Manjū-Komori, thanking the *kami* (gods) for the good harvest of wheat in which villagers offer the *kami* cake (*manjū*) made of newly harvested wheat, and during which they confine themselves for half a day in the shrine (this ritual confinement is called *komori*). The other is Gan-Tate—praying to the *kami* for a good harvest of rice—practised a week after the ritual of Manjū-Komori. *Gan* means 'prayer', and *tate* 'to make a petition'. Subsequently, the ritual in the autumn (in the latter part of November) thanks the *kami* for the good harvest of rice; it is called Nigirimeshi-Komori (viz. the *nigirimeshi* confinement; *nigirimeshi* means 'rice-balls' made of newly harvested rice): the villagers offer the *kami* rice-balls and they confine themselves for half a day in the shrine in order to thank the *kami* for the good harvest of rice. In the first ten days of August, i.e. between these summer and autumn festivals, the villagers practise a ritual called Sendo-Mairi, which literally means 'to worship the *kami* a thousand times'. In this ritual, the villagers pray to the *kami* for good health in the hot summer by offering a thousand leaves of the sacred *sakaki* tree (*Cleyera ochracea*); all the villagers, including the children, offer *sakaki* leaves until they have thus worshipped the *kami* a thousand times. In all these three main annual rituals, as well as in the smaller rituals practised during the course of the year, the left hand is often used.

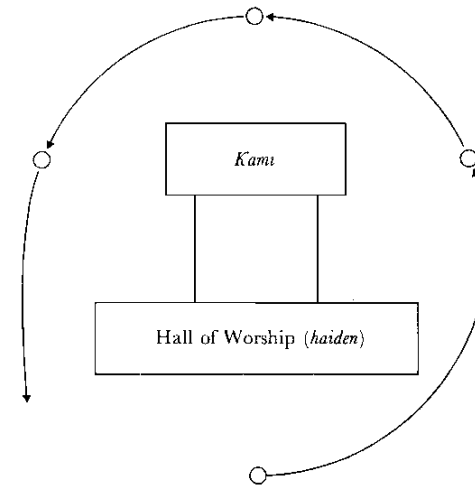
The Left Hand in Rituals

(i) The left hand in the village Shinto shrine

The *haiden*, or hall of worship of the shrine, and the *torii*, or shrine gate, are always decorated with *shimenawa* (a sacred rope made with tufts of straw). The villagers do this cooperatively and exchange an old *shimenawa* for a new one twice a year, that is, before the summer rituals of Manjū-Komori and Gan-Tate and again before the autumn ritual of Nigirimeshi-Komori. The *shimenawa* is a 'left-handed' rope, that is, twisted from the left-hand side; moreover, it should be installed from the left side to the right side, viewed from the seat of the *kami*—in other words, the 'root' or the 'beginning' of the *shimenawa* should be put on the left side, as seen from the *kami*.

Before any ritual is carried out—such as worshipping the *kami* and making offerings, but certainly at every annual ritual—the Shinto priest and the villagers wash their hands at a special hand-washing place in front of the *haiden*. According to the Shinto priest, they must wash the left hand first, then the right, and finally the left hand a second time (although I did notice that some villagers washed the left hand only once, and sometimes even after having begun the washing with the

Figure 1



right hand).

After washing their hands, the villagers worship the *kami* at four points surrounding the shrine, as shown in Figure 1. They move anti-clockwise (*hidari-mawari* in Japanese, or moving round to the left). After this, they ascend the *haiden* and make offerings as a preparatory act for the ritual.

Kome (rice) is offered first, directly in front of the *kami*, this being the most important offering at every ritual. At the ritual of Manjū-Komori they also offer *manjū* (the cake made of wheat), *sake*, salt and holy water, fish, vegetables, fruit and other items—all from the left side to the right side in the correct order. At the ritual of Nigirimeshi-Komori, rice-balls are offered instead of *manjū*. With regard to fish, vegetables and fruit, fish is generally speaking considered the most important, followed by vegetables and then fruit, in that order. In other words, villagers say that the sea is more important than fields and mountains, and that fields are more important than mountains. When offering two kinds of fish, they put a superior fish, such as a red snapper (called *tai* in Japanese, and used on most happy occasions, such as weddings, child-birth, naming etc.) at the left-hand side, and an inferior fish, such as blue mackerel (*saba*), at the right.

According to the Shinto priest, when either he or the villagers touch the ritual instruments on which the offerings to the *kami* are placed, they should do so with the left hand first and then with the right. When they need to carry them, they are not supposed to touch them with both hands at the same time, although in fact many villagers do so nonetheless.

After the ritual preparations, the priest and the villagers sit in front of the *kami*; the former sits on the left-hand side (viewed from the *kami*), and the villagers on the right. The priest then stands up and goes directly in front of the *kami*, stepping towards it carrying a *gohei* or *haraigushi* (a sacred staff with hanging paper strips) in order to recite ritual Shinto prayers. He steps forward with his left² foot first and then with his right, and then steps back with his right foot first. This means that his left foot is closer to the *kami* than his right foot for a longer period of time, and that he remains with his left foot in front of the *kami*. This practice is called *shinsa-taiu* (literally, 'step forward left, step backward right'), and it shows how the left foot is considered more important than the right.

The priest holds the *gohei* or *haraigushi* with both hands, but his left hand is kept in a higher position, and he moves it quickly to the left side first, then to the right, and finally to the left side again. Thus the left is again given primary importance. After various recitations by the priest, representatives of the villagers step forward to the *kami* in order to offer *tamagushi* (a sprig of the sacred tree *Cleyera ochracea*). The way that the villagers step forward and hold the *tamagushi* follows the same method as that in which the priest steps forward and holds the *gohei* or *haraigushi*, i.e. forward with the left foot first and then backwards with the right foot first; the *tamagushi* is held with both hands, but the left hand is kept higher. After these movements, the priest and the villagers dine together and finish the ritual.

The description above applies to all rituals. However, two further points should be noted. First, the Japanese round cushion made of straw on which the priest and villagers squat in the *haiden* is woven anti-clockwise. Secondly, there are many instances of *chigaya-kuguri* in Shinto shrines in the northern part of Kyushu Island, viz. the practice of passing through a big ring made of *chigaya* in front of the *kami* (*chigaya* is a species of reed, *Phragmites communis*;³ *kuguri* means 'to pass through'). Villagers practise the *chigaya-kuguri* in order to pray to the *kami* for their health in a hot summer. The way they do it is to pass through the big ring first anti-clockwise, then clockwise, then anti-clockwise again—so that, once more, the left side is given primary importance.

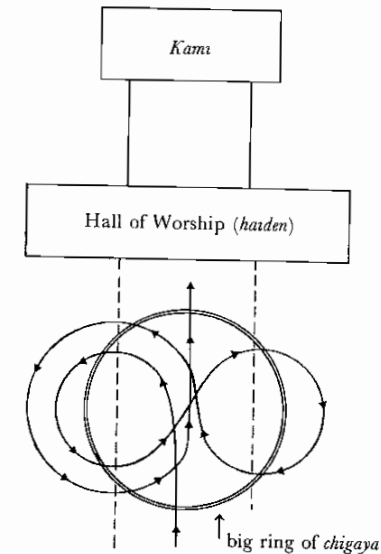
(ii) The left hand in funeral practices

When a man dies, a vigil called *tsuya* is held at night before the funeral. Relatives and villagers gather at the vigil, a bag of sweets or biscuits being distributed to all visitors in the left hand of a family member of the deceased, and received in the

2. Note that whereas the left position where the Shinto priest and villagers sit in front of the *kami* or where they put offerings is the left as viewed from the *kami*, the left concerning a person in motion (such as the priest here) is the left of the person in question (Jinsha-Honchō 1975: 19). It is often said that the left is valued in Shintoism.

3. In former times, leaves of this reed were used by Japanese farmers to roof their houses with straw and the root of this reed was used as medicine.

Figure 2



visitor's left hand. Nowadays, it should be said, villagers do not follow this practice strictly.

On the morning of the funeral, householders and housewives of the neighbourhood to which the family of the deceased belongs divide up the preparations for the funeral, such as setting up the altar, making contact with Buddhist priests, and cooking meals for visitors. The funeral is usually held in the afternoon, at the house.

In the past, when burial was the norm, villagers used to bind the coffin with a 'left-handed' rope, that is, one twisted by the left hand (like the 'left-handed' *shimenawa* rope mentioned above); this is not done nowadays, viz. since the introduction of cremation about twenty years ago. Formerly, the villagers carried the coffin to the graveyard on the hill near the village (nowadays it is carried to a crematorium by a motor-driven hearse); they wore *waraji* (straw sandals) and wound a rope round their waists. The thong of the *waraji* and the rope were also 'left-handed'; nowadays villagers wear shoes and no longer encircle their waists. Furthermore, two elders, respectively 78 and 81 years old, say that they used to carry a coffin on their left shoulders—in contrast to the carrying of farm tools on their right shoulders during the pursuit of daily agricultural activities.

Figure 3

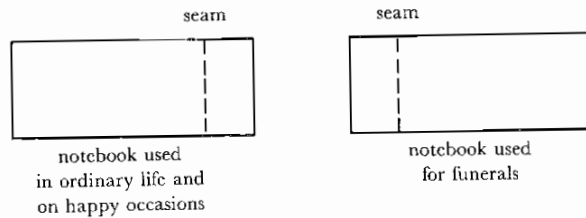
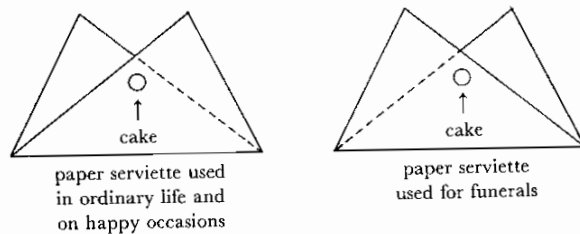


Figure 4

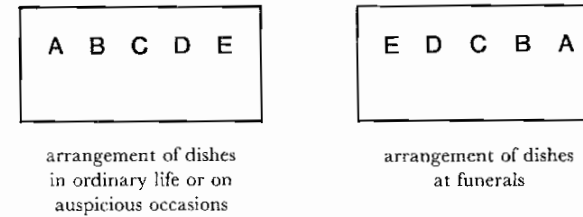


On the day of the funeral, the chief mourner borrows from other villagers such things as dining tables, tableware etc. and obtains foodstuffs from a shop for which he will pay later. Old informants say that in the past, the chief mourner recorded the various transactions made for a funeral in a special notebook with a left-hand margin or seam—as opposed to the use of a notebook with a right-hand margin or seam on other occasions, such as a wedding ceremony or in ordinary daily life (see Figure 3). This special notebook was called by villagers a *hidari-toji* (literally, 'left binding'); nowadays, however, any sort of notebook will be used.

Visitors to funerals are served with a cake and tea. On this occasion, it is considered proper that the paper serviette on which villagers put the cake they offer the visitors should be folded in such a way that the edge of the folded paper on the left side is uppermost, as shown in Figure 4. Again, this is in contrast to the method of folding used in daily life or on auspicious occasions such as weddings, when the fold should be such that the right-hand side is uppermost.

The corpse is dressed in a shroud in a manner called *hidari-mune* (literally, 'left breast'), before being put into the coffin. The normal way of wearing a kimono in

Figure 5



Japan presupposes the right side of the garment being placed underneath the left. A corpse, however, must be dressed in a kimono *hidari-mune*, that is, where the left side is placed underneath the right. Moreover, it is also said by villagers that the belt of the kimono used for a corpse, together with the *tekko* string (a covering for the back of the hand) and the *kyahan* (leggings), both worn by the dead, must all be of 'left-handed' rope.

After these preparations, the funeral ceremony itself is held. Buddhist priests step forward to the altar with their left feet first and chant a sutra. After they have finished chanting, first the family members of the deceased, then relatives and villagers, pay their respects to the deceased and burn incense powder, using their left hands for the purpose. Then the deceased is carried to the crematorium. After cremating the corpse, members of the family and other relatives put the bones into a special urn, using chopsticks held with their left hands. Some villagers use their left hands throughout, while others use the left hand only at first, and thereafter use the right hand. The bones are brought to the house after the cremation and kept at the household Buddhist altar, or *butsudan*, for 49 days, after which they are transferred permanently to an ossuary in the village.

After the funeral ceremony, visitors are served dishes arranged in a fashion known as *hidari-zen* (*hidari* means 'left'; *zen* is a portable small dining-table). The villagers say that the arrangement of dishes at a funeral must be reversed (as shown in Figure 5) from their arrangement on an auspicious occasion and in ordinary daily life,⁴ and this same arrangement is used at several memorial services held after the funeral. Thus the principle of reversal or inversion—a concept that is critical in the interpretation of left-handed behaviour in general (cf. Needham 1973)—can be recognised in comparing practices at funeral ceremonies and those of other occasions. The subject has also been observed

4. In another village, however, it is the placing of the pair of chopsticks on the left side of the *zen* at a funeral which is called *hidari-zen*. On auspicious occasions and in daily life, they are placed on the right side or in the middle of the *zen*.

elsewhere in Japan: Yoshida (in this volume) has drawn attention to the importance of the left principle in the cosmology of the Ryūkyū Islanders.

Finally, it should be noted that according to village elders it was formerly the custom that when relatives and villagers visit the family of the deceased to offer worship and present incense sticks at memorial services, the incense sticks would be extinguished with the left hand. Young people today, however, no longer behave in this manner.

Two Principles of the Left Hand

As indicated in the foregoing description, the left hand is connected not only with the rituals of the village Shinto shrine but also with funeral practices—both in the village where I conducted fieldwork and in other villages as well—even though worship at the former is conceived of as pure and funerals as impure or polluting. In this respect, then, they appear to be contradictory to each other, and to involve two different principles and meanings.

My hypothesis is as follows. In the first place, the use of the left hand in funeral practices indicates the principle of reversal or inversion, namely it is opposed to the use of the right hand, which is seen mainly on auspicious occasions or day-to-day activities. 'Right-handed' rope, for example, was used by villagers in binding rice-sheaves at harvest in the autumn, in binding straw on the roof of their houses, and in controlling their horses or cows in cultivating their fields (though some of these practices have lapsed nowadays). 'Left-handed' rope, however, was used when they bound a coffin. This kind of reversal (*sakasa*) is found in other funeral practices, such as *sakasa-hishaku* (using a ladle in a reverse way), *sakasa-kimono* (wearing a kimono in a reverse way), *sakasa-byōbu* (erecting a folding screen upside-down, viz. an 'inverted' screen), and so on. The practice of *sakasa-hishaku*, also known as *sakasa-mizu* (literally, 'reverse water'), refers to the ladle (*hishaku*) which villagers use with their left hands when they pour hot water into cold water to make it lukewarm for the purpose of washing a corpse—whereas they would normally use the right hand and, in addition, would pour cold water into hot (rather than the other way round) when preparing lukewarm water in ordinary secular daily life. The principle of reversal, contrasting funeral practices with daily activities, extends, as has been indicated, to the use of the left hand (*hidari*), such as *hidari-zen* (the inversion of dishes), *hidari-mune* (the inversion of the right under the left in the normal way of wearing a kimono), *hidari-usu* (the practice of specially turning a hand-mill anti-clockwise to make the flour for the noodles used at funerals—though nowadays ordinary factory-made flour is commonly used), and so on.

However, it seems impossible to interpret the use of the left hand observed in the rituals of the village shrine only from the viewpoint of the principle of reversal; no such principle seems to operate in such contexts. My fieldwork enquiries lead me to propose here quite a different solution for the use of the left

hand in such rituals, viz. in an acknowledgement of the cardinal directions of the east and the south, to both of which villagers attach importance in their agricultural activities, especially in rice cultivation. Temperature, represented by the south (the principal direction of sunshine), is an important factor at every stage of rice cultivation, since, as a tropical plant, rice needs a great deal of sunshine. For this reason, the south is regarded as the most important direction in agricultural activities, followed by the east, where the sun rises. Houses are constructed facing south, terrain permitting, in order to facilitate the drying of rice, wheat etc., in the yard in front. Moreover, the Shinto priest prefers the village shrine itself to face south if possible, because the main purpose of worship there is to pray for success in agriculture, and in particular for a good harvest of rice. The east, as the direction of sunrise, has come to be regarded by the villagers as the root or beginning of all things. As they put it, 'at the village Shinto shrine, we install *shimenawa*, putting the "root" or the "beginning" of it in the east—in other words, at the left hand viewed from the *kami*—because when we face south, the east corresponds to our left hand.' It is at this point that a fresh interpretation can be proposed concerning the use of the left hand in the worship of the village shrine—namely that since the left coincides with the east, it is symbolically related to it.⁵ This is also expressed in the movements of the village priest when he ascends the stairway and makes offerings to the *kami*, viz. keeping his left foot, facing east, closer to it than his right.

In summing up, therefore, it seems to me that the meanings of the left hand observed in the rituals of the village shrine on the one hand and in funeral practices on the other are different, although they are the *same* left hand in the *same* village. The use of the left hand observed in funeral practices is the opposite to the use of the right hand on auspicious occasions and in the ordinary secular activities of daily life, while the use of the left hand observed in the rituals of the village shrine may be connected with the relationship between the two directions of east and south, both very important for the villagers' agricultural activities. Hence my proposal to identify two principles of the left hand in the *same* village.

5. The connection between left and east has also been pointed out by Professor Ōno (1974: 170).

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MARY J. PICONE

BUDDHIST POPULAR MANUALS AND
THE CONTEMPORARY COMMERCIALIZATION
OF RELIGION IN JAPAN

AN INVESTIGATION of the contents and of the recent diffusion of religious self-help manuals will enable us better to understand the so-called secularization of Japanese modern society. Moreover, a general view of these contemporary manuals is useful as an indication of which religious elements are thought by their authors to be most suitable for commercialization¹ and diffusion by the mass media. Before examining this point in greater detail, I would like to consider the similarities between modern handbooks and earlier works within the popular religious tradition. It may be mentioned here that the mere fact of the existence and wide sales of the manuals indicates a breakdown of community-centred or hereditary transmission of tradition. For many, and in particular for urban Japanese, it has become necessary to acquire such knowledge independently.

Historically, religious manuals are not entirely new in Japan. It is possible to trace certain characteristics of contemporary literature in this genre back to the *Nihon ryōiki*² (end of the eighth century), a collection of narratives of

1. By commercialization I mean the emphasis on the sale of religious services by religious institutions or by individual practitioners directly to clients, in contrast with the pre-modern form of financial support of established sects. Modern commercialization, moreover, relies heavily on marketing techniques made possible by the mass media.

2. The full title of this work is *Nihonkoku genpō zenaku ryōiki* (literally, An Account of Abnormal Instances of Retribution for Good and Evil in Japan); see Nakamura 1973.