

# Magical Elements in Japanese Religions Promoting Modern Consumer Ethics

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**Abstract:** Previous research appears to state that the establishment of a new moral codex favorable for the development of capitalism during the popular ethical reforms in the 19th century Japan was influenced by factors such as traditional values system and government, popular moral thought and magico-religious dimensions of a vitalistic mindset of new religions. This paper, drawing on the assumption that considers the meaning of religious elements for the advance of the consumer aspect of the development of a capitalist society, suggests a detailed study of magico-religious elements, such as buying charms and believing in practical benefits. Popular ethics should be examined not only as factors promoting production but rather as favorable elements promoting modern consumer ethics as a necessary aspect of a capitalist society.

**Key words:** consumer ethics, practical benefits, magic, Weber, Japan.

## Introduction

Weber's *Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* remains an important basis when considering the relationship between modernization and religion within any society, especially under the hypothesis that using solely economic factors is not sufficient in explaining the emergence of capitalism and modern society. In understanding the development of our current society, it is necessary to examine its specific views and values. According to Weber, the modernization of "western culture" was supported by the flow of popular ethical reforms, which was guided by "western" religious traditions and modernistic religious movements. Specifically, Protestant ethics, related to the Calvinistic idea regarding predestination, along with religious incentives for secular practices, the "disenchantment of the world", individualism and the work ethic represent necessary prerequisites for the development of modern capitalist society in the "West". Today, however, we speak of various forms of "modernity" as well as various paths towards reaching it (Eisenstadt 1996).

Japanese society modernized itself rapidly and is according to all established criteria considered to be modern since the second half of the 20th century. It was the first non-western society that reached industrialization through a non-western path and during the 1970s became the second largest economy in the world. This gave rise to considerable interest within the research field of modernization processes in Japanese society and culture and within the theory of the modern society. Not only did Japan modernize itself without Christianity as the dominant religion, but no one religion had a monopoly over the society as is common in "western" society and which has been a precondition for secularization in the "West". Which characteristics of the religious world and its development could influence the process of shaping modern society in Japan?

Many people in Japan today consider themselves as secular and disinterested in religion. Recent studies showed that only 26% of respondents declared themselves as religious, while only 30% consider themselves as followers of a certain religion. On the other hand, the religious institutions claim to have so many followers that their total number exceeds twice the number of the total population of Japan (126 million). Furthermore, almost 90% of Japanese regularly visit the graves of their ancestors, 75% of families have Buddhist and/or Shinto alters within their homes, most parents include their children in the “coming-of-age” ceremony *shichigosan* (七五三) within the local shrine, while temples and shrines record multitudes of visitors during the New Year *hatsumōde* (初詣で) (Meiji jingu in Tokyo has over three million visitors over the first three days of the New Year). Pilgrimage to various sacred sites is also becoming prominent, which is further confirmed through the popularity of the show “*Nippon junrei*” (日本巡礼) (Pilgrimage in Japan) that airs on national television. All these factors indicate a high rate of participation of the Japanese in religious practices and a tendency towards the eclectic nature of Japanese religiosity.<sup>1</sup> Can we, to some degree, attribute the dynamic religious practices within the modern Japanese society to the positive influence of the consumer society on modern religiosity? Researchers in modern western surroundings have observed that the process of secularization and globalization, which terminated religious monopolies, and the influence of the consumer culture paved the way towards “freer” choice of religion, the “revitalization of religion” or towards de-secularization. Even the traditional “popular” religiosity within western Christianity took its form as a combination of the “people’s” choice, selection, interpretation and combination of demands/offers of specialized institutions of various ancient “popular” religions and Christianity as well as its leaders (Kerševan 1989). What does this tell us regarding the influence between consumption and popular religiosity?

## Consumer aspect of the rise of capitalism

As Marx (1939: 312) already anticipated, the survival of the modern capitalistic society is critically linked to economic consumption. Today everyday life and the self-expression of individuals occur through consumption, which some have named “the new religion” or rather a substitute for religion. However, Weber does not answer the question regarding which spiritual foundations were the basis for the delayed growth of “useless” pleasurable consumption. In other words, in Weber’s *Protestant ethic*, we do not find the answer to the mutual encouraging relationship between production and consumption. In his book *The Romantic Ethic and the Spirit of Consumption*, Campbell addresses the question of productivistic discrimination of the contemporary interpretation of the nature of modern society and concentrates specifically on overlooked circumstances that encouraged the development of consumption. Through the development of Protestantism in England in the 17th and 18th century, he shows that two opposing yet complementary ethics existed side by side as two lateral religious movements.<sup>2</sup> Ascetic ethics facilitated the production aspect, while the dynamic development of demand for goods enabled the liberation from the strict religious framework (Kos 1998: 269).

Campbell’s theories are, similar to Weber’s, limited to Christian experiences, but serve as a basis for the problematization of the relationship between religion and consumption in general. Considering the assumption regarding the existence of religious elements that encourage the consumer aspect of the development of the modern society can take us beyond the question “did consumption occupy an empty place left by the absence of religion?” further to the question of which religious elements, that favor consumption, contributed to the development of modern Japanese society and were preserved within it?

## Japanese history: trouble with Weber's theory

Soon after the Second World War, historical studies in Japan (partly as a reaction to criticism regarding the “emperor-national image” during the war) were governed by socio-economic interpretations with strong idealistic views. In this type of atmosphere, the majority of traditional ideas and customs including religion, were labeled as “pre-modern” as well as “remains of feudalism”. In any case, the theory of modernization that came into the foreground in the late 1950s, almost overturned the views on Japanese history. The *Tokugawa Religion* (1957), despite being written by the foreign American author Robert N. Bellah, indicated a new trend of re-evaluating the past, especially the early-modern past of Japanese history.<sup>3</sup> Within this context, the theme of modernization was tightly connected to the problem of rationalization in history, a phenomenon that Weber introduced as key for the comparative analysis of world religions. During this time, the acceptance and re-evaluation of Weber's ideas was promoted among Japanese intellectuals, even before the so-called “Weber's renaissance” in his motherland.<sup>4</sup>

His theories had a strong influence not only within the field of sociology of religion, but also in general within social sciences. This acceptance of Weber's ideas stemmed from the Japanese strong belief regarding the “backwardness” of Japan after they lost the Second World War and their ardent outlook towards the “West” and the theories put forth by “western” thinkers such as Max Weber and Karl Marx in examining the historical development of Japanese capitalism. Various trends in Japanese sociology of religion indicate the changing attitudes towards Weber's theories. The first studies of Weber were focused mainly on his work within the field of economic and commercial history. Sociologists began discussing his ideas at the end of the 1920s connected with sociological methodology and with concepts such as “ideal types” and “freedom of values”. The studies gradually formed the central course of Weber's studies in Japan. Along with studies regarding Weber's economic theories and sociological methodologies, studies appeared that concentrated on his comparative studies of the “East” and “West” as well as his analysis of the relationship between ethics and economic processes (Maruyama 1965; Uchida 1990).

Thorough examinations of Weber's theories on ethics and ethos are undertaken with an emphasis on his book *Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*. Ōtsuka Hisao, a former professor of modern European economic history in his book, *Kindaika no ningenteki kiso (The Human Foundation of Modernization, 1948)* speaks of ways that Weber's theories of ethos can be correlated with theories of human types that would support Japanese modernization. For the reconstruction of Japanese democracy, writes Ōtsuka, it is necessary to create “modern, democratic types of humans” (Ōtsuka 1969: 175). His studies influenced the development of religious studies in Japan with the idea that some specific religion (Protestantism) lead toward the formation of the modern society and that all other religions hinder this formation. In Japan, the idealization of Protestantism as the source of modernity due to its victory over “magic” prevailed. As a consequence, Japanese religions were criticized as being saturated with magic and thus hindering modernization. Magic, according to Ōtsuka, is an integral part of traditional ethos and contradictory to the modern human type. He writes that “liberation from magic is ... essential in realizing the process of reconstructing democracy in today's Japan” (1969: 235). For him, the elimination of magic from Japanese religion represents a necessary step for realizing Japan's modernization, with which Japan must hurry in order to catch up with the “West” (Hayashi and Yamanaka 1993: 213).

During the 1970s, a huge change occurs in the understanding of Weber's theories. Firstly, due to its central place in postwar sociology of religion, its practical usage begins to decline, which in turn diminished the influence of Weber's criticisms of the modernization in Japan. Two main factors can be identified as the cause of this change in thinking: new guidelines in intellectual debate at the

global scale and special social circumstances in Japan. In academic circles, the criticism regarding the Eurocentric evolutionary viewpoint of history evolved into anti-modernism. In Japan, a strong influence from authors such as Jung, Lévi-Strauss and Eliade begins to take place. Weber's theories, which speak of removing magic through rationalization, became obsolete. The understanding that myths, symbols, rituals and worldviews hold crucial meaning in people's lives prevailed (Hayashi and Yamanaka 1993: 216).

Other factors that influenced the changed affinity toward Weber's theories was the rapid economic development, in which the Japanese began to enjoy a higher standard of living and thus began to view their politically economic situation in a more positive light. Earlier discussions regarding modernism always labeled Japan as being behind in development with regard to the "West" and an underdeveloped society. However, this view was dismissed due to successful industrialization and economic prosperity. The academic world began to recognize the existence of multiple models of modernization. Japan, aware of its place among other developed industrial societies, began to revitalize the before neglected values from its feudal past, such as the traditional extended family *ie* (家) and the dynamic group oriented society (Aoki 1990). These changes within intellectual circles influenced changes in religious studies and led to the use of new methodologies and analytical tools for discovering the meaning of myths, symbols and rituals. Two approaches to Weber's theories take shape: the first dismisses the theory as irrelevant for Japan and attempts to pursue religious studies on the foundation of the study of symbols and rituals (Yanagawa 1968, 1975). The second is critical, but attempts to adapt Weber's theory.

## Conclusion

Authors of the critically adapted approach toward Weber's theories reject negative views regarding Japanese popular religion but rather recognize the meaning of ethos. They attempt to examine the practice and historical development of ethical ideas of the Japanese and explain the relationship between Japanese models of modernization and religious ethos, which supported and preserved it.

Prominent representative of the critically-adaptable approach are Robert N. Bellah, Yasumaru Yoshio and Shimazono Susumu. They adapted the view that Japan was not behind the "West" in terms of modernization, but rather took a different path than the "West". All of the mentioned authors argued that Japanese popular religion successfully ensured the type of ethics and ethos that support modernization (Hayashi and Yamanaka 1993: 217). Furthermore, they showed that magic, that in the process of modernization disappeared within the western (European-North American) world, was still observed and strengthened within Japan (Shimazono 1992b; Numajiri 1996: 109-124). Shimazono revisits the meaning of magical elements in Japanese religion and society. He contemplates how magico-religious elements are inseparably linked to elements that led to popular ethical reforms, but focuses on the Japanese new religions. For him, magic or rather the "magico-religious factor"<sup>5</sup> is something that can support a modern and postmodern society within the vitalistic concept that encompasses magic religiosity of new religions.<sup>6</sup> According to Shimazono, this was the leading factor in the popular reforms during the 19th and 20th centuries (1981). For him the vitalistic thought answered important questions faced by people going through the modernization process, as it focused on the basic problems in everyday life (such as the search for ties in new social relationships after the dissolution of traditional social ties) and as such, claims Shimazono, vitalistic thinking certainly played a positive role in adapting people for modern social relationships and therefore contains elements that supported modern and postmodern social thinking (1981: 221). Yasumaru partly denies the above mentioned arguments set forth by Shimazono, as he doubts that ordinary people are capable of the self-discipline and individuality required by vitalistic salvation<sup>7</sup> (Yasumaru 2007: 348). According to Yasumaru the

“correct” ethical standpoint was provided by the “popular morality thought”<sup>8</sup> that, in his opinion excludes religious thinking systems based on vitalism. These doubts probably stem from the question of whether (in this world and for the practically oriented) vitalistic salvation among common people could bring with it the ethical values necessary for modernization according to Weber’s theories. Yasumaru’s view that “popular ethical reform and magical elements (of vitalism) are contradictory” was criticized by Shimazono, stating that due to his negative criticism of magic Yasumaru fails to distance himself from “modernists”. These did not recognize the popular ethical reforms that had an important role in shaping ethics in modern Japan, as they believed that the majority of Japanese wander in a “magical garden” (Shimazono 1992a: 141).

The arguments set forth by various authors are influenced by two different approaches to religion that function in the background of their thinking process. Hayashi and Yamanaka (1993) warned that in the analysis of (un)acceptance of Weber’s theories in Japan, it is important to understand how Weber himself understood religion. According to Weber, the drive for rationalization requires the right ethical standpoint, that stems from the integrated thought system based on religious ideals. The emphasis on the thought system ignores the importance of symbols and rituals in religion in general as well as within the modernization process. The positive approach towards magico-religious elements in more current studies done by Japanese authors indicate a divide between their theories regarding religion and Weber’s understanding of religion (Hayashi and Yamanaka 1993).

Several authors, Japanese and foreign, in their studies showed that in contrast to the western world, where the thorough elimination of magic was the necessary condition for development, the process of modernization in Japan preserved and even strengthened the presence of magic (Shimazono 1992b; Numajiri 1996: 109-124). In researching the role of religion in modernization processes in Japan, the analysis of magico-religious elements remains an important aspect that promoted popular ethical reforms. Taking into account Campbell’s theory, it is important to examine the role of magico-religious elements not only in their meaning for the development of suitable ethics but also in their non-negligible promoting role in the consumer aspect of the development of a capitalist society.

## Notes:

<sup>1</sup> Many different religious traditions coexist in Japan. Among the most important are Shinto, Mahayana Buddhism, Confucianism (especially Confucian ethics), Christianity, new religions and folk religion. Christianity was introduced to Japan in the 16th century and again in the 19th century. New religions appeared and blossomed during the Meiji period in the 19th century and following the Second World War. Folk religion was, for a long time, through syncretic religious belief and practice part of the legacy of the common people. All of these traditions influenced each other and shaped the religion of Japanese society.

<sup>2</sup> Consumption began within the middle class with its demand of luxurious goods, which was also the class of ascetic and puritan Protestant ethics. In his search for a correlation between Protestantism and pleasure, Campbell discovered that a care for aesthetics - a new integral part imported from aristocracy, lead to radical changes in the former moral and spiritual ethic of the middle class (Campbell 1987: 203).

<sup>3</sup> In the study of Eastern Asia, the term “early-modern” is used for Song, Ming and Qing dynasty in China, while in Japan the term “early-modern” is used for the Tokugawa period (Hayashi 1998: 18-20 describes this in more detail).

<sup>4</sup> Various sociologists and scholars of religion, using Weber’s theories as a basis, examined the internal connection between religious ideology and the growth of modern industrialist capitalism in Japan. In the religious studies of postwar Japan, Weber’s work Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism

becomes a paradigm, while Protestantism is renowned as the only true religion that is, with its ethics, capable of shaping a modern society. Within Japanese literature of this period, one can find written that for the modernization of Japan, following the western model, it is necessary to become liberated from magic “*majutsu kara no kaihō*” (魔術からの開放), which is an integral part of Japanese traditional popular religion. Later, towards the end of the 1960s, when Japan reaches a successful level of industrialization and economic growth, the use of Weber’s theories for criticizing Japan as “behind” in its modernization loses its credibility and the awareness that there exist different models for modernization begins to appear. Some academics dismiss them as irrelevant for Japan, while others, assuming the existence of a Japanese model of modernization along with supporting Japanese religious ethics, attempt to adapt his theories.

<sup>5</sup> Here is magic defined as “an attempt, for whatever purpose, to utilize the assistance of a supernatural entity (deities, spirits and the like) or magical power in order to cause various phenomena, or the belief systems associated with such acts” (Shimazono 1981:213, after Yoshida 1973). For Shimazono this belief system does not differ from animism (or fundamental belief in their widest senses) containing such elements as taboos, fortune telling and shamanism. He refers to this as the “magico-religious factor” (ibid.).

<sup>6</sup> New religions offer this-worldly salvation (happiness, health etc.) through magically oriented techniques, practices and beliefs.

<sup>7</sup> Vitalistic conception of salvation, in its simplest sense, is optimistic view of salvation easily attainable in this world.

<sup>8</sup> Yasumaru from Weber’s and Ōtsuka’s “theory of asceticism” develops the “theory of popular morality thought” (popular thought based on conventional morality) which supposedly formed within the specific process of Japanese modernization. Here he criticizes Maruyuma and Ōtsuka for labeling popular thought/mindset as “irrational, reactionary and feudalistic” (Yasumaru 1974: 40). Popular morality thought should be based on strengths such as diligence, thriftiness, humility, filial respect and harmony. Yasumaru, drawing on historical documents, argues that these strengths shaped the internal religious ethics of common people and that it offered support to modernization in Japan (Yasumaru 1974).

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