

The Blur of Modernity:
Essentialism, Affect and Everyday Life in Tokyo

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Declaration

I, Tobia Farnetti, confirm that the work presented in this thesis is my own. Where information has been derived from other sources, I confirm that this has been indicated in the thesis.

ABSTRACT

This thesis explores the constitutive role that cultural essentialism plays in the everyday life of Japanese urban modernity. Starting from the ethnographic observation that essentialised ideas of “Japan” and “the Japanese” are not only fruit of an orientalisng anthropological gaze but also a prime indigenous concern, I aim to place my analysis as a “third way” between those ethnographies that employ essentialism as method and those who handle it as an object of critique. The experiment is to re-frame essentialism as the ethnographic object under scrutiny - as a living and breathing presence in the lives of people in Tokyo

The main argument guiding the thesis is that looking at essentialised social categories one does find its essentialised version - e.g. family structure understood as timeless and constitutively Japanese - but also, together with it, what is understood as its negative - e.g. a fluid changing family structure moving with history, migration to the urban centres, Westernisation and the life of the city. One does find strong binaries - e.g. old and new, Japanese and foreign, traditional and modern - and yet it is not through one of its extremes that essentialised social forms are lived and understood, but in between them. While this may appear paradoxical, in the thesis I show that it is through a dynamic of “blurring” of the terms of the opposition - in the ephemeral moments (sometimes transfixed in stone) when the two terms overlap and become undistinguishable - that the engagement with these forms is most strongly felt. This blurring carries a strong affective and aesthetic charge and can thus be in turn essentialised as something constitutively “Japanese”. Based on two years of fieldwork in eastern Tokyo the thesis aims to understand this indigenous logic in its own right, seeking to find it in different fragments of metropolitan life.

To my grandmother, mo-wo.

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Oh, when I was really young I promised myself that if I ever wrote a book I'd dedicate it to Friedrich Nietzsche. This gets close to it. It feels very silly now (and embarrassing!) and I am going to break that promise - but at least I should acknowledge it here. I thank him for blowing my mind when I was a teenager and putting me on this tortuous mountain trail – I am exhausted, but so thankful nevertheless. Here you go, Nietzsche.

NOTE ON NAMES, TRANSLITERATION AND TRANSLATION

Japanese names have been written with the surname followed by the given name, as it is Japanese convention. Exceptions are made when the author has published predominantly in English, when they are a non-Japanese person of Japanese ancestry or for *nom de plume*, which are left untouched.

In rendering Japanese terms I have followed the Hepburn style of romanization. While macrons indicate long vowels, I decided to omit them in commonly used words such as the names of cities (e.g. Tokyo in place of Tōkyō), regions (e.g. Kyushu in place of Kyūshū) and a few other words that have become part of English parlance (e.g. Sumo instead of Sumō, Shinto instead of Shintō).

All translations are mine unless otherwise stated.

INTRODUCTION

“Until now, I thought darkness was nothing but bad. But my time with you made me change my mind. You've chosen a road I never thought of. Light and dark, back to back. With you, they mingle in a way no one's ever seen before. I want to see where that road leads.”

– Mickey Mouse
in *Kingdom Hearts:
Chain of Memories*

Scope of the Thesis

December 2015 – my friend runs a series of night walks around different parts of Tokyo. Every time a different artist is invited to curate it, to choose the area and the itinerary, to talk people through the territory. This is walk number 14 and my friend curated it herself - it is called “In Search of Japanese Nationalism” (*nihon no nashonarizumu wo sagashi ni iku*). We meet outside Maihama station in Chiba, in the industrial east of Tokyo bay. It is freezing and there is only a few of us - we breathe into our hands to warm them up and pass around flasks of tea and *kairo*, the disposable heating pads ubiquitous in the Japanese winter. Behind us the strange glow of Tokyo Disneyland, our starting point. It is 10pm, closing time, we walk upstream against the crowds leaving dreamland and walking towards the train station holding their souvenirs. At the gate my friend explains what we are doing here. This is a place where every person born and raised in Japan has been to at least once. If you haven't been people would think: “as a Japanese person, something is not quite right” (*nihonjin to*

shite, nanika okashi). The act of going to the world of dream might be a standard (*sutandādo*) for being Japanese. However if you were not born and raised here, the act of going to the American world of dream built in the country that experienced two atomic bombs would make you think: “as a Japanese person, something is not quite right”. From the “inside”, as it were, Disneyland represents something constitutive of being Japanese; of being a child, a young person on a date, a young parent. From the “outside” it is a colonial tumour – the symbol of the enduring presence, at least culturally, of American occupation.

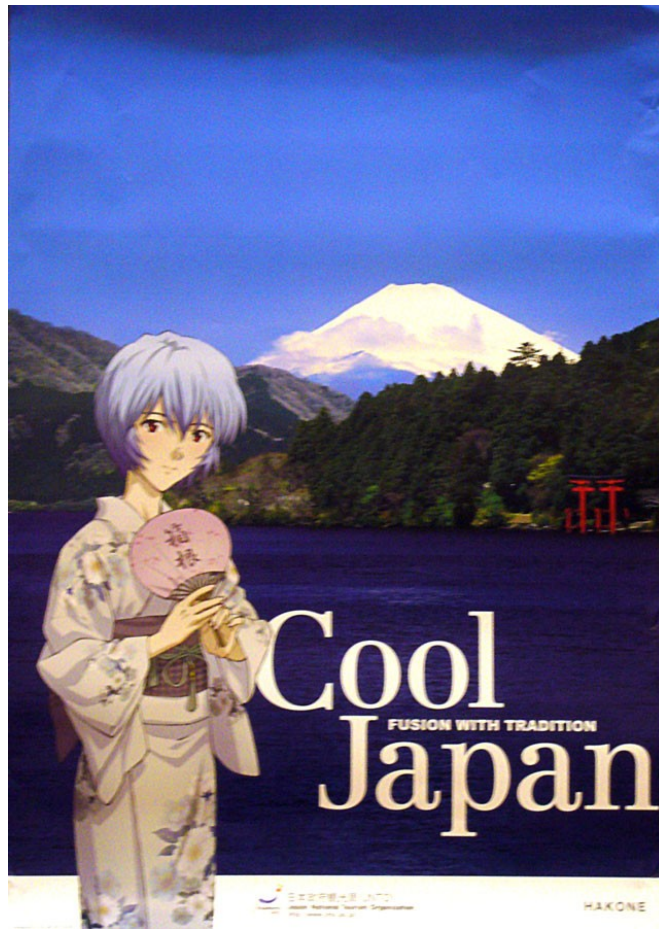
Mickey-Mouse, wearing a top-hat, smiles down at us while she explains this conundrum - “I don't understand it well but I think that something here is important to understand Japanese nationalism”. This apparent paradox is something that, for my friend, goes to the core of what it means to be Japanese today. Everyone agrees that - while they definitely would consider it something foreign, American, non-Japanese – Disneyland is, at the same time, something very Japanese, something that resonates with their cultural identity as “Japanese people” (*nihonjin*). We start from a closing Disneyland, walk around the fences and wander into the hotel lobby adorned with a fountain and frescos of Disney characters. We are immediately like everyone else, holding our phones up high and frantically taking pictures. We take group pictures in front of the entrance, smiling and doing the mandatory V-sign with our hands. Then we leave the warmth of the hotel and the hubbub of crowds to enter the empty night of the bay, walking towards *yumenoshima*, dream island – a different kind of dream compared to the American-Japanese one we left behind. Built in the 1930s out of waste landfill the artificial island was expected to host an airport that was never built, was briefly re-purposed as a beach resort (1947-50) and later became a waste

incineration facility the bushes behind which were a popular gay cruising spot in the 1990s. The night here is quiet, empty and cold; we walk on bridges that cross over water and motorways and stop at vending machines for cans of sweetened hot coffee, corn soup (*kōn potāju*) and sweet red bean soup (*oshiruko*) to hold in our hands for warmth.

A few hours later we arrive at our destination; at the gates of Tokyo Korean No.2 Elementary School in Edogawa. The school is one of the 140 schools in Japan run by the General Association of Korean Residents in Japan (*chongryon*), a Zainichi Korean association with close ties to North-Korea.¹ Since 2002 - when Kim Jong-il admitted that at least a dozen Japanese citizens were abducted by North-Korea in the 1970s and 80s - the school has been a constant target for violent harassment by far-right groups (*uyoku dantai*).² Here we find a different kind of nationalism compared to the one we started from; more visceral, more straightforward, more horrifying. The schoolyard beyond the gate is empty and the late winter dawn is still a few hours away. We seek refuge from the cold in a 24hr family restaurant and wait for the first trains to start; still short of answers and haunted by all the dreams of the nation-state - flashing their neon-light smiles through anthropomorphic animal figures or hiding behind the windscreen of black trucks (*gaisensha*) blasting hate speech from a loudspeaker.

1 *Zainichi* is a name for long-term Korean residents in Japan (from both North and South) who migrated before 1945, and thus trace their roots to Korea under Japanese occupation, and to people who have descended from them. They constitute today the second ethnic minority in Japan (*Sōmushō Tōkeikyoku* 2017). On North Koreans in Japan and *Chongryon* see Ryang 1997, 2000a, 2016 and Bell 2016.

2 The harassment intensified with the North Korean missile tests of 2006 and later 2017.



1. Cool Japan Poster

This thesis is an attempt to continue that night's conversation by taking these phenomena seriously and trying to understand them. It argues that this logic of blurring, overlapping and coincidence of opposites is the abiding logic upon which Japanese essentialism is predicated, and thus moves onto investigating its everyday dimensions. Once one starts to look around this apparently paradoxical blurring springs up in more than one place. In 2011 a new promotional poster was released by the Japan National Tourism Organisation (*Kokusai Kankō Shinkō Kikō*; or JNTO) picturing a character from a world-famous sci-fi *anime* series standing in front of the popular tourist destination of Lake Ashi in Hakone. The character, normally clad in a

futuristic pilot suit and driving a giant anthropomorphic robot, is here wearing traditional vestments. The “cool” in “Cool Japan” is not “Japan” but actually just Tokyo - and not the whole of Tokyo but only some of its fragments: the *otaku*-culture of Akihabara, the street fashion of Harajuku and so on. At the same time the true identity of “Japan”, as we shall see, is deemed in essentialist discourses to be found not in Tokyo but in notions such as *inaka* (countryside) and *furusato* (native place, homeland) – which evoke feelings of nostalgia and lost authenticity (Robertson 1988; Creighton 1997; Dodd 2004; Morrison 2013)³.

In the poster past and future, modernity and tradition, urban and rural are fused together and yet maintain their distinctiveness. One can recognise the elements of tradition and cultural authenticity and the elements of futuristic modernity as distinct but, like in Disneyland, one finds the two overlaid and blurred. Examples of this dynamic are everywhere – in *manga*, *anime*, video-games and pop-culture (the epigraph is itself from a strange blurring, a popular early-2000s video-game that merges characters from famous Japanese games and Disney characters), but also in the predictable places where one expects to find a straightforward essentialism: Shrines, temples and social institutions deemed traditional.

Essentialism is, as we shall see below, a huge uncomfortable presence in the anthropology of Japan. This is not only because orientalising Japan has proved much too easy, but also because people in Japan – scholars and the public alike – seem to be deeply invested in the creation and perpetuation of essentialised images of “Japan” (*nihon*) and “Japanese people” (*nihonjin*). Living in Tokyo one does quickly find that

³ For nuanced recent analyses of “culture” (*bunka*) from the point of view of the rural/urban dichotomy see Thompson and Traphagan 2006.

these essentialised images have a prominent place in people's lives – and in its humble, self-deprecating, intimate forms this essentialism carries assumptions of an atemporal and homogeneous “culture” that people, *qua* Japanese, partake in. In thinking about essentialism in Japan however, the main argument of the thesis goes, one cannot only look at social forms that encapsulate discourses of “tradition”, “authenticity” or “cultural integrity”.

Institutions like the family, Shinto, sumo, seasonal festivities and other cultural forms that fall under the rubric of “tradition” (*dentō*) are undeniably assumed to be timeless expressions of such Japaneseness. However, once one looks at these essentialised social and cultural forms, one does not find a straightforward essentialism that pins cultural authenticity *against* its other – be that the West, modernity or new social forms arising in response to them. One does often find these strong binaries – Japanese vs. Western, traditional vs. modern – but with them a logic of blurring that, instead of placing essentialism with one of the constituents and against the other as one would expect, instead predicates it – like in the example of Disneyland – on the space of blurring, overlap and coexistence of these binaries.

The experience of these “blurrings”, the thesis argues, is inherently an affective one. On that December night the conversation often stopped in meditative silences and trailing sentences- “...isn't it so .. (*sō da ne...*)” - before people changed topic, until the conversation was again picked up at another stop on the trail. Everyone agreed that it is hard to put into words something that is so ineffable, so tied to memories, emotions and feelings. The self-evident nature of Disneyland's place in the heart of belonging was not something they thought about – if not, like my friend, as a question – but

something that they could *feel*. Affect is a fundamental piece of this puzzle. As we shall see it is on the ineffable affective significance elicited by this dynamics of blurring that Japanese essentialism – one that encompasses both “standard” essentialised social forms and their opposite – is predicated upon. These moments – of overlap, blurring, coexistence of opposites – create a certain intensity, a certain feeling, and this feeling is the whole point of this logic. This thesis tries to get close to these affective impressions which are unspeakable because, ultimately, one has to feel them.

There are then three key problematics to the thesis: essentialism, the logic of blurring and overlapping, affect. As we shall see essentialism is the starting and end point of the argument. It is in looking at indigenous ways of navigating and understanding essentialism that the thesis uncovers this logic as the abiding principle over which those rest. In turn, it is by then focusing on this logic that the importance of affect is brought to light – moments of blurring and overlapping have a strong affective charge, one often deemed ineffable and hard to put into words. This affective dimension, elicited through the blurring and overlapping of boundaries, is in turn essentialised as constitutively “Japanese”, often becoming central to the construction of essentialised social forms. In other words, essentialism contains, within itself, a kernel of its own negation – be that the foreign, social and historical change, hybridity. People's experiences of the demise of these boundaries – between essentialised “Japan” and “tradition” on the one hand, and hybridity and contamination on the other – become central to the construction of essentialism itself, as if in the experience of the demise of boundaries they are immediately neatly drawn again. The thesis analyses everyday examples of this logic to find a picture of essentialism that differs from the ways in which it has been valorised in academic accounts – an essentialism that does not treat

the “other” only in a distancing act aimed at asserting boundaries, but one that actively incorporates it and, through the very blurring of these boundaries, asserts cultural identity.

While the question of the thesis is then the one of essentialism – what does this pervasive essentialism look like in its lived forms? How is it indigenously and practically understood? What is it like to live *with* it? In order to answer these question blurring and overlap, together with the feeling they elicit, comes to the fore as the main problem the thesis is aiming to elucidate.

* * *

Japan, Essentialism, Critique: Analytical Trajectories

Essentialism is a central problem not only in the anthropology of Japan but in anthropology more in general. Its distinctive mark, Michael Herzfeld has argued, lies “in its suppression of temporality: it assumes or attributes an unchanging, primordial ontology to what are the historically contingent products of human or other forms of agency” (2002: 188). After the publication of important works such as Edward Said's *Orientalism* (1978), in the 1990s many anthropologists explicitly took an anti-essentialist stance attacking the us/them dichotomy assumed in anthropological practice and the construction of the “ethnographic other” as part of a monolithic, atemporal and unchanging culture (e.g. Abu-Lughod 1991; Carrier 1992; Gupta and Ferguson 1997). More recently, however, others have argued that concepts such as cultural orders (Sahlins 2000), cosmologies (Handelman 2008; Abramson and

Holbraad 2014), or ontologies (Scott 2000; Kohn 2015), strongly rejected by anti-essentialist scholars, do have methodological purchase. One can, in the opinion of these latter scholars, indeed analyse the ways in which people think and act in reference to these larger scales. These wider schemas need not be equated to timeless, holistic and static essences - or be as cumbersome as Durkheim's "society" or Geertz's "culture" - but can do justice to the ways people themselves understand, create and innovate their own lives and surroundings (cf. Wagner 1975). While "the Nuer" have been undoubtedly essentialised in Evans-Pritchard's famous works (cf. Hutchinson 1996; McKinnon 2000) one cannot as easily dismiss accounts of, e.g., "Melanesian" personhood which have been part of the ongoing effort to promote the "permanent decolonisation of thought" (Viveiros de Castro 2015) that anthropology should by now be engaged with as a discipline.⁴

Things get even more complicated when essentialism is not only perpetrated "from outside" by Western scholars but it is actively embraced, from "the inside", by the essentialised people themselves. What my friends were trying to articulate on that cold December night was not nationalism *per se* but something that, so to speak, comes before it. It is a "fellow feeling" (Geertz 1963) or "cultural intimacy" (Herzfeld 1997) - the affective dimension of essentialism, or the essentialist dimension of *communitas*. Intimacy "involves an aspiration for a narrative about something shared" (Berlant 1998: 281) and cultural intimacy is that very affective narrative on a national scale. The thesis starts from the observation that essentialised images of "Japan" (*nihon*) and their identity as "Japanese people" (*nihonjin*) - with their corollaries in spheres such as personhood and kinship - play a prominent role in my interlocutors' understanding of

⁴ See e.g. Strathern 1988; Wagner 1991; LiPuma 2000; Strathern and Stewart 2000; Stewart and Strathern 2000, 2002; Mosko 2010.

themselves and their place in the world. In the anthropology of Japan the problem of essentialism has stubbornly kept the centre stage since the publication of Ruth Benedict's influential *The Chrysanthemum and the Sword* (1946). The problem, as we shall see in this section, is that the images of Japanese society one finds in clearly essentialist ethnographies such as Benedict's have a resonance on the ground, with the ways people talk about and understand themselves and their surroundings.

While the fact that people might themselves produce and embrace essentialised models of their own culture has been first highlighted by Gayatri Spivak (1988) in her conceptualisation of “strategic essentialism”⁵, I did not feel much strategy in the ways in which “essences” were dealt with by friends and acquaintances in Tokyo. Unsurprisingly it is Herzfeld's work (1997) on “cultural intimacy” that feels the most relevant here, and I shall engage with it after first presenting the two dominant approaches to the “essentialism problem” in the study of Japan. The first approach is an holistic anthropology that embeds essentialism in its method and the other a critical theory that treats its indigenous expressions as an object to be dismantled. With Herzfeld, a central tenet of this thesis is that “distrust of essentialism in social theory should not blur our awareness of its equally pervasive presence in social life” (1997: 26). The aim of this work is then to take these indigenous expressions seriously, which does not mean taking them on board, and to treat them not as objective representation of the “reality” of Japanese society, nor as an object of critique, but as an ethnographic problem to be taken seriously and interrogated.

5 See e.g. Fischer 1999 for an ethnographic example. Another example can be found in the work of the feminist theorist Luce Irigaray (e.g. 1985: 23-33) on mimesis – the resubmitting of women to stereotypes about women in order to call those very stereotypes into question.

Ruth Benedict's *Chrysanthemum and the Sword* (1946) was published just after WWII and it will become the book all social theory on Japan, both within and without its bounds, has to reckon with in a way or another. Building on Boas' method and on her own *Patterns of Culture* (1934), Benedict attempts to understand the wider patterns of Japanese culture in order to understand the behaviour of its people. The main goal of the book was political. It aimed to reinstate Japanese people, seen as alien and abject during WWII, as rational and understandable (Shannon 1995; Ryang 2004: 58-66)⁶ and framed Japan's entrance in the war not as a politico-economic quest for imperialist expansion but as a “cultural problem”, as an expression and consequence of the temperament and cultural orientation of the Japanese nation.⁷ The study was conducted at the request of the U.S. Office of War Information (OWI) to understand and predict Japanese behaviour.⁸ Like in many others OWI studies (e.g. Embree 1945 on Japan; Lowie 1945 on Germany), unable to visit the country Benedict employed a culture-at-distance approach using newspapers, films, books and interviews with Japanese-Americans in internment camps on American territory (Kent 1994). Japanese people were portrayed by Benedict as stuck between contradictions –grace (the chrysanthemum) and aggression (the sword), politeness and insolence, adaptability and rigidity, and so on. Importantly Japanese and American cultures were held to be the very opposite, or inverse, of each other.⁹

6 In this sense Benedict's *Chrysanthemum* can be seen as another instance in the debate about “different rationalities” insofar as it attempts to delineate an alternative rational logic behind apparently irrational behaviours. See e.g. Evans-Pritchard 1937; Winch 1970; Horton 1967; Sahlins 1985, 1995 (vs. Obeyesekere 1992); Lukes 2000.

7 Compare Ryang 2002 and Rosenblatt 2004 for comments on Benedict “culture” methodology.

8 See Price 2008: 171-99 for an overview of the U.S. wartime employment of anthropologists to study Japan.

9 E.g. Benedict 1946: 253-4. See also Robertson 1998c.

The book became a best seller not only domestically in the US but also in Japan, and received an incredible amount of criticisms in the years following both its publication in 1946 and its Japanese translation in 1948.¹⁰ However Benedict's essentialism did not really backfire. In fact, the *Crysanthemum*, on top of its enduring stellar sales (even today one can find it in most bookshops in Tokyo), exerted an incredible and lasting influence on both Western anthropology and on Japanese reflections on their own culture. Her legacy in the West can be found not only in clearly essentialist portraits of “Japanese culture”, but also in more nuanced works that take holistic or culturalist approaches to Japanese society (e.g. Lebra 1976, 2004; Rosenberger 1992; Hendry 1993a).

The Japanese legacy is somehow more complex. During Japan's economic boom in the 1970s and 1980s, a specific genre of quasi-academic studies of national character became extremely popular. While a sort of reflexive self-essentialism is not unique to Japan (e.g. Carrier 1995), this genre – *nihonjinron*, “theories about the Japanese” – aimed “to establish Japan’s uniqueness and to differentiate Japan from other cultures” (Befu 2001: 2). “Virtually the entire discourse of that branch of Japanese studies called *Nihonjinron*”, it has been argued, “has been carried out within the framework established by Benedict’s book” (Lummis 2007: 4; see also Lie 2001a).

Nihonjinron literature advocates the “fundamental assumption that Japaneseness, which every single Japanese supposedly possesses, has existed indefinitely, that Japaneseness differs fundamentally from 'Westernness' [...] and determines all aspects

10 Criticisms are many and there is not space here to cover them exhaustively. The most famous criticism coming from Japanese scholars are Watsuji 1949 and Yanagita 1998; see Bennett and Nagai 1953, Kent 1999 for an overview of the Japanese critiques. For Western critiques/appraisals see e.g. Lummis 1982, 2007; Hendry 1996; Ryang 2002. For an appraisal of the (enduring) influence of the shame/guilt culture dichotomy see Creighton 1990; Modell 1999 Pinnington 2001.

of Japanese way of life” (Sugimoto 1999: 82; see also Morris-Suzuki 1998) through an holistic emphasis on “finding continuities between contemporary Japanese values and so-called 'traditional' practices and in explaining both in terms of Japanese geography, topography, and agriculture” (Goodman 2005:60).¹¹

Nihonjinron literature then sees Japan as unique, homogeneous, atemporal and radically different from both West and other East-Asian countries, reinterpreting the impact of historical culture-contact either as completely irrelevant or as repairable damage. In this sense, it is a form of what Terence Turner (1988: 241-2) among others has called “ethno-ethnohistory” - “ethnohistory written from the native's point of view” (Fogelson 1974: 106). The extent to which these works encode nationalism, biological essentialism and racism depends on the different books; regardless, as a genre, even in its most benign incarnations it has been accused of being based on prejudiced (Lummis 1982) or racist (Dale 1986) assumptions.

This genre sparked incredible controversy among both Japanese and Western anthropologists and with it a whole new genre of cultural critique. These works aim to debunk essentialist assumptions and show how many of the categories deemed timeless and “Japanese” are socially constructed and the fruit of a long process of hybridisation with surrounding countries such as China and Korea first, and Western ones later. Following Anderson's (1983), Gellner's (1983) and Hobsbawm and Ranger's (1994) critiques of nationalism, authors of cultural critique – starting from Peter Dale's seminal *The Myth of Japanese Uniqueness* (1986) – criticise *nihonjinron* literature's assumptions of uniqueness, homogeneity and timelessness (e.g. Mouer and Sugimoto

11 Notable best-sellers in the genre are Nakane' *Japanese Society* (1970) and Doi's *The Structure of Amae* (1973).

1986; Yoshino 1992; Befu 2001). Through the years a significant number of works came to demolish the different essentialist facets of the essentialised “Japanese Culture” and “Japanese people” - examples are critiques of the nationalism of post-war Japanese anthropology (e.g. Ryang 2004), of ethnic/cultural homogeneity (e.g. Murphy-Shigematsu 1993; Lie 2001b; Roth 2005; Willis and Murphy-Shigematsu 2008; Weiner 2009), of blood ideology (e.g. Robertson 2011); to the ideology of the Japanese language (e.g. Miller 1982; Okamoto and Smith 2004; Yeounsuk 2010; Heinrich 2012; Hosokawa 2015) and the politics of its translation (e.g. Naoki 1997).

The attack on the ideological establishment did not stop at the staple concepts of *nihonjinron* but quickly extended to encompass the whole emotional landscape of the nation, seen by these authors as comprised by constructed state discourses – often through the means of post-war mass culture (e.g. Ivy 1993; cf. Benjamin 1975) – around maternal care (Allison 1991), love and sex (Ryang 2006; cf. Foucault 1990), cuteness (McVeigh 1996), nostalgia (Robertson 1988, 1997; Ivy 1995; Yano 2003) and appreciation of nature (Martinez 2005)¹². The same goes with forms of self-presentation in everyday life such as clothes (e.g. Golstein-Gidoni 1997, 1999), make-up and body aesthetic (e.g. Ashikari 2003, 2010; Miller 2006), choice of words and modulation of voice (Inoue 2006; cf. Carson 1995). Emotional expression, institutions believed to have been always been there such as Shinto and family structure, fantasies of uniqueness were all showed to be traditions invented at particular historical junctions of the last century, and thus spawns of modernity and not of “authentic” cultural roots (cf. Gluck 1985; Vlastos 1998).

12 cf. Asquith and Kalland 1997 for softer approaches, Rots 2017 for the link between ideology and environmentalism in contemporary Shinto.

These works of “cultural critique”¹³ are extremely important and changed the way ethnography is conducted in Japan. New anthropological analyses of Japan are much more constructivist, both taking into account the ways in which realities are historically and ideologically crafted and how they are constantly made in everyday life – e.g. ethnographies such as Kondo's multi-layered ethnography of power and gender in a family-run business in Eastern Tokyo (1990), Martinez's (2004) nuanced work on identity and gender in an (oft orientalised, cf. 1990) pearl-diving village and ethnographies of how the countryside – the enshrined *locus* of tradition and authenticity – is not only “made” (Robertson 1988, 1997, 1998b; Creighton 1997) but constantly re-made by intimate encounters (Faier 2009), or “reluctant intimacies” (cf. Świtek 2016), between migrants and locals. These ethnographies favour complexity against the perceived simplicity of an holistic account of the whole nation intensely narrowing their focus to capture the different dimensions – economic, ideological, linguistic, gendered – across which everyday life is lived.

While the problems with essentialist ethnography are clear, the problems of cultural critique are subtler. There are two points to be made here – the first is that distrust of generalisation engendered an intense particularism that has created somewhat of a gulf between the anthropology of Japan and the wider discipline of anthropology; the second that distrust of essentialism has led to ignoring its indigenous expressions by interpreting them as a form of false consciousness. In addressing this points I will delineate the stance of the thesis in regards to essentialism.

13 “Cultural critique” is a label I employ in the thesis to group the anti-essentialist approaches portrayed so far.

Firstly, in doing away with essentialism there has been a tendency to do away with generalisation and comparison altogether. Ryang (2004: 194) for example condemns the entirety of the literature on the “Japanese sense of selfhood” as a “national anthropology” perpetuating the essentialist search for a distinct cultural logic. However, as McConnell (2011: 4) has asked before, “is total rejection of the search for symbolic representations and subjectivities that illustrate 'Japaneseness' the best way forward for a new, politically inflected anthropology of Japan?”. The same goes for comparison. Most of these works are greatly enriched by engaging works in the Japanese language. This, however, comes at the expense of engagement with wider anthropological debates, leaving a general sense in the anthropology of Japan of being neglected by the wider anthropological community (cf. Robertson 2005). In order to address this relative isolation I bring material from different regions to bear on my own in what is both an attempt to steer away from any implication of regional/cultural uniqueness and a reaffirmation of comparison as one of the most powerful tools not only in the discipline (e.g. Gingrich and Fox 2002) but even across disciplines themselves (cf. Detienne 2008).

The second point is the most important and leads us back to Herzfeld's work. Herzfeld (1997) starts from the observation that people who oppose the state make it, at the same time, a permanent feature of their lives through small essentialising acts. His analysis places itself between “the elites” and “the people” to try to understand the complex processes they both partake in, a broad cultural engagement whose abiding logic is “cultural intimacy”. Cultural intimacy is a response to the apparent paradox that state ideologies and intimate narratives of everyday life, even when they are framed as “resistance”, are sometimes strikingly similar (cf. Herzfeld 2008). As

already touched upon above, in Japan this paradox is strikingly present. Not only can one find *nihonjinron* literature in most bookshops in Tokyo and in many houses I visited, but the same themes of uniqueness and timelessness were a constitutive part of the intimate everyday narratives of many of my interlocutors. This does not make them into raging nationalist (apart from the raging nationalists, such as the ones we have seen above). This “complicit exoticism” (Iwabuchi 1994) was lived similarly to Herzfeld's intimacy – humbly, self-deprecatingly and humorously.¹⁴

This clearly poses a challenge to the genre of cultural critique. If people are meaningfully partaking in the same state narratives of those works criticised as fictitious, then their point of view becomes a form of self-consciousness perpetrated by the state. In other words, it becomes the task of the scholar – often based in Western institutions – to show, regardless of the indigenous point of view, what is *really* going on. While the aim is noble – to give voice to the “real” Japan against its essentialised cardboard images – the result is potentially problematic: dismissing the native point of view in favour of Western explanation, a lingering spectre in the discipline. While the family, nostalgia and romantic love in its current forms might have been crafted by the modern Japanese state, this does not take away the fact that people still feel them – that people live and understand themselves and their relationships through them.

This thesis, then, is an attempt to treat these expressions of essentialism in people's lives not as a true description of facts – i.e. Japanese culture is homogeneous, etc – nor as false consciousness to be treated as an object of critique – i.e. essentialism is

¹⁴ See Adachi's (2017) interesting ethnography of the struggle to maintain ethnic and racial boundaries in a Japanese commune in Brazil for an extreme example.

created by the state. Instead of looking for minorities to show the fictitiousness of the mainstream, as some of the works we have seen above do, the thesis asks the question of what everyday life looks like in this mainstream – that is what essentialism looks like not on the level of state discourses (e.g. Kapferer 2011), but on the level of people's everyday lives, through their conceptualisations and practices. The thesis accepts essentialism insofar as it is a pervasive presence in people's lives, without denying the fact that many of these discourses have been constructed at different junctions of modern Japanese history. Essentialism, as it is lived and understood by my interlocutors, becomes then not a method or an object of critique, but the very ethnographic object that the thesis sets out to investigate.

Herzfeld's work is useful to position the thesis in regard to the essentialism debate – however the thesis moves in a very different direction. Herzfeld focuses on the stereotypes that engender a sense of national *communitas* while the thesis looks at the ways people live and understand essentialised social forms. In looking at these engagements the thesis finds something very different: the logic of blurring highlighted in the opening section. In the next section I then focus on this logic, trying to highlight some of its properties in comparison with salient moments of anthropological history.

* * *

Anthropological Equivalences to the Logic of “Blurring”

The opening of this chapter has posited blurring as something happening to – or

between – a binary opposition. In Disneyland Japaneseness and America, nationalism and internationalism, were at the same time positioned as an incompatible binary while, at the same time, blurring into each other so that things that most represent America or the West can be also the most Japanese. In the poster we saw something similar. This time the binary was constituted by ideas of tradition and modernity, past and future, and in the figure of the pilot-in-kimono the two merged. In both examples, when the binary blurs, what one gets is neither a simple annihilation of the poles of the opposition nor something new, like an Hegelian synthesis. Instead the terms of the opposition survive, they are still distinct and distinguishable, and yet they are blurred and one can not say which is which. They become indistinguishable while maintaining their individuality. In Disneyland the conundrum is precisely that – people look at it and can easily say “this is American” pointing at Mickey mouse, the castle, the princesses. At the same time, they can point at the same things and say “this is so Japanese”. The problem is not that “Japan” and “America” disappear, or that a new hybrid is born, but that the two remain in opposition, remain distinct, and yet in the “blurring” one cannot tell which is which. At the end of this section I will come back to this description to problematise the choice of terminology – as one can already see here “blurring” does not quite capture what is going on and yet it is the term I chose to adopt in this thesis. Before doing that, however, I need to clarify certain aspects of this logic by finding equivalences in the history of anthropology. Although these equivalences do not map neatly onto the dynamic of blurring in question, they help us to come closer to its definition and in so doing they bring to light its different aspects.

In looking for these equivalences I found two broad approaches. The first one, by putting emphasis on the binary, sees the problem as inherently structural, and hence

the non-structural in-between as “problem”. The latter understands this anti-structural moment not as problem but as a space of possibility and freedom – from structure, categories, norms –; one where categories – and people – can be re-defined and re-invented. All the authors we are going to encounter below are important for the thesis not only because they focus on similar dynamics to the one I investigate herein, but mainly because they see these anti-structural moments as a constitutive part of the social structure.

The first approach has been mainly heralded by scholars of a structuralist bend – especially Claude Lévi-Strauss and Mary Douglas. These structuralist approaches are useful here because they focus on binary oppositions and the interstices between them and, as we have already seen, binary oppositions such as tradition/modernity, Japanese/foreign are constitutive to this logic. In both Lévi-Strauss' and Mary Douglas' work we find the space in-between these binaries as a place where categories blur and become indistinct. Both maintain an ambiguous attitude to this ambiguous “space”. On the one hand the work of society is to constantly try to erase it in its attempts to impose order upon a chaotic undivided stream of experience. On the other, both see this endeavour as ultimately hopeless and these ambiguous spaces as a fundamental part of the process of classification and understanding. This ambiguity is very important for the thesis although not exactly in the way these authors treat it. As we have seen binaries do not vanish, they are maintained together with their overlapping and blurring. Finally, both see this space as intensely affective, as charged with and eliciting strong affective responses in people, which is – as we shall see at the end of this section – what the logic of blurring is all about.

One of the recurring concerns of Lévi-Strauss' work is the conceptual transition from the indiscrete to the discrete. In fact one could say that the entirety of his work on myth (1969a, 1973, 1978, 1981; also 1988, 1996) is concerned with the ways myths fluctuate between binary oppositions, move back and forth between their two extremes, in order to achieve this very transition (cf. Girard 1976). While I am not concerned with this transition *per se* in the thesis, these considerations are relevant because they bring the problem of transition between binaries into focus, and with them the affective dimension of this transition. I here review some key moments of Lévi-Strauss' work to bring to light these concerns in relation to my own: his treatment of game and ritual in the *Savage Mind*, his mythical analysis seen through the eyes of Gregory Schrempp's comparative work, and the “finale” of his magnum opus *Mythologiques*.

In the famous chapter of *The Savage Mind* on the “science of the concrete” (1966: 1-33) Lévi-Strauss famously lays down the difference between two different modes of thinking: the *bricolage* analogous to mythical thinking and the engineer-like conceptual thinking analogous to the modern scientific method. As a testament to the centrality of aesthetics to his oeuvre (cf. Wiseman 2007), Lévi-Strauss places art as an “half-way between” - a type of thinking that is both *bricoleur*-like and engineer-like - and with it two more forms analogous to it: games and ritual. Like rituals, games are forms of non-ordinary sociality (cf. Huizinga 1949: 13) and Lévi-Strauss sees the two as inverse forms of each other. Both games and ritual are transistors to effect a transition between the indiscrete and the discrete. Games have a disjunctive effect, they start with equals and end up with the establishment of a difference between winners and losers. Rituals inversely are conjunctive, they bring about a union between two

initially separated groups – the postulated asymmetry between sacred and profane, dead and living, initiated and uninitiated is obliterated by making one side pass into the other. In other words, games engender a transition from the indiscrete to the discrete, they create difference, while rituals do the opposite, they engender a transition from distinction to indistinction.

It is on this particular problem that Gregory Schrempp (1992) focuses in his triangulation between the philosophy of the pre-Socratic philosopher Zeno of Elea, Lévi-Strauss' science of mythology and Maori mythological thought. Relevantly Schrempp (1992: 33-34) notes that Lévi-Strauss still focuses too much on the binary and too little on the transition itself. He posits the origin of discrete categories, the transition from uniform indistinct cosmos to discrete categories, as the central problem of mythology but ultimately, much like Zeno's paradoxes, transition only features - bracketed - as problem in a static system that focuses on the beginning- and end-state. This is because what is ultimately at stake is, both in mythical thinking and its structuralist science, the fact that transition – in its blurring, confusing, indistinct motion – is threatening and confusing and thus the task of the mind, myth and science is to reduce it to structure – the reduction of change to changelessness.

This becomes most clear in the (grand) finale of the last book of the *Mythologiques* (Lévi-Strauss 1981: 625-695). Here the work of myth is the taming of the indiscreet, the imposing of a grid over the tumultuous sea of experience, and this work can never be completed. Myth sets binary oppositions into motion in a series of transformations aimed at the transcendence of said binaries but no matter how fast these transformations tumble and chase each other they never stop being binary. There is a

principle of discontinuity in myth and this principle can never be transcended, there is always a gap between binaries and categories. As in the end of a musical fugue there are moments that come close to closing the gap, moments in which the binaries blur and seem to touch, and these moments are charged with affect and feeling. Yet the union is never complete and, unlike the fugue, the game of duality keeps moving forward.

Here, in an echo of the argument above, Lévi-Strauss posits ritual as counter-myth - ritual works from discreet units backwards, trying to fill the gaps between the discontinuities of the mythical cosmos and striving to restore the initial continuity. Yet going back to the state previous to the initial break, the big-bang of mythic thought, is for Lévi-Strauss impossible and hence the intensely affective “desperate” and “maniacal” nature of ritual. In a grand ending, the work of myth is compared to a twilight - the entire work of myth is the transition between binaries, the anxiety of a terrible and unavoidable transition from all to nothing. The core of the human experience is for Lévi-Strauss the paradoxical co-existence of these two extremes - the tangible presence of the reality of being and, at the same time, of the reality of non-being. It is this coexistence, this blurring of life and death, that sets the entire mythical (and human) drama in motion.

In Lévi-Strauss one finds many of the themes of this thesis. His attention to binary oppositions and the attempts to overcome them resonate with the logic of blurring the thesis finds at the heart of essentialism in Tokyo. This logic is indeed predicated on binaries and on their transcendence. For Lévi-Strauss, despite turning such binaries, spinning them and transforming them, myth cannot fully transcend binaries and finds

itself still implicated with them. In a similar way in the thesis we do see binaries being transcended and yet ultimately, thinking back to the opening of this section, maintained. This logic of blurring does not however seek to erase this ambiguous space, like myth does but, in a way, it represents an active endeavour to create it. At the same time, this logic does not align with analyses such as Roy Wagner's (1975), where the work of culture is precisely that of upsetting the order the construction of which Lévi-Strauss had posited as its goal. Order, grids and classification are here both preserved and upset, both maintained and transcended. In the *Mythologiques* myth is tragic, not only because of its fruitless pursuit but also because of its affective power, and in this paradoxical logic that overlaps order and disorder we shall find a similar power.

In Mary Douglas' work on dirt and pollution (1966) we find very similar concerns, if only portrayed in a static manner as opposed to the dynamism of Lévi-Strauss' myth. If in the latter the concern was with the passage between the terms of the opposition, Douglas brings attention to the static space in-between them. Here again we find both blurring and ambiguity together with affective intensity but in a clearer manner than in the tumbling forward of myth. Her analysis develops in two directions. One is a very Durkheimian way of looking at taboos as a regulatory mechanism to protect consensus and the status *quo*. The other direction looks at taboos and notices that it is largely ambiguity that it is found threatening and thus banished and prohibited, and asks why this might be. This second dimension flows from writings on primitive classification (notably Durkheim and Mauss 1963) and the structuralism of Lévi-Strauss. "I believe", she writes, "that ideas about separating, purifying, demarcating and punishing transgressions have as their main function to impose a system on an

inherently untidy experience. It is only by exaggerating the difference between within and without, above and below, male and female, with and against, that a semblance of order is created” (Douglas 1966: 4). Categorisation works chiefly through the establishment of binary oppositions upon an inherently undivided, indistinct and undetermined flow of experience.

This process of demarcation, of ordering, is central to the establishment and maintenance of society and impurity “a by-product of the creation of order” (Douglas 1966: 198). This by-product does not fit into the “grid” and hence threatens it, it is undifferentiated matter that threatens the very process of differentiation, formless matter that threatens form – an idea that will be later corroborated by the work of Rene Girard (1979) on the “crisis” of the lack of differentiation and its overcoming in the establishment of social order. The need for purity and the threat of pollution arise precisely when these categorisations appear most insecure and ambiguous. The abominable pig of Leviticus 11 sits both inside and outside the category of edible land animal and thus is impure. Orifices are both inside and outside the body and hence at constant risk of pollution.

Douglas' model is useful here because it clearly brings attention to the in-between as the place of the blurring of binaries. Dirt, she points out, “is a kind of compendium category for all events which blur, smudge, contradict, or otherwise confuse accepted classifications” (Douglas 1966: 51). On top of this general focus on these in-between states, Douglas analysis is relevant for two reasons we have already encountered. First of all, the in-between is not an unwanted left-over of defective classification but itself a fundamental part of the social system: “reflection on dirt involves reflection on the

relation of order to disorder, being to non-being, form to formlessness, life to death” (Douglas 1966: 6). Things falling outside categorisation is part of the dialectic of categorisation itself. Here we come very close to what the thesis finds in looking at essentialism in Tokyo: what is considered to fall outside categories pertaining to “Japan” becomes a fundamental part of the thinking about Japan, giving essences a somehow paradoxical *relational* quality. The second point is that this blurring has an affective dimension. Fear, danger, anxiety about impurity are affectively charged states, they elicit and demand affective responses which, as we shall see in the last chapter, is precisely the point of the blurring of binaries.

The other approach to blurring can be found in the work of Victor Turner and Giorgio Agamben. Both analyse dynamics – the liminal in Turner and the state of exception in Agamben – that come close to the object of this thesis and are here grouped together for treating these moments of blurring not as “problem”, like we have seen so far, but as possibility. “Possibility” is an important concept here given that this logic allows apparently contradictory opposites to coexist. In Turner we also find affect in the form of *communitas* and we come the closest to the forms of cultural intimacy elicited by blurring and overlap that we shall see in Chapter 1. In Agamben we find images that strongly resonate with the dynamics we shall see at play here – turning inside out, overlapping, opposites permeating each other – and, most importantly, the instrumentation of this space of possibility by the hands of the state.

Turner (1967: 93-111) famously borrowed and expanded upon Van Gennep's (1960) concept of liminality and looks at the middle moment of rites of passage where the person becomes “invisible” (1967: 95), they have “no status, insignia, secular clothing,

rank, kinship position, nothing to demarcate them structurally from their fellows” (1967: 98). People enter a realm of pure indistinction to be remade and reborn – this liminal space is “a realm of pure possibility whence novel configurations of ideas and relations may arise” (1967: 97). The erasure of distinctions has, we find again, an affective aspect which Turner calls *communitas* (1969: 94-130). In the “betwixt and between” liminal stage one finds another image of society – an antistructural one comprised of an undifferentiated community. Liminality is the cultural manifestation of *communitas* – the space of possibility where all distinctions are erased, all blurs (to a certain extent) into sameness and structure can be reinvented. One can see an instance of this in Turner's analysis of the *Chihamba* ritual of the Ndembu where the limen is “at once pure act and pure potentiality” (1975: 28) and the core ingredient for the healing of society as a whole. The other two manifestations of *communitas* are marginality/outsiderhood and inferiority, which he later characterises as ambiguous but, unlike liminality, without the assurance of a resolution, at risk of perpetual ambiguity (1974). Here we find the liminal both as “moment”, in the rites of passage, and as a “spacial” permanent fixture of society, in these latter forms. The characterisation of the liminal as the space of *communitas* resonates here with the thesis' argument that “cultural intimacy” is elicited through the logic of blurring. The thesis, however, takes Turner's “possibility” with a pinch of salt and, like Agamben below, sees its constitutive role in the creation of essentialism.

Agamben works around an equivalent problem in his articulation of the “threshold” as a space of both possibility and sovereign power. In *Homo Sacer* (1998) sovereignty is founded on the creation of what he calls “bare life”. The original sovereign act is the creation of this bare life through the relation of the ban – the inclusion of something

or someone in the political realm by virtue of its exclusion. By declaring a zone where the law is suspended – e.g. by stripping a human being of legal status – a “state of exception” is created and it is in the relation to this exception that the rule is constituted as rule. This is not the mere creation of difference – like illegal migrants today the person in the state of exception is encompassed by the law, constantly in relation to it in the threat of violence and imprisonment. Paradoxically, though the suspension of law, law and life are made to overlap and become indistinguishable. While the state of exception was in the Greek *polis* a limit case at the edges of the city, Agamben later maintains that “the declaration of the state of exception has gradually been replaced by an unprecedented generalization of the paradigm of security as the normal technique of government” (2005: 14). The paradigmatic space of this new political arrangement is the camp – the concentration camps of WWII and the refugee camps of the current refugee crisis where law and life become indistinguishable and “possibility” becomes absolute threat, the possibility of the enforcement of absolute state power. The “liminal”, to use Turner's language, defines absolute possibility – the very space of the birth of the original community – but modernity sees state power seizing liminality and turning it in pervasive bio-power. However, this liminal space where law and lawlessness overlap and permeate each other retains its creative potential. The task of humanity is precisely to expose the potential of these zones of indistinguishability – not by rejecting dichotomies but by turning them inside out and finding where they overlap and become indistinguishable, zones of potentiality from where to create anew (Agamben 1993).

In Agamben we find characterisations that come close to the movements we shall see in the thesis: including by virtue of excluding, surrounding like a halo, opposites

permeating each other. In Douglas a static overlap and blur of binaries and in Lévi-Strauss a dynamic one. There is a reason as to why so many different characterisations are brought in as equivalences to the logic I am trying to delineate. I spent years trying to pin down the exact structure of this logic and I am very clear as to its structure - yet I cannot find a term that neatly covers it. I here used the term “blurring” but this is not always exactly right – sometimes it is an overlapping, a flipping, a co-existence of opposites. The general structure, as I tried to convey so far, is the presence of a binary whose extremes are contradictory and incompatible. The logic of blurring is the juxtaposition of the two, where they become indistinguishable while maintaining their individuality. We have seen this in Disneyland – people can clearly distinguish its being American and its being somehow “Japanese”, there is no Hegelian synthesis or resolution: the two remain distinct and yet indistinguishable. Yet it is very hard to put one's finger on it, to define with absolute logical clarity the *shape* that this kind of thinking takes.

The reason for this, as we shall see over and over again in the thesis, is that “blurring” is, by its nature, elusive. The whole point of “the logic of blurring” is that it is actually not about “logic” but about feeling and affect – it is about the affective epiphenomena of this dynamic. A Shinto priest (*kannushi*) once told me that all of the mythico-ritual apparatus of Shinto is there so that one could *feel* the *kami* (spirit) – that is all that really matters, getting to the point where one can feel it. It is ineffable and inexpressible: “you have to feel it”. One can find many equivalences in Japan - “reading the air” (*kūki yomeru*), the roundabout ways things are alluded to, the ways sentences are left to trail into nothing, the use of allusive words in *waka* poetry, the *kōan* of Zen Buddhism – some of the many social, cultural and linguistic forms that

rely on the eliciting of a certain affective or non-linguistic understanding. In talking about the topics of the chapters of this thesis many of my interlocutors could spend hours talking in detail about the structure of the binaries but once we talked about those moments words would dry up and sentences trail off with words like “it's difficult..” (*muzukashī ne*). It is a feeling, and thus hard to put into words for people.¹⁵ While there are metaphors that could be employed, perhaps Schrödinger's cat or other metaphors from quantum mechanics, they ultimately do not capture the undefined and affective nature of this logic. In contrast with much of the literature concerned with the “shape of relations” (e.g. Wagner 1989; Strathern 1991; Holbraad and Pedersen 2008; Holbraad 2012) I here then decided to - or simply have to - leave it somehow undefined and, instead of coming up with a definite shape, I leave this logic “do its thing” and express itself in its different forms. It is in the interplay of form and formlessness that this logic is played out and, rather than trying to pin it down by giving it a definite shape, thus privileging one side of the dialectic, I attempt to capture this dynamism ethnographically. By the end of the thesis, by seeing this unfold through different ethnographic windows, I hope this elusive logic will be somehow familiar and recognisable.

* * *

Field and Method

Setting the Scene: Tōjima and Shitamachi

This section has a four-fold aim: to introduce my main field-site, to show the ways in

¹⁵ Chapter 1 will bring some clarity to this by looking at the ways this “blurring” is expressed aesthetically.

which this speaks to the concerns of the thesis, to present some of the activities of my fieldwork and raise some issues of ethics. I start by introducing the neighbourhood where I resided and show its relevance in investigating the logic of blurring highlighted so far. Tōjima is at the centre of essentialist discourses (both from within - as a place with a distinct culture more “authentic” than the rest of Tokyo - and from without - as a vanishing remnant of cultural authenticity), while at the same time embodying the opposite: social change and hybridity.

The main field-site for this project has been the neighbourhood of Tōjima - in the east of Tokyo beyond the Sumida river. Differently from the grid of the government planned neighbourhoods one can find to the south of the ward (cf. Sorensen 2013: 27), Tōjima is a chaotic mix of shacks of wood and corrugated iron, small houses and family run workshops all tightly packed together in a hard-to-navigate maze of narrow alleyways. The neighbourhood is a prime example of Paul Waley's (2009) point that in north-eastern Tokyo industrialisation preceded any attempt at urban planning - which gives the area its chaotic first appearance. Designated as a farming area according to Shogunate law the neighbourhood comprised marshes and paddy fields as one can see in maps of Edo - the name of Tokyo until 1968 - of the time. It developed organically, especially after the 1923 Great Kanto Earthquake that saw most of Tokyo burnt to ashes and Tōjima, still not very developed at time, surviving almost intact. The neighbourhood also somehow survived the bombings of the American B-29s during WWII. Most of the corrugated iron shacks, wooden houses and the *nagaya* - tenement houses - that one can see around were built between the 1920s and the 1960s. Today they are assemblages of rust and DIY repairs and yet still enduring.



2. My house in Tōjima.

“Endurance” is an important word for thinking about Tōjima. Much of the population of the neighbourhood is elderly, living on pensions, benefits and social care provided by state¹⁶. The vast majority of the residents of the neighbourhood is born in the area and either lived here all their lives or sometimes returned after going elsewhere for work. Young people and young families are few and many family businesses have to close because nobody is there to continue them. Given that the neighbourhood is far from being one of the desirable ones in the city, the influx of new residents is incredibly low and many houses lie empty waiting for demolition. On top of that, the whole area is one of the most exposed to risk by natural disaster in the capital. The neighbourhood sits at sea-level which exposes it to the risk of floods and tsunami, is

16 See Iwata and Nishizawa 2008 on poverty, social exclusion and welfare in Japan – especially Parts 2 and 3.

built on soft alluvial soil which amplifies ground shaking during earthquakes and, with its architecture dominated by wooden structures, it is at high risk of fires in case of natural disaster. The ward's Disaster Prevention Section (*bōsaika*) estimates that within 30 years there is a 70% chance that a big earthquake will hit the area and destroy a big portion of its structures. This sense of vanishing and loss is palpable: big office blocks and fancy shopping centres are built further north and they seem to slowly creep southward eating more and more of the neighbourhood, the last wooden *nagaya* is scheduled to be demolished next year, many of the shops in the main artery of the neighbourhood, the main shopping street (*shōtengai*), are empty.

Old neighbourhoods in the east are part of what is known in Tokyo as *shitamachi*, meaning “old town”. *Shitamachi* is one end of a symbolic binary which has been important to the city since the Tokugawa period (1603-1868) – one end of a “symbolic cleavage” (Kondo 1990: 58) the other side of which is the Western part of town, *Yamanote*. The word *shitamachi* is built by two characters, “low” (“down”, “under”) and “town”. The “low” is a topographical clue that contrasts its historically marshy lowlands to the “high” hills and valleys of western Tokyo. However, it is not the geographical distinction that the words evoke in people's minds but a socio-economic one. In the caste system of the Tokugawa era the hills of Yamanote were inhabited by the aristocracy and Samurai classes while the often flooding marshes of the east by merchants, artisans and outcasts, thus making geographical and class distinctions overlap (Seidensticker 1983: 8-9; Wagatsuma and DeVos 1984). This symbolic boundary still maintains a degree of truth today, where the west is inhabited by middle-class families and salarymen (*sararīman*, the name for white-collar workers and businessmen working in large firms) while the east predominantly by working-class

artisans, merchants and family businesses.

Tōjima, like the surrounding areas of east Tokyo, is part of an imaginary of a vanishing life of old, replaced by modernity. The gradual disappearance of Tōjima - through ageing, gentrification and abandonment - is part of a wider discourse that sees *shitamachi* culture as a vanishing remnant of old urban life, a more authentic past compared to the modernised Tokyo of today. Marilyn Ivy (1995) has argued that the “vanishing”, the obsession with disappearing remnants of authentic culture, is a key part of the logic of state nationalism in Japan and one could see *shitamachi* as part of the same logic. Like the indigenous Ainu in Ivy's book *shitamachi* has been *always* vanishing, being pushed further eastward as the city developed (Waley 2002, 2010), and thus essentialised and instrumentalised as a nostalgic repository of authentic urban culture (Sand 2013: 20).

This essentialism does not only come from without, but also from within. Ethnographic works on *shitamachi* (e.g. Dore 1958; Smith 1960; Bestor 1985, 1989, 1992a; Kondo 1990) have focused on the important part that “downtown”, as an imaginary and symbolic space, plays in the construction of people's identities. Seen from *shitamachi* the slash in the yamanote/*shitamachi* distinction is not only indicative of class and topography but it is an “imaginative horizon” (Crapanzano 2004), a blurry boundary that distinguishes the here and now from what lies beyond thus framing and giving meaning to people's experience. *Shitamachi* as a word carries in itself a whole cosmos of moral values, behaviours, language and ideas of authenticity. It is *old* - it carries the very spirit of “old”, the spirit of Edo before industrialisation (Bestor 1992b). By contrast to “new” Tokyo, where people do not know or speak to each other,

shitamachi people see themselves as straightforward and direct - sometimes verging on rudeness -, warm (as opposed to the “coldness” of Tokyo people), nosy, noisy and emotional. People here are true *edokko*, children of Edo, natives and bearers of its traditional values. Of course one can smell the whiff of essentialism and, of course, there are scholars showing that *shitamachi* is a modern invention (Bestor 1990).

However, *shitamachi* itself is not the essentialised imaginary one is immediately presented with but an anachronic assemblage of disparate elements. As we have seen above the imaginary landscape of *shitamachi* is, like Japan itself, often itself portrayed as an holistic and homogeneous background for identity, action and relations (cf. Sneath et al. 2009), both from within and from without. The boundaries of *shitamachi* have been however constantly redefined both culturally and geographically. One does not only find the “true children of Edo” but, together with them, a whole array of migrants who do not fit the *shitamachi* imaginary. Young artists are moving into the neighbourhood fascinated by the *shitamachi* way of life (and cheap rent) starting what is now a small architectural movement restoring dilapidated buildings respecting traditional architecture. They are self-consciously experimenting – living together in shared workshops, eating together in self-built communal canteens, sharing the bath at the back of a café as part of a “bath club” (*ofuro kurabu*) they instituted for people who don't have money to go to the local bath-houses (*seniō*) every day. Chinese families fill the big *chūka* restaurant¹⁷ near the station and their stay-at-home housewives (*shufu*) frequent the local free language classes when their children are at school and their husbands at work. Korean families attend mass at the local Christian churches – some of which also hold services in Korean. Japanese Catholics worship in

¹⁷ Japanese-Chinese cuisine.

a nearby yard and drink in the local establishments (see Ch. 4).

Many of them are central to the life of the neighbourhood. For example Jasmine, the Filipina *mama-san* of a local snack-bar (*sunakku bā*), is something of a celebrity.¹⁸ She runs, together with the snack-bar, a small restaurant where I often had lunch and spent time watching TV. Old Japanese men from the neighbourhood too broke to afford the hefty fees of the bar come here to drink hoping to catch a glimpse of some of the girls who work at the bar and sometimes come by the restaurant to eat or talk to the *mama-san*. They sit at the plastic tables comparing the girl's phone numbers and trying to call them (I have never seen a call go through) while hassling Jasmine to give them the right ones.

Tōjima is not only a repository of essentialism but, in virtue of its relative marginality and low prices, also the site of its very opposite: social change, inter-mixing and hybridity. In August 2015 I went to see my friend Satoko acting in a comic re-enactment of Kawabata's *The Scarlet Gang of Asakusa* (*Asakusa Kurenaidan*; 2005). In the novel Asakusa, the old centre of *shitamachi* culture, is a repository of the values of old Edo but also the main point of contact with external culture – what Kawabata calls the “foreign modern” (*hakurai modān*). Asakusa is here a chaotic anachronic assemblage of old and new, Japanese and foreign, and Kawabata “uses this image [...] to delineate the topography of spectral modernity – one based on disjunction and doubleness, rather than assimilation” (Lippit 2002: 140). My friend Satoko somehow is well suited to the

18 A snack bar is a small hostess bar where the female staff is paid to flirt, talk and sing with the male customers. A *mama-san* is a woman who runs these kinds of establishments. See Faier 2007, 2009 on Filipina women in Japanese snack bars; Suzuki 2000, 2005, 2010a for great work on the interplay between national image and lived life in the lives of Filipina women in Japan; Allison 1994 for an in-depth ethnography of a Tokyo hostess club.

script – she works part-time in a Shrine as a *miko* – a shrine maiden who helps with rituals –, she is an actress in a comedy troupe and works at a burrito stand in Harajuku, the popular area known for its street-fashion and cosplay. Like in the novel, disjunction and doubleness, the coexistence essentialism and its opposite, make Tōjima an ideal place to look for the logic of blurring that the thesis focuses on.

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Method and Praxis

The thesis is based on 24 months of fieldwork in Tokyo, 18 of which were spent in Tōjima. Although rooted in Tōjima my fieldwork had a strange semi-nomadic quality to it. Before moving to the neighbourhood I was feeling considerable anxiety as to where and exactly what to research, while I had drawn up a plan before leaving for fieldwork I had left blanks to be filled once in Tokyo. When I arrived in Tōjima, living in a small shack, I felt as if I finally found my field-site. However, this ended up being only partially true. While I expected life in Tōjima to be somehow circumscribed to the neighbourhood, in accordance to the small-scale urban ethnographies of Japanese neighbourhoods I had read, this proved not to be entirely true. People do have a neighbourhood life which defines them, gives them pride and identity. People wear the name of their neighbourhood association during the annual festival (*matsuri*), make a point of knowing their neighbours, catch up with each other in the main shopping artery where they shop and many young men take a year of service at the local Shinto shrine.

However, that is not the end of the story and people's lives stretch outward in both space and time outside the boundaries of the neighbourhood. There are many reasons for this. Although many people in *shitamachi* are born there many others have either returned or moved in. Many sons and daughters of the elderly population have moved away, either to another city or to another area of Tokyo. Women especially are supposed to join their husband in the virilocal “traditional” Japanese family structure. As we shall see in Chapter 3, for the vast majority of the Japanese population kinship means *movement*, and family occasions such as *bon* in late summer or *hatsumōde* on the new year take people outside the neighbourhood. Most people affiliated themselves with more than one shrine and took pains to visit the ones outside the neighbourhood at least once a year. Domestic tourism was another important part of people's lives and they often visited landmarks around Tokyo and, when possible, around Japan bringing back presents (*omiyage*) for their friends and family.

Even when focusing specifically on social forms such as the family and Shinto – which, as we shall see later on, have been at the centre of indigenous discourses about essentialism – people's engagements with them exceeded the bounds of the neighbourhood and of its essentialised imaginary, stretching outwards tentacle-like.

In other words, when trying to look at people's lives in the neighbourhood I found myself constantly directed outside it. People would invite me to visit a particular shrine, their family grave, a particular church or simply to meet their friends and families elsewhere. In trying to follow people's engagements with the things I was interested in I was directed all over Tokyo and sometimes even outside it. Looking at the history of a local shrine I'd be directed elsewhere, looking at the life of the local carpenter I'd find myself visiting the other side of town, and so on. I embraced this

and followed these leads, guided by friends and neighbours, wherever they took me. One could find a parallel in ethnographies that follow circuits, markets and the flow of commodities to understand a specific phenomenon (e.g. Bestor 2001; Tsing 2005), only what is followed here is not a product, but relations. For this reason what follows does not read as an ethnography *of* Tōjima, a small-scale urban ethnography. Instead, every chapter covers diverse ethnographic ground which gives the thesis a somehow “general” feel to it. This is because, in a way, the thesis is *about generality* – it is about cultural essentialism and the ways it impacts people's lives, about the ways people link their particular lives to a general concept of culture and nation, of “Japan”. Despite this, every chapter tries to remain very ethnographically focused, making it then an ethnography *of* essentialism *from* Tōjima, or an ethnography *of* the city rather than *in* the city (cf. Low 2014: 16-17).

It is important to note that people never felt marginal or different in relation to mainstream Japanese culture – in fact, if anything, their *shitamachi* identity made them “more” Japanese than the rest of Tokyo, encapsulating a more traditional and authentic version of Japanese culture. Their understanding of themselves and their lives did not stop in the neighbourhood, their imaginary constantly returned to images of “Japan” and themselves as “Japanese” people making the geographic boundedness of the neighbourhood, even with its own particular *shitamachi* “culture”, often not a relevant distinction. It was ideas of “marginality” that took me to the neighbourhood – following romanticised ideas fieldwork – and what I found was a definite rejection of it. Suggesting their marginal status would be outright offensive to many of my friends and interlocutors, Japanese and non-Japanese. Note that this does not mean that there is no marginality in Tokyo – there are plenty of ethnographies on homelessness

(Guzewicz 1998; Aoki 2006; Hasegawa 2006; Wickens 2012), the day labourers of the “slum” district of San'ya (Fowler 1996; De Bary 1997; cf. Gill 2001, 2015; Kim 2018), working class people excluded from mainstream discourses (e.g. Chalmers 1989; Roberson 1998, 2003), discriminated minorities such as Burakumin (e.g. De Vos and Wagatsuma 1966; Amos 2011; Hankins 2014) and Zainichi (e.g. Ryang 2000b, 2014; Chapman 2007; Lie 2008). Tokyo is full of “margins”, Tōjima is just not one of them.

In relation to this last point it must be noted that there is a huge risk, in talking about essentialism, of essentialising in return – both essentialising *with* essentialism and essentialising essentialism itself. As I said this thesis is, in a way, about generality and this poses a problem. I am not here talking this unexpected multi-sited gaze at different locations as particular instances of a whole – “Tokyo” or “Japan”. I consider these different chapters, with their different people and locales, as differently positioned windows, as partial connection (cf. Strathern 1991) and fragmentary prisms, onto the complexity of the role essentialism plays in the everyday life of the people I spent time with (cf. Candea 2007). Similarly, when I talk about “indigenous logic”, I do not intend it to mean a way of thinking that pertains to Japanese people *qua* Japanese, but a culturally embedded way of understanding essentialism that is assumed, resisted, humoured, rejected and problematised by different people at different times. I spent time with plenty of people that pointedly do not want to have anything to do with it – and successfully do not.

In Tōjima the winding shopping street moves through the neighbourhood, cats sitting outside the shops selling *oden*, *koppepan*, pickles.¹⁹ Old people walking slowly carrying blue shopping bags full of groceries. They stop at the *tayaki*²⁰ stand and talk, at the tofu shop to whisper gossip, then laugh and pat each other on the shoulders before walking away. I walk in the *soba*²¹ shop in winter, glasses steaming up, and sit next to the gas heater. A pot sitting on top of it simmers quietly. People look at who is coming in, greet friends, sit together. Sometimes I am a stranger, sometimes I am one of them. Someone tries to persuade me to drink with them (“*ippai nomu?*”, and laughing, “*nonde yo Tobia-kun!*”)²² – it's so early – sometimes I give in, sometimes I apologise scratching my head and looking down. In my 18 months in the neighbourhood I never ceased to be a strange presence. Although the presence of westerners in the city is not a strange occurrence any more in Tokyo, and I was just another westerner, there were admittedly not many of them in the neighbourhood and especially ones who had an overt interest in local life (or in pretty much anything people talked about) and, especially, so much time on their hands.

Having time has been a very important part of my fieldwork. On most days I would walk around the neighbourhood aimlessly all morning, talking to people, shopping, stopping by the Catholic church or sitting with the elderly men drinking cheap sake by the small Inari shrine. Having time brought me close to many people and made people accept my presence not as mere novelty but as constitutive part of the

19 *Oden* is a dish consisting on different ingredients such as boiled eggs, tofu and seaweed in a soy-flavoured *dashi* broth. *Koppepan* is a soft bread loaf filled with jam or peanut jelly. Pickles (*tsukemono*) are pickles.

20 A fish-shaped sweet cake usually filled with red bean paste.

21 A bowl of buckwheat noodles in a *dashi* broth with toppings such as preserved mountain vegetables or *tempura*.

22 “Should we have a drink?” and “Come on, have a drink!”.

neighbourhood. Hospitality, with its “versatile unpredictability” (Herzfeld 2012: 210), has been a key part of this – people have shown an astounding kindness and generosity inviting me into their houses. Having the time to follow up these invitations has been key. However this abundance of time also never allowed my presence to be entirely “ordinary” – as a young and unmarried male I would have been expected to have a job and seek a partner and I was not doing either. While my explanations about my research in the neighbourhood were accepted, people never quite understood why, being a university student, I was never actually in university.

While I did live alone - although the sonic intimacy of having only a thin wooden layer between houses often makes it not feel so - I did spend most of my time with people. Some people in the neighbourhood became surrogate families and I spent a lot of time at their houses. I would help cooking, watch TV with them, sit around chatting after dinner and partake in different leisure activities on the weekends. The neighbourhood offered plenty of opportunities to spend time with people, from the local bath-house (*sentō*), the shops where people sat drinking in the afternoon or the shopping street where many people loitered. Drinking has been another important part of my fieldwork. As we shall see in Chapter 4 it is a well-known cliché in Tokyo that people open up when drinking, that social barriers fall and one sees the “real” person behind. Without assessing the validity of this statement, drinking has actually allowed me to spend time with diverse people who, in many occasions, kept inviting me over precisely because I did drink, as a reliable drinking partner willing enough to make a fool of himself.

This hospitality and generosity has been absolutely central to my fieldwork. Unlike many other places visited by anthropologists I had the luck to find that in Japan research and academia are highly respected and people helped me immensely by taking my research interests seriously. They either went out of their way to introduce me to relevant people or allowed me to follow them to private events such as family gatherings, bible study classes, visits to their home towns and family graveyards. I followed every possible lead and, while I often ended up sitting awkwardly with people who had little to do with my research, often these meetings took my thinking in new and unexpected ways. I visited people, shrines, churches and graveyards all over Tokyo and I took trips, with and without my interlocutors, to places they considered important. Some of these locales, like the Hachiman shrine in Shibuya we encounter in Chapter 2, became permanent presences in my fieldwork and constant sources of comparison with the reality of Tōjima. The unexpected multi-sited nature of the research created a considerable anxiety throughout my stay in Japan and beyond, I somehow never felt as if I really “found my field-site”. However, this also allowed the theme of the PhD to emerge organically – from an initial interest in essentialism to the focus on its logic that one finds in this thesis.

The early months of fieldwork were spent in the west of Tokyo, renting a small apartment and attending intensive language school in the centre of the city. During these six months I would spend my spare time attending free language classes in my area or clumsily attempting forays into field-work. Despite this, my linguistic abilities were limited when I moved to Tōjima and my learning continued throughout my fieldwork and coloured many of my relationships with people who became helpers, admirers and amused witnesses to my linguistic quest. Learning the language became

a constitutive part of both my identity during fieldwork and my research. Through the process of learning – the excitement, the curiosity, the pain and the despair – I made many friends who, respecting my willingness to learn and speak the language, would spend time correcting my mistakes, teaching me new expressions and helping me practice. Many of the people I met in the volunteer-led classes became very good friends and, in general, the network of people I met both in west and east Tokyo has been invaluable.

Finally an important point about positioning and representation. There are many voices represented in this thesis, and yet they are still very few. Many of the essentialist discourses in Japan are, predictably, ethnically Japanese male discourses: they structurally exclude women, ethnic minorities and sexual minorities. This is particularly problematic in Chapter 3 where the whole discourse about family structure and kinship is: (i) from the male point of view (it relegates women to the roles of mothers and spouses)²³, and (ii) deeply heteronormative. This is another instance of the “problem of women” (Ardener 2007): the invisibility of women from anthropology accounts based on the male experience, especially in descent systems (cf. Bloch 1987). There are important works explicitly focusing on women in Japan - from the counterpoint to Embree's famous village ethnography (Smith and Wiswell 1983) to more recent works (e.g. Lebra 1984; Roberts 1994, 2011; Kelsky 2001; Hunter 2003; Rosenberger 2011; cf. Tamanoi 1990) – and on their experiences of kinship (e.g. Holloway 2010; Roberts 2011; Mirza 2016; Marshall 2017); together with Lindsay R. Morrison, I started a project about women, kinship and temporality to complement the work of this thesis. Besides, while the discourse on the family is firmly based in

²³ And, importantly, it does not track women's kin-ties in time, it structurally erases their histories.

what Butler has called the “heterosexual matrix” (1990), there is important work on LGBTQ people in Japan (e.g. Summerhawk et al. 1998; Chalmers 2003; McLelland 2005; McLelland and Dasgupta 2005) and their absence here is, again, motivated by the focus on essentialism and mainstream discourse.²⁴

As a white male in Japan one is somehow treated as a special specimen and given even more privileges than in the UK. I tried, both in Japan and while writing back “home”, to be humble and not assert authority over knowledge and space. Insecurity and doubt have been, willingly or not, integral parts of my method.

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In order to protect the anonymity of my interlocutors I have changed all their names and have tried as much as possible to change or conceal other features that might make them particularly identifiable. Names of places such as Tōjima, the Takahashi family or the Church or the Holy Family are invented stand-ins for the real ones. While the vast majority of my interlocutors do not actually care about it, there is an element of respect in granting people anonymity. There is also an element of distancing which is perhaps necessary to be able to write after the intense intimacies of fieldwork. For both reasons I took pains to make sure people's true identities are concealed.

²⁴ This also applies to minority groups such as Zainichi Koreans (e.g. Ryang 2000, 2014; Chapman 2007; Lie 2008) and Japanese Brazilians (e.g. Roth 2002; Tsuda 2003; Nishida 2017).

Throughout my stay I made sure to inform people of my role as researcher. Main informants become friends, lines blur, one does truly not know where fieldwork starts and ends – throughout I made sure to remind people over and over again of my strange status as onlooker onto their lives. One must be honest and admit that this is no way straightforward: people invite you to their houses as a friend, do you show up as researcher? I tried to maintain a foot in both worlds, sometimes by awkwardly taking the role of researcher when friendship was expected and sometimes by forgetting to be one and leaving my notes untouched for days. The main insights of this thesis come from this ambiguous space that is participant-observation. Moving towards to participate while moving away to observe. Entanglement and intimacy seemed to be the only way forward – not just “as anthropologist” (or, better, as a student of anthropology), but as human in a social setting different from my usual one - being often bored, lonely and confused, trying to “do” a strange thing called fieldwork. In these entanglements I tried to find method and integrity and while I often failed to find the former, at least during fieldwork, I sincerely hope I did achieve the latter and remained an ethical person both in my behaviour and my writing.

* * *

Thesis Outline

The thesis is divided into 5 chapters, exploring the logic of blurring from different angles. Chapter 1 sets the scene for the ethnographic chapters to follow and tries to delineate the contours of this logic by finding its expressions in the modern Japanese history of ideas. The chapter attempts to achieve three things – it helps understanding this logic before seeing it moving ethnographically, it establishes the indigenous importance of it and, perhaps most importantly, it shows its imbrication with essentialism. Chapter 2 focuses on Shinto and the ways people engage with its spirits, the kami, to find two contrasting ways upon which modern Shinto practices are predicated. By looking at the moments in the annual festival when the two overlap and blur, the chapter looks at how moving towards a paradigm of transcendence and seclusion one is led, inevitably, to its opposite, one based in intermingling and flux.

Chapter 3 focuses on kinship and temporality by looking at the post-war family history of the Takahashi family. By following the Takahashi kin and their lives the chapter tries to make sense of the coexistence of an essentialised eternal descent system (*ie*) together with its disintegration and finds material objects and their movement to be the “transistor” over which both can overlap and coexist. Chapter 2 and 3 fulfil the same function – they take social practices that have been at the centre of essentialist discourses since the Meiji era (1868-1912) and find within them both an essentialist variant (changeless and “pure”) and its anti-essentialist negative (steeped in change and history). A logic of blurring of the two is, in both, the pivot upon which people's engagement with these forms is predicated. Chapter 4 explores the relationship between foreignness and Japaneseness by looking at the lives of the

community of a small Catholic Church and their engagement with activities that the priest explicitly proscribes. Through the notion of encompassment and engagement with the literature on conversion and culture change, the chapter shows how people, through these activities, manage to encompass two worlds that are presented to them as incompatible with each other.

Chapter 5 pulls the threads of the thesis together by exploring the affective imports that these dynamics of blurring seem to elicit. It finds affect to be in the context of the thesis both a non-ordinary experience akin to the ecstasies of Chapter 1 and an ordinary “afterglow” akin to cultural intimacy and, through an ethnographic engagement with an artist in Tokyo, explores how one leads to the other. The thesis leaves us with the fact that blurring elicits affect and the argument becomes somewhat circular by arching back to Chapter 1 to see how that affect is then itself essentialised as something “Japanese” and somehow untranslatable.

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Additionally, there is another structure to the thesis. The ethnographic engagement with the material proceeds from a substantial level of abstraction to a much more intimate modality. The first chapter relies largely on textual analysis while the second one, though ethnographically rich, experiments by rendering many voices into a dialogue between myself (T) and a nameless Shinto “priest” (K, *kannushi*). Chapter 3 is built on an intimate engagement with a friend's family history and, yet, it is pictures and objects that somehow take centre stage, both in the chapter and in people's imagination. Chapter 4 looks at the lives of Catholic people in the neighbourhood but,

instead of following them in the formalities of ritual life around the church, it moves with them into the haziness of drunkenness, into restaurants and living rooms in the nights between church events. The last chapter takes place in a series of hotel rooms in the late 1990s, while other people are sleeping and the ethnographic spotlight is only on one person, still awake, secretly performing something he calls “doing it”. The structure of this thesis is, effectively, a gradient moving from form to affect, from abstraction to intimacy.



CHAPTER 1:

THE POETICS AND POLITICS OF BLURRING

“Today in flower, Tomorrow scattered by
the wind - Such is our blossom life. How
can we think its fragrance lasts forever?”

- Ōnishi Takijirō

Aesthetics as Frame

The poem in the epigraph is by Takijirō Ōnishi, an admiral of the Japanese navy during WWII and the person who is credited with inventing the *tokkotai* units, more commonly known as kamikaze. The blossom and the impermanence of life are the symbolic heart not only of the poem but also of the *tokkotai* program itself. Emiko Ohnuki-Tierney (2002; 2015) has shown how the transience and impermanence of the cherry blossom became the master trope of Japanese nationalism before and during WWII. She argues that the state manipulated the symbolism of the blossom by linking it to the sacrifice of young soldiers, specifically kamikaze pilots who were to “die like beautiful falling cherry petals”. These young men would often pin flowering branches to their uniforms before their last flight on a rickety plane upon which a blossom had been painted.

Her work shows how many of these young people were not fully aligned with the nationalist project – many were radicals, Marxists, Christians and liberals.²⁵ Through a process of symbolic manipulation and aesthetic resonance, the state succeeded in channelling young people's idealism into its own agenda: “the pilots assigned aesthetics to concepts and behaviours involved in the state ideology without fully realizing that they were being co-opted through ideological manipulation” (2002: 302). The aesthetics of impermanence resonate so strongly with people that through its appeal even those diametrically opposed to wartime imperialism end up sacrificing their lives for it. Impermanence, its aesthetics and its symbols, are not only an important element of the state's ideological machine, as often the case in totalitarianism, but a polysemic symbol that reaches deep into the hearts of all kinds of people in Japan.

One finds symbols of impermanence and national ideology going hand in hand in many different contexts in Japanese modernity. Examples are the post-war ideologies of *inaka* - “countryside” - and *furusato* - “hometown” or “native place”, where one finds the aesthetics of impermanence mobilised through the beauty of nostalgia. Rural villages come, in modern Japan, to symbolise “home” and with the movement away from the countryside and into the cities the link between “home” and the place where one actually lives is primarily expressed through feelings of nostalgia and longing (Robertson 1988; Creighton 1997; Hillenbrand 2010). Jennifer Robertson (1997, 1998b) has shown how “the native place” is an imagined and discursive space where the modernity of Japan is pronounced in a reflexive act of identity-making – between traditional and new Japan, between Japan and the world outside. In other words, it is

²⁵ See Ohnuki-Tierney 2006 for analysis of and extracts from their diaries.

through the search for tradition and the old that a particular brand of state modernity is found and asserted. Marilyn Ivy (1995) has called this process a “discourse of the vanishing”, where the seeking of and nostalgia for vanishing forms of cultural authenticity previously marginalised – like peasant cultures, the indigenous Ainu and popular theatre – becomes a modern form of cultural nationalism and the underpinning of Japanese modernity itself. One finds these traditions and peoples disappearing against rapid modernisation, but Ivy's point is that these cultural forms are *always* vanishing – their vanishing, their life at the edges of oblivion, is what makes them powerful as national symbols.

These works explore subtle mechanisms at work behind cultural nationalism. Impermanence, the vanishing, the paradoxical movement “backwards” in order to move forward (and thus assert modernity) are for these authors the logics at work in the construction of both the state nationalism of the war years and the cultural essentialism that underpins Japanese modernity. One finds these aesthetic notions mobilised as a national project – a project promoting militarisation first and cultural uniqueness afterwards – in order to elicit affect. Tangled emotions of nostalgia and desire are indissolubly fused with the images elicited by words like *furusato*: the smell of a mother's cooking, the mountains under which one played as a child. Aesthetics is, for these authors, the form through which essentialism is expressed.

This chapter takes the concern with blurring delineated in the introduction and moves it into the wider arena of Japanese Studies and sees them here appear, as it were, aesthetically. With this move I aim to achieve three things. The first is to show how the concerns with the introduction, blurring and its relation to essentialism, are not only

hand-picked rare occurrences but indeed part of a widespread logic in urban Japanese modernity – or at least of the Greater Tokyo Area and its imagined landscape of “Japan”. The second aim is to provide a counterpoint to the anthropological genealogy of blurring of the introduction – to culturally embed those concerns and further delineate the concept. In literature and the arts one finds the most complete and accessible thinking on phenomena of blurring: in its aesthetic form this blurring of opposites has been incessantly studied, modified and deployed by a myriad of authors thus making this material the most useful to carve the conceptual space within which to place the coming ethnography. The last aim is to provide a “transistor” between the introduction and the chapters that follow: the ideas introduced in the introduction are moved in the realm of the history of art and literature to appear as an aesthetic concern, often wedded to essentialist agendas, to then being moved – chapter to chapter - in different ethnographic arenas to see it appear as a “logic” through which sociality is shaped and lived. On top of these, the chapter shows something that is key to the thesis and will be picked up again the last chapter. Blurring elicits affects – manifested here as ecstasy, nostalgia, horror, sadness and beauty – and it is precisely for this reason that its symbols are powerful and hence made into banners of nationalism.

In what follows we look at the aesthetic ideals of transience, impermanence and obscurity as expressed by notions such as *aware* and *yūgen*. I catalogue these aesthetic notions under the wider umbrella of blurring because they all express the concern with the overlap of opposites we explored in the introduction. The aesthetic works to follow try to capture the moment *between* opposites, and see that moment as instantiating a blurring or an overlap of the two categories. Notions like

impermanence or the luminous darkness of *yūgen* centre the aesthetic experience on these often ephemeral moments where dualism is transcended and opposites are obfuscated and overlaid. Given this multiplicity blurring is here explored in different manifestations – it is here an heuristic “basket” to contain many interconnected phenomena which will be explored in the thesis. As we shall see in this chapter sometimes things are beautiful *because* of the presence of their opposite: a youth is beautiful because of the hint of the presence of death, trees in bloom beautiful because one can already sense their withering. Other times the focus is on the nearing of the border between the stages - the ephemeral moment of passage: an ancient temple is most beautiful in the midst of an air-raid threatening to destroy it, a lover most beautiful in the moment of their death, a blossom most beautiful when it is about to fall. In this between stage dualities overlap and one has to move left in order to go right and *vice versa*. Often the sought quasi-mystical aesthetic experience, nearing madness or Buddhist awakening (*satori*), is simply the transcendent blurring of duality where it is impossible to tell which side is which; where darkness glows, corpses are the most life-like, the background becomes foreground. In all these shades of the notion there is a concern with those empty gaps *between* things and their intense aesthetic and affective charge, gaps that “take us to a boundary situation at the edge of thinking and at the edge of all processes of locating things by naming and distinguishing” (Pilgrim 1986: 256).

In the first section I focus on a single symbol, the cherry blossom, as the nexus of many of the dimensions of blurring. I move then to look at the concept of *yūgen*, an aesthetic paradigm that casts the aesthetic experience as the blurring of duality, as an experience that transcends oppositions while letting them retain their distinctiveness.

The works of two modern writers – Kawabata Yasunari and Mishima Yukio – analysed in the following section see all the concerns explored up to this point expressed explicitly as aesthetico-political project. Blurring is for these authors not only something to be achieved within their work, but a key philosophy of art and life. The dualisms of old/new, Japanese/western, traditional/modern are central to their work and, as we shall see, one cannot easily privilege an aspect over the other: they seem to innovate in order to be traditional, work with tradition in order to be avant garde.

* * *

Methodological Notes – Essentialism, Orientalism, Elitism.

In this section I introduce the link between nationalism and aesthetics in the modern Japanese history of art and literature and, by so doing, introduce three important methodological provisos for the chapter. They are different facets of the same problem which is, unsurprisingly, the same overarching problem of the thesis: essentialism. In a way this section does for this chapter the work that the “analytical positioning” section in the Introduction did for the thesis – it positions both the chapter and its content in relation to the problem of essentialism.

As one can see with the cherry blossom and the rural native place, the aesthetics of impermanence has a political use, and it is extremely difficult to disentangle the concern with transience, its aesthetic expression and its political content. This entanglement of the aesthetic and the political is not a purely Japanese phenomenon. The aestheticization of politics has been often considered, for example by Walter

Benjamin, as a key ingredient of fascism and totalitarian regimes.²⁶ There is however something specific in the way in which, in Japanese modern history, aesthetics has been enshrined as a constituent part of “Japanese culture” thus becoming an important part of political life. The philosopher Nishida Kitarō, who we shall re-encounter later on, wrote that “Japanese culture can be regarded as an aesthetic culture” (Nishida 1970: 247). In Japan aesthetics as a discrete field of study did not start until the Meiji restoration with the introduction of Western philosophy among the intelligentsia, an introduction that prompted a reformulation of previously non-discrete artistic and ritual practices in terms of “culture” (*bunka*) and “art” (*bijutsu*) (Marra 2001: 1-22). Despite this, aesthetic appreciation has been central for much of Japanese history to – among others – court life, practices of self-cultivation and the construction of group identity. Mara Miller has hence called Japanese aesthetics and its expressions “cognitive prostheses” (Miller 2001: 318) which extend people's cognitive, emotional, social and physical capabilities, although one could simply remark that the category of aesthetics itself, much like “kinship” in anthropological theory, did not exist until the Western gaze carved it out. Still, within academia and local literary traditions, one finds it still hopelessly entangled and indissoluble with the cultural and political landscape in which it lives.

One finds aesthetics considerations and productions playing a key role in struggles for power and political legitimation since at least the medieval period (LaFleur 1983; Ebersole 1989; Huey 1989; Marra 1993). As Rupert Cox (2003: 196-230) argued in respect to Zen arts – e.g. the tea ceremony (*chadō*) and archery (*kyūdō*) – the idea of

²⁶ Walter Benjamin develops the idea in regards to war in a review (1979) of a collection of essays by Ernst Jünger and later expands it to politics more in general in the concluding remarks of his famous essay “The Work of Art in the Era of Mechanical Reproduction” (1969). See also the excellent Jay 1992 for a general overview of the concept.

“Japanese culture” which is expressed by the aesthetic forms of the various disciplines is constructed at particular historical moments and hence it expresses the interests of particular groups at particular times. This does not necessarily mean that these interests need be those of the ruling classes. Often the authors' discontent with the politically powerful has been more or less subtly encoded in literary texts making the line between aesthetics and ideology a blurry one at best (Marra 1991). Despite this long alliance of aesthetics and politics, the historian Eiko Ikegami (2005) has argued convincingly that it is only in the early-modern period that the pursuit of beauty becomes indistinguishable from politics. Vertical and horizontal networks based around the performing arts, poetry and the tea ceremony established cultural notions of beauty, good manners and propriety that became central to Japan's cultural identity and in turn integrated politics and aesthetics into a whole.

Many scholars have then argued that Japanese nationalism, both historical and contemporary, has expressed itself primarily aesthetically.²⁷ Ohnuki-Tierney (2002), as we have seen, sees the aesthetics of the cherry blossom as the beating heart of the propaganda machine of WWII. Similarly Alan Tansman (2009a) has shown how apparently innocent aesthetic sensibilities created the “spiritual” grounds for the war's fascist ideology. Along the same lines, Yumiko Iida (2002) argues that Japanese nationalism is best understood in terms of hegemony (*sensu* Gramsci) and that this hegemony has chiefly reproduced itself aesthetically. Importantly Iida argues that “the aesthetic” functions ideologically by promising to *resolve the contradictions that haunt Japanese modernity* and hence “remedies for the ill effects of the modern were formulated in aesthetic terms [...] not only as a response to the alleged limitations of

27 See essays in Tansman 2009b, especially Part III and IV.

modern rationality, but also because the aesthetic was the realm in which the essence of Japanese culture was thought to lie" (2002: 60; my italics). In *nihonjinron* literature (see Introduction) aesthetic categories such as *aware* and *yūgen* are promoted as distinctively Japanese qualities unique to the Japanese arts and with no counterparts in the West (e.g. Dale 1986: 56-76). As we shall see one finds this idea already expressed in the Tokugawa scholar of nativist studies Motoori Norinaga who argued that the uniquely Japanese sensibility of the classic *The Tale of Genji* creates, unlike Chinese counterparts, a form of *communitas*; it enables "generalized sociality, transfiguring personal woes into a communal reverberation of sympathy" (Yoda 2004: 141). The most famous expression of these ideas is perhaps in the philosopher Kuki's Shūzō (1888–1941) treatment of the notion of *iki* – concept he deems culturally untranslatable and unique.²⁸ *Iki* is for Kuki a central concept to the aesthetic life of the Edo period and, although French words like *chic*, *coquet* and *raffiné* share some connotations with the term, no European word comes close to capturing its meaning. This is nicely captured in Heidegger's famous dialogue "between a Japanese and an enquirer" (1971) where he discusses with one of Kuki's disciples the limits of cross-cultural understanding in relation to Japan and Kuki's work.

One can then say that at some point in Japanese history – somewhere between the Edo (1603-1868) and Meiji (1868-1912) period – these expressions of transience in the arts are indissolubly fused with their being essentially "Japanese" and transformed from self-standing aesthetic categories to *relational* ones. Categories explored in this chapter such as *aware* and *yūgen* – but also others like *wabi*, *sabi*, *shibui*, *iki* – are defined

28 Kuki's celebration of Japanese aesthetic values in the face of western cultural imperialism has been seen as explicitly endorsing the nationalism of the time and scholars still disagree on the agenda behind his work. See Pincus 1966 for an all-out attack, Nara 2004 and Parkes 2007 for a re-evaluation.

as intrinsically Japanese in opposition to the thinking of China and the West, and often this opposition is expressed in strong binaries such as light/ darkness or being/nothingness. Most of the authors we shall encounter in this chapter are modern authors who, in their attempt to create something beautiful, explicitly anchor their aesthetic sensibility in previous works, the “classics”, such as the work of the monk Dōgen for the philosopher Nishida or the work of Norinaga for the novelist Kawabata. These works themselves are often grounded in pre-existing texts creating genealogies that allow people to trace their aesthetic paradigm to something allegedly pure and untainted. Works like the 11th-century novel *The Tale of Genji*, for example, are reinterpreted as expressing a “purely Japanese sensibility” by Norinaga in the 18th century who in turn gives Kawabata the basis for thinking about Japanese aesthetics in the 20th.

In a beautiful book about the problem of time in Renaissance art Alexander Nagel and Christopher Wood (2010) argue that the renaissance art object has an inherent temporal structure and that this structure is anachronic: shaped by anxieties about authenticity, references to previous works and historical eras, by citations, misquotations and forgeries. All the modern authors in this chapter constantly go back and forth between the classics and their surrounding circumstances, between sensibilities understood as “Japanese” and “traditional” and others that are pointedly modern, even avant-garde for the time in which they are writing. They repeat and re-interpret the classics to find both authenticity and innovation. Like the Renaissance art object these works of Japanese modernism are intrinsically anachronic, they encode a particular historicity (cf. Hirsch and Stewart 2005) – they talk to the past, the present and the future. The anachronic nature of these works is then here in turn

illustrated anachronically - I move quite freely between historical periods, yet always gazing from post-war modernity and being careful, along the way, to always signpost, reference and point out the historically contingent nature of these works.

A couple of additional methodological points are necessary. First of all the use of material that ranges from the middle ages to today in order to define some kind of “Japanese aesthetics” - especially material that has to do with trite exotic imagery such as the beauty of impermanence - would strike many as irredeemably orientalist. Since the publication of Edward Said's seminal *Orientalism* (1978) the fact that Middle Eastern, South Asian and East Asian cultures are essentialised and portrayed as static and often underdeveloped has been something to constantly and seriously consider - and re-consider - in the way anthropologists among others represent the places they inhabited (see Moeran 1990). The second and interrelated point is the problem of the use of what can be defined as “elite culture” in order to frame an ethnographic work about the lives of, figuratively speaking, non-elite people. In other words how one can justify using poetry and philosophy to frame an analysis of people's everyday lives, especially when people themselves are not necessarily reading and discussing those works?

This latter point is really only a facet of the problem of orientalism. The problem is an old one in anthropology and one that comes up over and over again in the discipline. A good place to look in order to understand the problem is through the critiques to Clifford Geertz's analysis of Balinese time. While Geertz will later be similarly criticised for a-historically essentialising Balinese culture in his analysis of the state (Geertz 1980; Vickers 1989), critiques of his notion of “pointillist” time are important

here because they raise the problem of what kind of sources, or “data”, one brings forth as representative of the reality of the field. In only a few words Geertz's analysis sees Balinese time as embedded in a matrix constituted by ideas of personhood, social status and role. In this matrix time is “detemporalised”, it is a “motionless present, a vectorless now” and its calendar one that does not tell what day is it but “what kind of day it is” (Geertz 1975: 404). As Alfred Gell (1992: 71-73) has noted the entire analysis relies only on one of three calendars in use in Bali and, as Leo Howe (1981) had already pointed out, that this particular calendar is used, by ordinary Balinese, only for practical purposes and not for its “qualitative” properties.

However, the most scathing critique comes from Maurice Bloch who criticises the lack of a distinction between the realm of the everyday on the one hand, and the ritual or ideological on the other (Bloch 1977). He criticises Geertz for focusing on the ritual calendar which he argues is only used by the priesthood and not by ordinary people who rely on “the seasons”.²⁹ The problem is, in other words, that Geertz takes elite knowledge to be representative of the entirety of Balinese culture. Indeed most of the famous debates about ethnographic accuracy revolved precisely around the issue of elite vs. non-elite knowledge. Examples abound, the most notable being the critiques against Marcel Griaule's account of Dogon cosmology (1965) and Margaret Mead's work on adolescence and virginity in Samoa (1928). In Griaule's case his claims of having been taught the innermost secrets of Dogon cosmology by the blind sage Ogotemmêli have cast doubts of the representativeness of those secrets to Dogon

²⁹ There is more to both Geertz's and Bloch's arguments – Geertz already acknowledges the use of different calendars and interprets it as “social change”, especially the introduction of the Gregorian calendar, while Bloch takes it as proof the misguidedness of his argument. The underlying critique is the one against cultural relativism for a universalist model of immobilised time vs everyday time that in much of Bloch's later work will be called the “long term” and the “short term”.

cosmology as a whole (Van Beek 1991, 2004; also Douglas 1967; Clifford 1988) and inversely in Mead's case her use of young women's accounts of pre-marital promiscuity at the edges of the village was questioned with the use of elite knowledge by an anthropologist who finds a radically different reality by spending time with the chief-hood at its centre (Freeman 1983; also Abramson 1987, Shankman 2009).

The problem is that ritual calendars, the secret architectural plan of the Dogon granary, Samoan virginity cults are all representative, for many critics, of a small elite part of a society and not of a culture as a whole. In the case of many of the classics we shall encounter in this chapter this is undeniably true, and holding Heian courtly poetry as somehow true to the lives of people in 21st century Tokyo is unquestionably Orientalist. Except that, in a sense, they *are* representative, insofar as these classics were later held to be - by modern urban Japanese authors - representative of something true to Japan, containing within a (vanishing) essence of Japaneseness. The modern authors we see in the chapter are themselves going to these classics to find this essence and often trying to replicate it thus engaging in that production of difference and uniqueness central to *nihonjinron* theories. The elite knowledge in this chapter is perhaps not representative of the lives of 21st-century Tokyoites and yet it is central to popular conceptualisations of Japaneseness that are a tangible presence in television broadcasts, newspaper, popular literature and *manga* - consumed every day by millions of people in the metropolis. In other words, many of these works are either central to popular conceptualisations of Japaneseness and uniqueness which trickle down, figuratively, into the everyday life of many people living in Tokyo today.

The aim here is not to prove that notions of impermanence and blurring of opposites

are central to a “Japanese aesthetics” or to “Japanese culture” in general. The work of this chapter sees these notions as important to urban writers who are thinking about modernity and Japan's place in it. The Orientalising gaze of the West (cf. Minear 1980) is turned backwards and appropriated by Japanese authors and, through what many authors of “cultural critique” see as propaganda, by ordinary people in the way they understand themselves and the place of Japan in the modern world. Said himself (1978: 322) had written: “[Orientalism's] influence has spread to 'the Orient' itself: the pages of books and journals in Arabic (and doubtless in Japan, various Indian dialects, and other Oriental languages) are filled with second-order analyses by Arabs of 'the Arab mind', 'Islam', and other myths”. This “complicit exoticicism” (Iwabuchi 1995) or “Oriental Orientalism” (Kikuchi 2004) is still a reality today, as we have seen in the Introduction. Many authors in this chapter are in this way themselves Orientalising and essentialising “Japan” using the West as a mirror that, like in Robertson's native place, while threatening and destroying “tradition” at the same time helps to define and create it. This does not mean that because some people in Japan are themselves “Orientalist”³⁰ it is acceptable to ourselves be so. Rather, as in the thesis, essentialism is itself an ethnographic fact and the role of these works here is to contextualise it. In this way, in carving the conceptual space needed to frame the rest of the thesis, I can also already show certain dynamics to do with the creation of essentialism that in the next chapters will be seen in different spheres of everyday life.

* * *

30 Although I doubt that, much like “racism”, the term can be meaningfully used the other way round.

Life, Death, Madness, Eroticism - the Cherry Blossom as Symbolic Nexus

In his famous dictum from *Totemism* Claude Lévi-Strauss states that natural species are chosen as representative of clans “not because they are 'good to eat' (*bonnes à manger*) but because they are 'good to think [with]' (*bonnes à penser*)” (Lévi-Strauss 1963: 89). In the deconstruction of the anthropological category of totemism Lévi-Strauss argues that there is no such phenomenon, but that “totemism” is just a variety of metaphorical thought. In this sense the place of the cherry blossom in Japanese culture can be seen as a sort of totem, something that is not only good to think with but also, in a sense, to *feel* with.³¹ The appreciation of the blossom is an enduring literary – and social – trope from at least the Heian era (794 –1185AD) to today and it carries an affective element. The blossom is what Emiko Ohnuki-Tierney has called a polysemic symbol (Ohnuki-Tierney 2002; cf. Turner 1967: 19-47). Polysemy, the coexistence of multiple meanings in one word, is here not only the fact that a symbol means something different in different contexts, but that the blossom represents a matrix of interrelated concepts – not just life but life in relation to death, not just femininity but its relation to masculinity, and so on. In other words the cherry blossom does not only represent concepts, but processes and relations (Ohnuki-Tierney 2002: 57).

As we see in this section the polysemy of the blossom does not only concern “meaning”, but also the feelings attached to the apprehension of those meanings in the aesthetic experience. The blossom is famously the symbol of beauty in impermanence - it only lasts a few days before it starts falling and the trees are left bare. The

31 The cherry blossom is still “good to eat” as testified not only by their ornamental use in *wagashi* (traditional sweets) and *anpan* (a sweet bun filled with red bean paste) but also by the plethora of cherry blossom flavoured ice-creams, chocolates and snacks.

observation of impermanence in the blossom about to fall elicits feelings of sadness, acceptance and pathos and these feelings are themselves inextricable from its meanings. In this section we find the blossom to be the nexus for two interrelated aesthetic insights into the beauty of impermanence: the fact that things are at the most beautiful when about to vanish – epitomised by the falling blossom – and the fact that manifest beauty entails the presence of its negative – the blossoms in the glory of full bloom already entail a foreshadowing of death, youth entails decay, beauty entails horror.

In somewhat Orientalist fashion, the scholar and translator Donald Keene has remarked that “the Japanese were perhaps the first to discover the special pleasures of impermanence, and [...] believed that impermanence was a necessary element of beauty” (Keene 1988: 20). D. T. Suzuki (1870-1966), the famous Zen scholar, similarly defined Japanese aesthetics as pervaded by a profound recognition of the beauty of things in their suchness and, at the same time, being tinged with an element of sadness and melancholy (1993: 22).³² The notion that melancholy and sadness emerge in the very moment in which life presents itself most strongly is one of the major themes that one sees emerging over and over again in the religious-aesthetic history of Japan – and, as we see with Keene and Suzuki, often with essentialising undertones. The cherry blossom comes slowly to be the very epitome of this idea. Steven Heine (1991: 374) argues that the affirmation of death as coexistent with, or even having a priority over, life is a major feature of the Japanese interpretation of the Buddhist idea of impermanence coming from China, and that it becomes a persistence presence in aesthetic approaches through history. This attitude is mirrored in social behaviours

³² Railey 1997 calls it a dual-aesthetics, an aesthetics of both affirmation and mourning.

that legitimate voluntary death such as ritual suicide (*seppuku*), double suicide (*shinjū*) and the kamikaze phenomenon (*tokkōtai*) – behaviours that express pathos, tragedy and heroism.³³

It is virtually impossible to trace the idea of impermanent beauty to a specific moment in Japanese history. The Buddhist root is obvious, the idea is often traced back to the idea of impermanence (*mujō*) most notably expressed in the poetry of the monk Dōgen in the thirteenth century, who maintains that life and death are both manifestations of “impermanence-Buddha-nature” (*mujō-busshō*) (Abe 1985: 25-68, 1992; Heine 1982, 2005). The most complete and clear treatment of the concept is perhaps found in the writings of the later Buddhist monk Kenkō Yoshida whose *Essays in Idleness* (*Tsurezuregusa*; Keene 1998) is considered, besides being one of the most important works of Japanese literature, one of the fullest expressions of the themes of death and impermanence not only in its content but also in its structure (Chance 1997). Scholars like Karaki Junzō have seen the Buddhist notion of impermanence as expressed through Dōgen and Kenkō, but also through the literary works we shall see below, as the defining feature of the Japanese mentality (see Heine 1991; Heising, Kasulis and Maraldo 2011: 227-232).³⁴

Other scholars (e.g. Heine 1991, Ohnuki-Tierney 2002: 27-32) have however traced the presence of this idea to the agrarian cosmology based on rice cultivation pre-dating the arrival of Buddhism in Japan, specifically in the circle of the seasons and the

33 See Ch. 17 in De Vos 1973, LaFleur 1974, Ch. 11 in Lebra 1976, Pinguet 1993. Morris 1975 focuses on what he calls “the nobility of failure”, the aestheticism and pathos of voluntary death is the epitome of the tragic hero.

34 One gets here a taste of those genealogies spoken about in the introduction to this chapter: Karaki referring back to Kenkō referring back to Dōgen.

comings and goings of the *kami* of the rice field (*tanokami*) and the *kami* of the mountain (*yamanokami*) we shall re-encounter in the next chapter. Despite problems of genealogy, one finds, in all of these works, the intuition that perception of the beauty and fullness of life is always accompanied by the foreshadowing of their demise. The aesthetic experience contains both extremes, an affirmation of the existence of the thing and, at the same time, the perception of its perishability and imminent dissolution. This theme comes to be expressed most fully in the aesthetics of the cherry blossom whose “meaning as a life force is embedded in a complex nesting of concepts in which life is always predicated on death and rebirth, and vice versa” (Ohnuki-Tierney 2002: 38).

The cherry blossom has had at times purely life-affirming connotations. In the early agrarian cosmology sometimes called “folk Shinto” or simply “folk religion”³⁵ cherry blossoms represented youth, vigour, the exultation of life and in the culture of the Heian³⁶ courts feminine beauty, romantic love and the beauty of the imperial palace (Ohnuki-Tierney 2015: 25-56). Old age and the loss of youth were then perceived as “withering blossoms” in opposition to the life-celebratory fullness of the full bloom (Skord 1989).³⁷ However despite the presence, especially in early literature, of a purely positive connotation of the blossom already in Heian poetry one finds more than the static representation of the apogee of life and vitality, but a symbolism of transition carrying the melancholy of loss and grief. This change is marked by a shift in emphasis from the cherry blossom in full bloom to the falling blossom, increasingly

35 What Robert Redfield (1956) in the context of agrarian cultures has called “little tradition”; see Hori 1994 for a focus on Japan.

36 794 to 1185AD.

37 This is still visible today in the planting of cherry trees in Hiroshima and Nagasaki as a symbol of the enduring of life over war and death (cf. Ishitani 2010).

linked to an emergent feeling, called *aware*, in front of the impermanence of youth, love and life (Ohnuki-Tierney 2002: 39-44).

The *Tale of Genji* (Murasaki Shikibu 1977) - composed in the 11th century by an aristocratic woman at the imperial court and often considered the first novel in history - is where the genealogy of the notion of *aware* - poignant sadness at the passing of things - is usually traced. The *Tale* focuses on the amorous exploits and political successes of the Prince Genji, son of the emperor and a low-ranking imperial concubine. The story follows Genji from his demotion to commoner through his many romantic exploits in youth and finally to his political rise in rank that sees his children becoming respectively emperor, empress and minister. The final chapters see Genji's world falling apart: his vulnerability in front of young heroes like he once himself was, the death of his beloved and finally his own demise. It has been often argued that the focus of the whole novel is the ephemeral beauty of the fleeting world (e.g. Field 2001, Morris 2013), the sadness-tinged acceptance and beauty of the passing of things.³⁸

It is largely through the study of the *Tale* that the 18th-century scholar Motoori Norinaga (1730-1801) develops the notion of *mono no aware* (the “pathos of things”) as well as casting the *Tale* as a national and cultural treasure expressing a uniquely Japanese aesthetics (Yoda 1999). There is an explicit political bent to Norinaga's work - as well as to the nativist tradition (*kokugaku*) he writes in - and revisiting the classics means both rediscovering a lost essence of Japanese culture and purifying it from the

38 Despite consistent the presence of cherry blossoms in the *Tale* these tend to be still linked with life-affirming beauty and youth. An explicit link between blossoms and perishability appears only once: “The cherry blossoms of spring are loved because they bloom so briefly” (Murasaki Shikibu 1977: 736).

influences of Confucianism, Buddhism and Chinese culture.³⁹ The feeling of *mono no aware* found in the *Tale* demarcated a realm of experience that was specifically “Japanese” (Burns 2003: 68-101) and thus emancipated the aesthetic concern with impermanence in the classics from Chinese concepts such as the *mujō* (impermanence) of the Tendai school of Zen Buddhism (Matsumoto 1970: 54). *Mono no aware* was the quintessential Japanese sentiment, connected to the idea of a “Japanese spirit” (*yamatodamashii*). The appreciation of the cherry blossoms was its most poignant expression.⁴⁰

The blossom and its impermanent beauty are an enduring aesthetic paradigm today, and the appreciation of the flowering cherry trees is one of the major social events of the year. Every spring the cherry blossoms only last for about a week before falling. It takes only a rainfall or a gust of wind to quickly leave the trees bare and ruin *hanami* (“flower viewing”). Crowds gather under the trees and sit on blue tarpaulin with *bento* boxes and bottles of sake, drinking to intoxication. Parks fill with people taking pictures of the blossoms or posing in front of the trees in bloom and paper lanterns are hung in parks so that people can gather at night after work. In the weeks leading up to the bloom the media fuels the collective expectation with forecasts for the blossoming week. The Japan Meteorological Agency (*Kishō-chō*) releases a forecast about the specific dates of the blooming from Kyushu in late March to Hokkaido in

39 On nativism in Tokugawa Japan see e.g. Harootunian 1988, Nosco 1990.

40 Norinaga's paradigm for understanding the classics, as well as his systematization of Japanese grammar, are still influential today together with his idea of the cultural uniqueness of both language and sentiment (Flueckiger 2010: 173). His notions that the *Tale*, together with the myths of the ancient chronicles, is the place to find an untainted “Japanese” culture (see Isomae 2000) resonated with the nationalism of the Meiji period and enduring discourses of cultural homogeneity. Still today, as Takuya Sakurai (2017) has recently argued, the cherry blossom is at the centre of discourses promoting Japan as a unique and homogeneous country.

early May: the “cherry blossom front” (*sakura zensen*). The dates are discussed on TV, broadcast on screens in the subway and public squares and compared with the weather forecast hoping for clear skies and windless days, so that the fragile blossom might endure. The appreciation of the flowers is a constitutive part of urban society to the point of being considered a “total social phenomenon” (Ohnuki Tierney 1998; cf. Mauss 1966). One finds the symbolism of the blossom to express transience in many places, from contemporary literature to TV productions and *manga*. For example, given that school starts and ends in spring, the cherry blossom becomes a particularly powerful symbol of beginnings and endings for young people and the same feelings of poignancy one finds in the classics are often employed in *manga* in scenes about goodbyes and growing up. Either under the blossoms or amidst fallen blossoms swirling in the wind, characters look at each other for the first or last time.

Up to now we have seen the coexistence of life and death one finds in the symbolism of the blossom as a manifestation of a somehow normative ideal of beauty. The blossom however appears in much more visceral incarnations in connection with eroticism or madness. The blossom was in the popular arts of the Edo period (1603-1868) – puppet theatre (*bunraku*), *Kabuki*, and woodblock prints (*ukiyo-e*) – often associated with the pleasure quarters, especially Yoshiwara which, until government crackdown in 2008, maintained legacies to its past hosting many businesses engaged in the sex-trade.⁴¹ Geisha and their “floating world” (*ukiyo*) were central to the urban imagination of the time and often portrayed in plays and woodblock prints which were usually rafted from the trunks of cherry trees (Gerstle 1987; Ohnuki Tierney

⁴¹ Yoshiwara is today in Tokyo's Taitō ward in the south-western part of the day-labourer district of Sanya and it was at the centre of the post-war government attention to sex, prostitution and venereal disease (Kramm 2017: 119-162).

2002: 44-52). An early 17th-century author writes: “Although there are many things that are popular in Edo now, there is nothing to compare with the women of Yoshiwara-chō” (in Shively 2002: 35).⁴² The association between the sensuality of the geisha and the blossom is visible in many of these prints where cherry trees in bloom are often in the background of prints or *kabuki* plays.

The early 17th-century “*ukiyo*-book” *The Life of an Amorous Woman* (*Kōshoku Ichidai Onna*; 1963) by Ihara Saikaku tells of a courtesan fleeing to the pleasure quarters of Kyoto. Here the cherry blossoms become metaphor for the fleeting pleasures of sensuality and throughout the book they remain the central symbol for the evanescence of both pleasure and youth (Inouye 2008: 69-74). The fleetingness of the visits to the pleasure quarters, and of pleasure itself, are undoubtedly part of the association between blossom, impermanence and the lives of the women of Yoshiwara – “floating world” is itself a term borrowed from Buddhism to express the ephemerality of life in general – but one must also note that these women, embodying youth and sensuality in the minds of the men of Edo, had lives of isolation and insecurity that often ended with suicide (Seigle 1993: 107) making fleetingness a dark subtext of the book.

Along with the association with eroticism, the one with temporary madness is also important. From Zeami's famous Nō play *The River of Cherry Blossoms* (*sakuragawa*; Huey 1983) to contemporary literature one finds references to madness and frenzy under the trees in bloom. However, it is in modern literature that one finds this link most explicitly. In Sakaguchi Ango's (1906-55) short story “In the Forest, Under

⁴² On Yoshiwara and the Edo imagination see Hibbett 1975; Seigle 1993; Ikegami 2005: 245-85; Longstreet and Longstreet 2008.

Cherries in Full Bloom” (*sakura no mori no mankai no shita*; 1997) the blossoms drive anyone stepping underneath them to a frenzy, “gasping for breath”. In the climax of the story the protagonist, walking under the trees in bloom, suddenly feels a dreadful cold and, in the place of his wife, sees a horrifying demon. After strangling it fighting for his life he sees his wife's corpse in its place, the blossoms falling gently to cover it.

Similarly in Kajii Motojirō's (1901-32) “Beneath the Cherry Trees” (*sakura no ki no shita ni wa*; Dodd 2014: 191-205) a frenzied narrator begs the reader to believe that there are corpses hidden under the cherry trees.

Corpses everywhere: of horses, of dogs and cats, of humans. All the corpses are decomposed and seething with maggots, the stench unbearable. Yet still they manage to squeeze out droplets of crystalline liquid. The tree roots embrace them like a rapacious octopus, their tiny hair roots clustering like sea anemone tendrils to suck up the fluid. What is it that makes such petals, what produces such stamens? (in Dodd 2014: 207).

Indeed, how else could the blossom be so beautiful? Extreme beauty must for Kajii be predicated on its negative, abjection and dread. In fact the narrator tries to push the reader to edges of disgust – sea creatures, reproduction, death are all knotted in the symbolism of the blossom:

Looks like you're wiping under your arms. Breaking into a cold sweat, are we? I'm just the same. It's nothing to feel uncomfortable about. Just think of it as sticky semen. So, our melancholy is complete. Ah, under the cherry trees corpses are buried! (in Dodd 2014: 208).

Through this “aestheticization of the unaesthetic” (cf. Kutzbach and Mueller 2007) Kajii aims to capture the intensity of the aesthetic experience. In her influential elaboration of abjection (1982), Julia Kristeva argues that the abject emanates from an ambiguous place that overturns the differentiation between inside and outside - “an exorbitant outside or inside, ejected beyond the scope of the possible, the tolerable, the thinkable” (1982: 1). The aesthetic experience is here grounded on the paradoxical coexistence of beauty and its negative and this experience takes the viewer to the brinks of dissolution and madness. The description of the aesthetic experience as being predicated on a coexistence and overlapping of opposite terms, the idea that in the intensity of that experience the subject/object distinction becomes blurred, that opposites come to overlap, is something we find at many junctures of the Japanese history of ideas. The next section explores perhaps the most significant of these junctions: *yūgen*, an aesthetic ideal that focuses on the phenomenological dimension of this blurring. It is in this experience – where darkness becomes light and the background becomes foreground – that beauty is sought and found.

* * *

Dusk and Penumbral Beauty in Poetry, Theatre and Philosophy

The aesthetic ideal of *yūgen* presents a phenomenological approach to many of the themes we have seen so far. The collapse of duality conceptualised through the aesthetic of the blossom is here sought and appreciated in its experiential and immediate form. The word *yūgen* is comprised by two characters: the first component,

yū, connotes faintness or shadowiness and is a character one finds in words like “ghost” (*yūrei*), “gloom/melancholy” (*yūutsu*) and “hermitage/seclusion” (*yūkyō*). The word suggests insubstantiality, feebleness and intangibility. The other component is *gen*, which connotes darkness, dimness and mysteriousness and one finds it in less expressive words to do with doorways or with unpolished rice or barley. The word would then literally translate something like “shadows and darkness” or, more openly, something like “mysterious profundity”. One finds it first in Chinese philosophical texts as “dark” or “mysterious” but by the time it becomes an established aesthetic model in Japan it acquires connotations of mystery, depth and grace.

Yūgen was first established as an aesthetic ideal in the theory of poetry popular among the circle of court poets in the 12th-13th century. Kamo no Chōmei (1155-1216), who became a Buddhist hermit after being passed over for promotion in his family's Shinto shrine, considered *yūgen* to be a primary concern of the poetry of his time. His famous *An Account of My Hut* (*hōjōki*; 1955) he describes the notion thus: “It is like an autumn evening under a colourless expanse of silent sky. Somehow, as if for some reason that we should be able to recall, tears well uncontrollably” (in Hume 1995: 253). The phenomenon of *yūgen* involves a particular human gaze focused on the phenomenal world (Izutsu and Izutsu 1981: 27) together with an emotive response to it. Beauty is here not intrinsic to the object itself but born of the moment in which the gaze is fixed upon the object, in the aesthetic experience.

The principle *yūgen* hints at the aesthetic value intrinsic in all phenomena due to their hidden depth and the possibility of its disclosure. *Yūgen* poetry is known for its simple descriptions of natural phenomena which “eliminated the distance between poetic

object or topic or poet” (Konishi 1985: 204). The descriptions are simple and direct and sometimes border on realism “as if striving for a vivid and realistic presentation of intriguing aspects of nature experienced by a distant subject” (Heine 1991: 385). The word “distant” is important as the apprehension of things in this aesthetic mode has been linked both genealogically and thematically to the Tendai Buddhist practices of “calm-and-contemplation” or “tranquillity and insight” (*shikan*) that will influence the development of sitting meditation (*zazen*) in Zen Buddhism (LaFleur 1983: 89-91; Odin 2001: 103-11). In these meditative practices, it is through detached contemplation - observing things with equanimity and without craving - that things are revealed in their truth. In a similar exercise it is through the detachment of simple poetic description that one achieves the very opposite effect to both realism and detachment (Heine 1991: 385): through detachment one reaches an experience of pure attachment, one where the real blurs and the observer becomes implicated in the disclosure of the true reality beneath.

What is revealed in the aesthetic experience is the primordial non-articulated reality underlying the object (Izutsu and Izutsu 1981). In the moment of the revelation of this reality the distance between observer and observed is obliterated and a deeper mode of awareness is achieved. It is hard to put these experiences into words precisely because it cannot be done, and hence the paradoxical writing style where one strives for the distance and realism in order to disclose something *more* real and, through that disclosure, achieve a deeper union with the object. The beauty of *yūgen* “is faint, delicate, suggestive because it is based on the awareness of the insubstantiality and delimitation of the human existential field. It is a beauty of spiritual aspiration and yearning motivated by the desire to have sensuous images of the non-articulated, non-

sensuous reality of eternal silence and enigma in the midst of the physical world” (Izutsu and Izutsu 1981: 28).

As an aesthetic paradigm *yūgen* reaches its fullest expression in the treatises on Nō Theatre by the playwright, actor and critic Zeami Motokiyo (1363-1443). *Yūgen* is in Zeami's drama “the highest principle” and its allusive principles become the base for the actor's grace (Rimer 1984: 92). Zeami was an incredibly prolific writer who wrote 30 plays and 21 critical writings where he lays the theoretical foundations of Nō from music to movements (Rimer 1984: xvii; Quinn 2005: 1). In his “The Nine Stages” (*kyūji*) a complete theory of acting is delineated implicitly in dense and indirect descriptions of nine levels of performance. These levels also describe in symbolic language the state of mind that the Nō actor must achieve and which serves as ground for the performance itself.

The highest of the nine stages, achieved by very few performers, is called “The Flower of Mysterious Singularity” (Izutsu and Izutsu 1981) or “The Flower of Peerless Charm” (Rimer 1984):

The meaning of the phrase Peerless Charm surpasses any explanation in words and lies beyond the workings of consciousness. It can surely be said that the phrase ‘in the dead of night, the sun shines brightly’ exists in a realm beyond logical explanation. Indeed, concerning the Grace of the greatest performers in our art [it gives rise to] the moment of Feeling that Transcends Cognition, and to an art that lies beyond any level that the artist may consciously have attained (Rimer 1984: 120).

As a result, the “articulating function of the human mind as well as all that has been articulated dissolve into the abyss of darkness [...] one witnesses at this stage the abyss transmuting itself all of a sudden into a dazzling light” (Izutsu and Izutsu 1981: 43).

The mysterious darkness of *yūgen* is apprehended for a moment in the aesthetic experience and this moment entails the obliteration of all duality, what Zeami calls transcendental non-duality of the internal landscape. “Once the essence has been regained”, writes Konishi in regards to *yūgen* poetry, “the poet recommence grasping for forms manifested on a more superficial level of awareness” (Konishi 1985: 204). The experience of *yūgen* is predicated precisely on the cancellation of dualism where the awareness of the poet and the insubstantial underlying nature of things are mirrored in each other. One finds equivalences in the work of the monk Kenkō whom we met in the previous section. Kenkō characterises change as an “impetus budding from underneath”: It is not that when spring draws to a close it becomes summer, or that when summer ends the autumn comes; spring itself urges the summer to show itself; [...] The impetus for this change being provided from underneath, the process of shifting from one to the next occurs extremely fast” (Keene 1998: 148). Heine comments: “Here Kenkō identifies a radical moment-to-moment transition in which the past (of spring) and the future (of summer) are at once fully overlapping in the present yet indistinguishable and irreversible” (Heine 1991: 386).

In Zeami these moments of indistinction, where subject-object become one and the sun shines brightly in the dead of night, allow the actor to transcend dualities. Movements, pace and diction in *Nō* are highly stylised and extremely unnatural but – similarly to the paradoxical method of *yūgen* poetry – this extreme formalism is meant

to give way to a “higher naturalness”. The study of the appropriate forms (*kata*) is “based on the tension between opposites, which can be traced in part to the *in-yō* (yin-yang) concept of the harmony of dark-light, hard-soft, female-male” (Brandon 1997: 4) and the goal to achieve that quality of *yūgen* which transcends these dualities.

Many of Zeami's most famous plays fall in the category of what he called “the Woman's mode” (Hare 1986: 131)⁴³. Zeami considered female roles the highest form of *yūgen* especially ones depicting aristocratic women either in distress or fallen to madness such as the oft-portrayed characters of the *Tale of Genji*.⁴⁴ Dressed in female garb and wearing a mask the actor does not only have to imitate a woman: once reached the limits of imitation one is not imitating at all but trying to become the “very thing” (Hare 1986: 66; 132). In fact, there is no attempt at imitation - the masculine body is not hidden, the voice not tuned or high-pitched and the actor's face is much bigger than the mask meant to cover it.⁴⁵ Margaret Coldiron notes how despite the “masculine jowls behind the face of the Heavenly maiden” the actor is able to create “a performance of extraordinary feminine grace and lightness that is especially impressive in such a large man” (2004: 266). The masculinity of the actor is constantly hinted at on stage while the actor achieves that higher naturalness and becomes an idealised figure of female beauty. The actor is not “crossing” the bounds of gender - the point is not again imitation but the production of *yūgen* beauty, the obfuscation and obliteration of the dualism exaggerated by the contrasting features of

43 *Ryōtai*; the other two modes are the aged mode (*rōtai*) and the martial mode (*guntai*); see Hare 1986 for a detailed treatment of the three modes.

44 This aspect of Zeami's work is quite problematic to modern sensibilities. While the association between woman and madness has been a long-standing refrain in patriarchal cultures - and this is no doubt still applicable here - see Savas 2008 for a more complex textual/historical analysis of the relationship between madness and femininity in Nō.

45 See Tsybizova 2015 for an account of techniques of cross-gendering.

male body and feminine demeanour.⁴⁶

The enduring presence of these concerns can be seen in philosophical and literary works of the 20th century such as Natsume Sōseki's (1867-1916) strange novel *Kusamakura* (2008) and many others as we'll see in the next section.⁴⁷ Another author of that period, Tanizaki Junichiro (1886-1965), in his treatise *In Praise of Shadows* (*inei raisan*; 1977) argues that, in contrast to Western canons of beauty, Japan has developed an aesthetics of shadows. The preference for darkness and shadows, the twilight atmosphere of *yūgen*, expresses itself in a predilection not of the object *per se*, viewed in the light of the day or under spotlights like the Western art object, but for the shadows these objects cast as they recede into darkness leaving behind an aura of mystery and depth. In architecture, for example, a mysterious faint world of dim darkness is created through the use of massive roofs with overhanging eaves so that “even at midday cavernous darkness spreads all beneath the roof's edge” (1977: 30) and the beauty of a room within the house lies not in the furniture and decorations but “depends on a variation of shadows, heavy shadows against light shadows – it has nothing else” (1977: 18). In his novella “A portrait of Shunkin” (*Shunkinshō*; 1963) Sasuke, the protagonist, blinds himself with a needle to completely submerge in the

46 The actor becomes: “simultaneously both man and woman or, conversely neither man nor woman” (Thornton 2003: 224). While the dualism of gender did not entail heteronormative desire (e.g. MacDuff 1996), gender distinction was indeed strongly codified in Muromachi society. Later one finds similar themes in *Kabuki* theatre in the figure of the *onnagata*, the female impersonator. Here the biologically male actor does not only perform femininity on stage but also socially where they were supposed to represent the ideal heterosexual partner with a femininity and refinement that women could not achieve (Morinaga 200: 257; Isaka 2016). A strong parallel is found in classical Chinese theatre (Scott 1957: 69). A specular principle can be found in Robertson's (1998a: 47-88) analysis of the modern *Takarazuka Revue*, an all-female musical theatre troupe. The androgyny of the female actor playing masculine parts embodies contradiction and bridges gender, while interestingly the women who play female roles can affect a radical denaturalization of “femaleness”. William T. Vollman's *Kissing the Mask* (2010) is an exploration of this blurring of gender in *Nō* and also an account of the author's own clumsy attempts to achieve this state.

47 “Grass Pillow”; see Ueda 1976: 11.

world of his blind lover. At the moment when the needle stabs his eye and takes his sight away, Sasuke achieves a sudden awakening - the face of his lover appears before him like a mandala of the Buddha surrounded by a halo of luminous darkness.

One finds similar considerations in the philosophy of Nishida Kitarō (1870-1945), the founder of the Kyoto School which opened the dialogue between Western and Japanese philosophy.⁴⁸ Nishida claimed that while the Western cultural tradition has been founded on the problem of being, Japanese culture is rooted in the problem of nothingness (Nishida 1970). Note that in both Tanizaki and Nishida we find that mirroring highlighted at the beginning of the chapter: the binary of West vs. Japan refracted into more binaries such as being vs. non-being, darkness vs. light. Takeuchi Yoshinori (1913-2002) - a student of Tanabe Hajime, himself Nishida's pupil and his successor in the chair of philosophy in Kyoto - describes Nishida's "second phase" thus:

According to Nishida [...] the self ultimately finds itself in the abyss of darkness [...] enveloping within itself every light of self-consciousness. This darkness, however, is "dazzling obscurity" [...] giving the self an unfathomable depth of meaning and being. The self is thus haloed with a luminous darkness (1982: 183).

One finds the *yūgen*-like transcendence of dualism at the centre of the whole of Nishida's opus, from the early notion of "pure experience"⁴⁹, free of subject/object

48 See the excellent Heising 2001 for an overview of the Kyoto School and Heising et al. 2011: 639-800 for texts and overviews of the different members. Carter 1997 and Wargo 2005 for studies of Nishida's philosophy.

49 The notion of "pure experience" (*junsui keiken*) was influenced by the work of William James (Dilworth 1969) although it restores the (Zen) transcendental idealism that James sought to criticise. This well exemplifies Nishida's ambiguous attitude to Western philosophy.

dualism, to the later “logic of place” (*basho*) and Absolute Nothingness. Nishida argues that Japan is a culture based on pure aesthetic feeling and that “the quality of *yūgen* is also based on pure feeling” (1970: 252). In his works on aesthetics, one finds constant comparisons between the *yūgen* sensibility of Japanese art versus the heavy use of colours and light in Western art.⁵⁰

Nishida and Tanizaki highlight something important. In Tanizaki's fiction “the West” and “Japanese tradition” are often juxtaposed (Chiba 2015: 623-33) and at the end of his treatise on the aesthetics of shadows he calls for a return to, and a preservation of, aesthetic categories like *aware* and *yūgen*. The urgency of preserving a fading traditional aesthetics against the dazzling electric lights of modernization turns into a call-out to modern writers to turn their back to the encroaching westernisation. In Nishida one finds again the idea of unique Japanese patterns of thought which will end up being entangled with the nationalism of the 1920s and forging an uneasy and unresolved link between the Kyoto School of philosophy and right-wing politics (e.g. Heisig and Maraldo 1994). For both writers their ideas are defined against Western ones which are understood to be their very opposite: light versus darkness, being versus nothingness. Notions like *yūgen* and *aware* become symbols of a purely Japanese sensibility and employing them in an author's writing intrinsically a political act. This antinomy becomes both central and problematic for modern writers and in the next section we look at these concepts through the lenses of two writers who felt terribly this struggle but approached it in a way which is not a straightforward choice between tradition and modernity but, one could say, a blurring that transcends both.

50 Or at times a search for traces of *yūgen* sensibility amongst Western artists he loved. See e.g. Nishida's comparison of *sumie* paintings to Western painting (1978: 33-35) and his appreciation of Goethe and Rembrandt (1958: 145-62).

* * *

Literature and Modernity: Kawabata and Mishima

The endurance of the aesthetic concern with capturing the overlapping moments between life and death, the impermanent aesthetic experience suspended between the two, is a motif that appears over and over again in modern literature. The two authors whose work perhaps most embody the aesthetic concerns of this chapter are Kawabata Yasunari (1899-1972) and Mishima Yukio (1925-1970). The choice is to a certain extent personal preference; one can find the themes of *yūgen* and *aware* explicitly expressed in many modern writers such as Mori Ōgai, Natsume Sōseki and, as we have seen, Tanizaki Junichirō. The same can be said for modern Cinema: many of Ozu Yasujiro's films, such as *Late Spring* (*banshun*; 1949), are seen to carefully invoke these aesthetic principles through the presentation of “the faces of things” rather than actors (Bordwell 1988). These objects express these principles more than the faces of the greatest actors could: a vase standing in a corner of a *tatami* room where father and daughter are asleep, two fathers contemplating the rocks at the dry garden at Ryōanji in Kyoto (their shapes echoing the shapes of the stones), an empty mirror reflecting the absence of a daughter who has just left to get married.

The choice is however also motivated by fact that both Mishima's and Kawabata's aesthetic concerns are part of a dialectic between westernisation and innovation on the one hand, and the forging of something purely Japanese, able to convey traditional ethical and aesthetic principles, on the other. If in the introduction of this chapter we have seen instances of an engagement with and use of the classics for ideological

reasons and here we see the same impulse but coupled with its very opposite: the urge to innovate and the influence of Western literature. While in a way Mori Ōgai and Natsume Sōseki already embodied this dialectic in their coupling of, respectively, Goethe's attitude of resignation and British aestheticism with Buddhist aesthetic principles (Odin 2001: 23-24), in Mishima and Kawabata – perhaps because they lived later on – this dialectic is stronger. Both seem at times to use innovation and Western literature to craft something that feels old and Japanese and in others to use tradition in order to be avant-garde.

Kawabata and Mishima are highly concerned with the crafting and preservation of a purely Japanese literature against the encroaching westernisation while, at the same time, engaging and being fascinated by Western art and experimenting with the form of the novel. In other words both authors are concerned with the preservation and recreation of traditional aesthetic (and ethical) forms by drawing heavily from the classics (Petersen 1979: 2-3) while at the same time looking outside Japan and deconstructing those very forms. Kawabata, for example, suggested that “literature records nothing but [...] encounters with beauty” (Ueda 1976: 174-5) and that beauty - he stated in his Nobel acceptance speech titled “Japan, the Beautiful and Myself” - is the simple beauty of Zen Buddhism, thus equating his writing with the traditional Zen arts such as flower arranging, ink wash painting and the tea ceremony (Kawabata 1968). While some of his novels, like *The Master of Go* (*Meijin*; 1972), are seen as explicitly embodying the aesthetic concerns of Zen (Feenberg 1994), Kawabata often explodes the novel-form both stylistically and content-wise. From the surrealism of his *Palm of the Hand Stories* (*tenohira no shōsetsu*; 1988), to the stream of consciousness of the unfinished short story *Crystal Fantasy* (*Suishō gensō*) to the engagement with mass

culture, the journalistic style and kinetic literary techniques of *The Scarlet Gang of Asakusa* (*Asakusa Kurenaidan*; 2005), Kawabata's work is far from a nostalgic gaze on a lost aesthetic but an highly experimental mosaic that incorporates modernity and the elements of what was considered both “tradition” and “Japanese culture” at the time.

These two elements – a gaze that goes both backwards to the classics and forwards to both west and mass culture – are however always in conflict: while some see his work as quintessentially modern and experimental (Starr 2011: 103-131) others see it as ultimately anti-modernist (Keene 1984: 631) and its aesthetic feeding, and being fed by, the fascist discourses of the time (Cornyetz 2007: 13-58). The same can be said for Mishima, a writer deeply influenced by western writers such as Friedrich Nietzsche and Thomas Mann first (Starr 1994: 13-23) and Georges Bataille and Pierre Klosslowki later (Mishima 1995) but at the same time intensely invested in the resurrection of the moral code of *bushido* and the protection of Japan's disappearing cultural integrity.

Commenting on Kawabata's work Mishima says that his art is “the opposite of the plastic will of the Greek sculptors who committed themselves to the permanence of marble; it is in sharp contrast to the fear that the harmonic Greek sculpture fights with its whole body” (in Miyoshi 1982: 95). The Greeks, an enduring interest of Mishima's, represent for him the Western mind and its hegemony of forms. Again in the introduction to Kawabata's *The House of Sleeping Beauties* (*nemureru bijō*; 1969a) he observes that the meaning of great novels is culturally obvious, much alike “exoteric [...] Buddhism” (Mishima 1969: 7) referring to his blending of characteristic aesthetic, religious and cultural elements which would immediately resonate with any Japanese reader (cf. Boardman 1969). Mishima is explicitly referring to Kawabata's masterpiece

Snow Country (*yukiguni*, 1956) where the love affair between the two main characters is both an allusion to a Shinto festival and its mythology (Boardman 1971: 97) and an expression of *aware*, the pathos of the passing of things.

One finds the concern with impermanence in many of Kawabata's novels. As in *Snow Country* one finds the sadness-tinged beauty of transience in most of his works and the disappearance of old Japan foreshadowed in the Western elements that appear throughout his stories; e.g. the American tourist casually taking a picture of Mt. Fuji from the train in *Beauty and Sadness* (*utsukushisa to kanashimi to*; 1975). In his Nobel acceptance speech (1968) Kawabata returns to *mono no aware* as central to both Japanese aesthetic and his own. He describes it as a “feeling for the poignant beauty of things” which he sees the most purely in Heian courtly literature such as the *Tale of Genji* (see also Kawabata 1969b). The same can be said for the aesthetic of *yūgen*: some Japanese critics suggest that books like *Snow Country* are written like a Nō play in prose – in which the reader is led closer and closer to the elusive personality of the geisha Komako – and *The Sound of the Mountain* (*yama no oto*; 1970) like an *haiku* journal (Rimer 1995: 10).

The affair between Komako and Shimamura in *Snow Country* is defined by the awareness of its impermanence: both lovers know that their affair is fleeting and soon to end which casts a feeling of poignancy and beauty over their actions. The novel also makes use of seasonal imagery to foreshadow the inevitable passage between love and its death. Flashbacks to spring accompany the lovers' first meeting – symbolism that connects to a long literary tradition – while the second part of the novel is drenched with traditional *haiku* symbolism for the “sad” season of autumn (Boardman 1969: 8-

10) foreshadowing tragedy and the wintry climax of the final paragraph. As Mishima noted these elements explicitly connect to an interminable string of cultural, aesthetic and religious forms that are meant to resonate with the Japanese reader and elicit feelings of poignant sadness that are – for these authors, but also for Norinaga long before – constitutively Japanese. A similar mechanism can be found again in *Beauty and Sadness* where the protagonist hears the resonating sound of Buddhist bells in Kyoto ringing 108 times on new year's eve, the fading reverberations signalling the pathos of impermanence. It is the fading reverberations and not the ringing of the bells that carries pathos and beauty. Again the passage is also reminiscent of the opening lines of the *Tale of Heike* where the fading bells of a Buddhist temple in Kyoto function, just as in Kawabata, to disclose the impermanence of all things (Odin 2016: 286).⁵¹

The work of Mishima brings similar concerns, if in a more intense way. If “Kawabata's favourite beauty was delicate, fragile and perishable” (Ueda 1976: 201), in Mishima the aesthetics of death, eroticism and violence take the centre stage (Starr 1994; Cornyetz 2007: 109-52) and a style of prose that in Kawabata was obscure and allusive becomes in Mishima clear and descriptive. While *yūgen*, *aware* and Zen aesthetics were self-consciously central to Kawabata's work, in Mishima one finds a distinct neglect for the passive attitudes of Zen and an increasingly anti-psychological attitude (Starr 1994: 107-11; Inouye 2008: 169). For example, despite the fact that the Buddhist metaphysics of renunciation of pleasure and beauty is a constant presence in the novel *The Temple of the Golden Pavilion* (*Kinkakuji*; 1959), sensuality for the character remains a stubborn

51 “At the Jetavana temple the bells give voice to the impermanence of all as it reverberates” in Miner et al. 1985: 163; or the less fitting: “The sound of the Gion Shōja bells echoes the impermanence of all things” in McCullough 1994: 265.

active force and beauty an insurmountable object to be defiled (Wallace 1997).⁵² However while intellectual Zen Buddhism and the beauty of sadness are shed in favour of an active nihilism that privileges action, the goal is again an aesthetic experience that epitomises both *yūgen* and *aware*.

The Temple of the Golden Pavilion is based on the true story of how the Golden Pavilion in Kyoto was burned to the ground in an act of arson by a Zen monk in 1950.⁵³ In the fiction the stuttering monk is haunted by questions of aesthetics in an urge to understand his own obsession with the pavilion. Mishima clearly addresses the notions of beauty in perishability and death when the young acolyte realises that the “tragic beauty” (*higekiteki na utsukushisa*) of the temple is increased with the awareness that an air raid by American bombers could turn the temple into ashes at any moment. The beauty of the pavilion is increased in the moments before its vanishing and, on the verge of its destruction, the temple becomes “a symbol of the real world's evanescence” (Mishima 1959: 45).

Eventually the monk realises that the only way to free himself from the tyranny of his obsession is to burn the temple. In the climax of the novel he sets fire to three straw bales on the ground floor of the temple. After finding the door leading upstairs closed and realising the impossibility of burning with the temple - that a glorious death has been refused to him - the monk runs away and to the top of a hill nearby. There he disposes of incriminating evidence, lights a cigarette and watches the temple burn.

The novel ends with a climax - the beauty of the temple is fully revealed to the monk

52 Here Mishima comes incredibly close to Bataille: “Beauty is desired in order that it may be befouled; not for its own sake, but for the joy brought by the certainty of profaning it” (Bataille 1986: 144).

53 The only account of these events in English is in Borowitz 2005: 49-63.

gazing upon it for the last time. Everything fades into a twilight void of nothingness expressing the ideal of *yūgen* as the mysterious beauty of darkness while the temple is ablaze with light, echoing the protagonist's first impression of it: “the shadow was more beautiful than the temple itself” (Mishima 1959: 24). The temple sinks into darkness while coming forth as blazing light. Steve Odin sees this moment as the fusion of *yūgen* and *aware* which become for Mishima inseparable:

The majestic beauty of the Golden Pavilion is fully revealed to the Zen monk only when he gazes upon it for the last time. For it is only through the heightened awareness of the evanescence of the Golden Pavilion as it burns into a black void of nothingness, that the tragic beauty of the Golden Temple as *yūgen* or darkness and shadows is finally brought to full disclosure. The tragic beauty of the Golden Pavilion is revealed precisely at the moment of its destruction and subsequent vanishing into the dark night of nothingness. [...] The tragic beauty which arises through the loss of passing things is directly related to the beauty of the darkness into which things pass (Odin 2016: 285).

Throughout the novel binaries are presented over and over again: brightness and darkness, beauty and ugliness, desire and repression. The narrative structure itself is based on these contradictions and the attempts to control or transcend them (Napier 1991: 110) and it is only in the destruction of the temple that all duality is transcended.

These themes are not only an aesthetic ideal within the novel but, one could say, also a philosophy of art and life. Mishima is perhaps most famous for his ritual suicide after a failed *coup d'état* in 1970. On November 25 together with a few members of the *tatenokai* - “shield society” a private militia sworn to “protect the emperor” under his

command⁵⁴ - kidnapped the commander of the Japan Self-Defence Forces⁵⁵ camp in Ichigaya, Tokyo. After barricading into his office, Mishima gave a speech to the officers gathered under its balcony hoping to inspire them to restore the power of the emperor taken away by American occupation. The crowd laughed and sneered - Mishima stepped back inside to commit ritual suicide (*seppuku*) stabbing his own abdomen before being beheaded by his second in command.⁵⁶

The last years of Mishima's literary production are peppered with essays that come closer and closer to extreme right-wing ideology, advocating a return to the philosophies of old Japan as an antidote to the poison of Western humanism and capitalism (Starr 1994: 146-194). The characters of his last novels - *The Sea of Fertility* (*hōjō no umi*), the tetralogy he only finished a few days before his suicide - pontificate on the corruption and decadence of contemporary Japan against the “real” Japan (*hontō no nippon*) that only survives in the spirits of few people. One can find all the elements of Mishima's suicide foreshadowed throughout his work from the very beginning, a fact that made many authors speculate if the *coup* was only an excuse to enact a destiny he had chosen for himself a long time before.⁵⁷

54 Paul Wilkinson (1981: 90) argues that Mishima's *tatenokai* was a replica of the Japanese secret societies of the 1930s and the German *Frei Korps* of the inter-war period. Starr (1994: 157) on the other hand remarks that in their fancy-dress uniforms and with their boyish faces they looked more like “toy soldiers” than hardened fascists.

55 The name of the military forces of Japan after being deprived of an active army after defeat in WWII. The article 9 of the constitution, which prevents Japan from active participation in war efforts, still haunts Japanese politics today as political agendas of the last few years have clearly shown.

56 See Nathan 1974 for a detailed discussion of the *coup* and the leading events.

57 There are many works that pontificate on the reasons behind the suicide beyond right-wing politics from seeing it as part of his work (Yourcenar 1986), as an expression of his nihilism (Starr 1994), as “perverse capitulation to homosociality” (Cornyetz 2007: 145-51).

One finds Mishima's fascination with violence present in most of his novels, from the erotic obsession with the bleeding body of Saint Sebastian pierced by arrows in *Confessions of a Mask* (*Kamen no Kokuhaku*; 1958)⁵⁸ to the cathartic arson of the *Golden Pavilion*. In this latter novel, the protagonist was resolute to die a glorious death ablaze with the temple if the chance of a locked door hadn't prevented him. His characters move from powerless and physically disabled (but in the *Golden Pavilion* already overcoming their passivity) to strong and active, a transformation that Mishima explicitly attributes to his own life story in *Sun and Steel* (*taiyō to tetsu*; 1970). A transition from “words” - the life-world of the protagonist of the *Confessions*, already drawn to the bodies of the youth carrying the palanquin at the local festival - to the “body” - a world of action (Wagenaar and Iwamoto 1975).⁵⁹

In these active characters of his late work the foreshadowing of his final act becomes explicit. In *Kyoko's House* (*kyōko no ie*) the two characters – an athlete and an actor, perhaps representing the two side's of Mishima's personality (Nathan 1974: 160-8) – end up respectively joining a far-right political group and committing ritual suicide. His short story *Patriotism* (*Yūkoku*, 1966) depicts the ritual suicide of a lieutenant and his wife. In the homonymous Nō-theatre-inspired short film he will act the part himself performing the same actions he will later carry out on the day of his death.⁶⁰ Similarly, in a photo-shoot two months before the suicide, Mishima posed for a series of photographs themed around ritual suicide, holding a short sword to his stomach while the photographer stood as his second ready to behead him. Inoue - the

58 Mishima will pose himself as an arrow-pierced Saint Sebastian in a photo-book called *Ordeal by Roses* (Hosoe and Mishima 2004).

59 The narcissistic obsession with body-building and martial training is immortalized in pictures by the photographer Yatō Tamotsu (1967; 1972).

60 “Patriotism” (*Yūkoku*) 1966.

protagonist of the second novel of his final tetralogy and Mishima's ideal of the man of action⁶¹ - is a right-wing terrorist moved by notions of purity, both personal and national, who plans a *coup d'état* with his followers and commits ritual suicide for the emperor. Before the act they resolve: "Whether we have succeeded or failed, we will commit *seppuku* honourably together" (1973: 256).

In the essay "The Eyes of a Dying Man" (*matsugo no me*) Kawabata refers to the writer Akutagawa Ryunosuke's suicide note: "Nature looks more beautiful to me now.. you may laugh at the paradox: I am about to commit suicide when nature looks so tenderly beautiful. But nature looks beautiful precisely because it is seen through the eyes of a dying man". Kawabata then comments: "the ultimate principle of all artistic activities lies in 'the eyes of a dying man'" (in Ueda 1976: 192).

As in samurai's death poems, Akutagawa's note expresses "how the beauty and sadness of life is disclosed in an epiphany just as one gazes out at the world for the very last time immediately prior to the instant of death as passing into the oblivion of nothingness" (Odin 2016: 284). As we have seen Mishima's concern with beauty and death does not rely on the sadness of *aware* but rather on violence and eroticism. Yet Mishima comes incredibly close to his mentor in considering the moment of death the ultimate act of beauty and the foreshadowing of death, the awareness of death in every appreciation of things, an integral part of the aesthetic experience and his own death poem centres around the falling blossom - "What Mishima most wanted was to die tragically and beautifully. His romantic wish was to become a scattered cherry blossom" (Inouye 2008: 168). Both Kawabata and Mishima see the overlap of life and

61 *Runaway Horses* (*Honba*; 1973); cf. Noguchi 1984.

death as the climax of beauty and Kawabata will kill himself only a few years after Mishima putting a gas conduit in his mouth.

The point of this section is not to mobilise essentialised categories to explain these authors' art and psychology but to see how such existing notions are mobilised by the authors themselves to elicit strong emotional responses. The argument is not that Mishima's and Kawabata's suicide can be explained through categories of beauty, which would ignore plenty of other factors from depression to political intent (cf. Yamamoto and Iga 1975). Rather the point is that these notions of beauty – sad, death-tinged and penumbral - are mobilised by these authors to elicit powerful emotional responses in the reader. These aesthetic forms have power because - as we have seen in Mishima's comments, but also in the militarization of the cherry blossom and the thematisation of the native place as vanishing and nostalgic - they resonate with the Japanese reader tapping into a much wider cultural baggage. These authors explicitly refer to the past as a purer and original place where their work aims to return to. This concern is so strong that when Mishima and Kawabata did commit suicide it was easy for critics everywhere to see it as a logical component of their lives' work.

However, as we have seen in this section, what is particularly interesting about both authors is that in order to return to an idealised past they were remarkably experimental and drawn to Western art and literature. In fact, one might say that both Mishima and Kawabata were traditionalists in order to be avant-garde, or vice versa. It is hard to elect one particular side over the other as both seemed to write in the space where the two notions overlap. We find in their work all the shades of “blurring” highlighted at the beginning of the chapter – the overlap of opposites, the ephemeral

moments of passage between them, a movement in one direction that leads in the opposite way, a figure-ground reversal. Like Lévi-Strauss' art in the *Savage Mind*, here these themes are themselves embedded in a meta-level where the authors deploy them within a dialect of binaries – the West and Japan, the future and the past.

* * *

Conclusion

The aim of this chapter has been to introduce and delineate the concern of the thesis through the use of the wider tool-kit that is the discipline of Japanese Studies. Through the use of modern works of art, literature and philosophy I have tried to trace the contours of the logic of “blurring” providing a counterpoint to its anthropological sketch in the Introduction. Firstly I have focused on the symbolics of the cherry blossom as the repository of different aesthetic approaches to the convergence of oppositions to then move to the ideal of *yūgen* and its phenomenological apprehension of the fading of duality. I then looked at two modern writers and the ways in which these concerns shape their work. In so doing an important theme has come to light. As we have seen throughout this chapter, one cannot talk about the aesthetic dimension of these forms of blurring without getting tangled up in essentialist views of Japanese culture, and their portrayal of its fundamental difference and uniqueness compared to the West. Indeed my argument has been that transience becomes inextricable with essentialism, with a “Japanese culture” which is itself inextricable from its negative – the West – in a dialectic based on oppositions such as old/new, traditional/modern, darkness/light, nothingness/being.

Taking this chapter together with the introduction one can see an ambiguity in the relationship between blurring and essentialism. On the one hand I start by looking at essentialism and, by so doing, find a logic (or logics) of blurring. This is the strategy of the next two chapters, where I take essentialised social categories and find “blurring” to be the abiding logic these social forms rely on. However one also finds, in this chapter, a different movement. Here, in looking for “blurring”, we have found essentialism. It is not clear, in other words, whether blurring is a logic *of* essentialism or essentialism a function of a wider logic of blurring. This ambiguity is central to the thesis and the last chapter will try to flesh it out more fully. For now it suffices to note that “blurring” has been valued, by the authors in this chapter, primarily for its affective dimension. Beauty here presented itself “not as form but as force” (Taussig 2012: 3). Through the beautiful sadness of *aware* and the overwhelming intensities of *yūgen* the aesthetic experience is primarily an affective one, and it is in virtue of their affective intensity that these experiences become important and thus essentialised. While the next three chapters will focus on the logic of blurring in its more structural form - that is, as a logic - the last chapter will come back to focus on its affective charge to try to re-think this ambiguity.



CHAPTER 2:

SECLUSION AND DIFFUSION IN MODERN SHINTO

“Difference between Relation and totality lies in the fact that Relation is active within itself, whereas totality, already in its very concept, is in danger of immobility. Relation is open totality; totality would be relation at rest. Totality is virtual [...]. Relation is movement.”

- Édouard Glissant
- *Poetics of Relation*

Introduction

This chapter looks at the way people and spirits (*kami*) interact in modern Shrine Shinto (*jinja shintō*). This and the next chapter do the same work: they take what is one of the nexuses of Japanese essentialism – Shinto here and the family in the next – and, in looking at them, find blurring to be the central logic upon which these social forms are predicated. In both the family and Shinto one does find an essentialised dimension that holds claims of timelessness and uniqueness. However one also finds, together with it and as its negative, a dimension predicated on change and hybridity – and it is upon the moments of blurring between the two that the whole social dynamic pivots. Here the binary to be blurred is the one between what I term heuristically immanence and transcendence.

Shinto at once seems to encapsulate discourses about timelessness and tradition on the one hand and an aptitude for change, adoption and adaptability on the other and

in this chapter I try to take both seriously. In fact, this tension is precisely what this chapter is about. I focus here on the interaction between people and kami through both ritual and everyday practices. After a small introduction placing Shinto in the contemporary Japanese landscape I proceed to delineate two very different understandings of the dynamics of this relationship, which seem to be diametrically opposite and to map on the well known distinction between immanence and transcendence. Firstly we encounter an understanding of kami as separate entities, and the relationship with them predicated on their separation. Here maintaining the kami untouched and unseen in darkness is of paramount importance and the possibility of the kami's departure is always looming. The following section presents a very different image. Here the kami enter in intimate contact with the land, things and people around them, changing them and being changed by them. Kami are immanent porous entities in constant flux, an image dissonant with the transcendental timeless entities of the previous section.

The binary of immanence and transcendence that is introduced later on is part of a potentially problematic analytical vocabulary that is already steeped in Christian preconceptions (Sahlins 1996, Cannell 2006). Their use here is heuristic, they are but an analytic tool to make sense of an apparent paradox. As it will turn out these two modes are predicated on their negation, looking one way – say, to a transcendental understanding of the nature of kami that emphasises their separation and difference – one ends up actually looking at the other – to an understanding of the spirits as mutable immanent forces. One could say that each “mode” is predicated on the other, containing it as its shadow. While this looks, only structurally, as a version of the “problem of presence” (Engelke 2007) or “problem of transcendence” (Holbraad

2012: 109-43) that lies at the heart of Christianity – the problem of God's simultaneous absence and presence – this in Shinto is not a paradox at all. As one can see ethnographically in the annual festival parade the two modes, while they remain distinct, they rely on their negation for their functioning, making them at times indistinguishable.

* * *

Shinto Today

The Japanese religious landscape is extremely diverse. In a huge metropolis such as Tokyo one finds the temples of different Buddhist sects, Shinto shrines that vary from small roadside alcoves to huge complexes, the headquarters of many of the New Religions (*shin-shūkyō*), the huge church of Scientology in Ōkubo, Christian churches scattered in back streets and few mosques and synagogues. In this complex landscape delineating the contours of modern Shinto is not an easy task. In a way it *should* be easy – as a tradition Shinto holds, not unproblematically, the unique title of “indigenous religion of Japan”⁶² and a common refrain is that Shinto, like Sumo, is “as old as Japan itself”. Shrines can be found virtually everywhere - today according to official statistics about 80% of the Japanese population counts as “adherents” and in a 1997 survey about 70% of people said that they visit a shrine on the new year (*hatsumōde*) and other common rituals (Teeuwen & Breen 2003: ix-xiii). There are, goes another refrain, more shrines than convenience stores – which everyone who has been in Japan knows it's impressive. On the other hand when one actually looks at the reality of urban Shinto today things get much more confusing. It is actually extremely

62 Other commonly used adjectives are “native” or “ethnic”.

hard to contain the ritual diversity in a category or another and in the same 1997 survey, while only 16% of respondents stated that they never prayed at shrines, when asked if they followed a religion called “Shinto” only 4% responded affirmatively.⁶³

This apparent contradiction is symptomatic of the fact that the vast majority of people in Japan does not consider Shinto as a religion. The word “religion” (*shūkyō*) evokes images of foreign world-religions like Christianity and Islam but also ones of extremism and social deviance that people associate with New Religions⁶⁴, especially after the Tokyo Sarin attack of 1995 by the religious group Aum Shinrikyo (e.g. Reader 2010). Buddhism and Shinto are instead understood under the umbrella of “tradition” (*dentō*), as part of a much wider set of daily practices that people simply define as “part of their culture” (Martinez 2004). As such people do not see a problem in partaking in activities from both traditions – which until the Meiji restoration were highly syncretised and virtually indistinguishable. Today one finds in the ritual life of the average urban dweller a sort of division of labour between the two: Buddhist priests overseeing the administration of funeral rituals and Shinto priests (*kannushi*) managing life-cycle events such as weddings and coming-of-age ceremonies (Reader 1991: 55-106).⁶⁵ A *kannushi* gave me his own explanation of this apparently untroubled existence: “Buddhism has a doctrine, Shinto does not”. Shinto is, according to him, a collection of rituals and myths about the constitution of Japan as what it is today. Be that true or not this dictum well highlights the centrality of ritual in Shinto. The *kannushi* is, over all, a ritual expert and he is charged with the proper administration of

63 This is also my own experience. In a questionnaire I used for another project the only people that wrote anything other than “non-religious” were my Catholic respondents.

64 Religious organisations founded from the Meiji restoration onwards.

65 Bloch (1992: 46-64.) sees them as part of a unitary system in his theory of rebounding violence.

the appropriate rites.⁶⁶ Through these rites the kami, the spirits of Shinto, are brought and kept into the world - a relationship is established with the community and their blessings bestowed on household and nation.

While the etymology of the word “kami” has been the subject of intense speculation (e.g. Holtom 1940a, 1940b, Vance 1983, Herbert 2010) most Western Scholars have translated the word with the theistic term “god” and, more recently, with the more general “spirit”. The celestial gods of the ancient text indeed resemble the gods of polytheistic pantheons of ancient Sumeria, Egypt and Greece and yet this by no means exhausts the definition of “kami”. Kami are also syncretic beings born of the coming of Buddhism, Daoism and Yin Yang divination cults⁶⁷; spirits of nature such as thunder; ancestral spirits; or a particular rock emerging from the ocean or a sacred tree in a forest clearing. Kami are also famous national heroes such as Tokugawa Ieyasu, founder of the shogunate and first shogun, whose spirits are enshrined in well-known shrines across Japan. So are the spirits of noteworthy ancestors of long-standing families who are enshrined in the precincts of the family mansion. This inherent polymorphism makes it difficult to classify Shinto under an existing umbrella and it has been alternatively (and concomitantly) classified as polytheistic (Kato 2011), animist (Clammer 2001: 217–243, 2004), pantheistic (Herbert 2010) and even quasi-monotheistic (Kasulis 2004).⁶⁸

66 Ashkenazi 1985. See Nelson 1997 for an analysis of the complexity of the figure of the *kannushi*.

67 See Rambelli & Teeuwen 2003 and Ch.6 of Breen & Teeuwen 2013 for a socio-historical analysis of kami as Buddhist/Shinto syncretism

68 On top of that, scholars trying to move away from theistic interpretations of kami (e.g. Iwasawa 2011; Kasulis 2002, 2004) have emphasized the concept of a life-force – *tama* - that permeates all cosmos, not unlike the ever-elusive Polynesian concept of *mana* (Holtom 1941, Norbeck 1961; cf. Holbraad 2006).

The ample variety of local practices and traditions has been divided by indigenous scholars in different traditions⁶⁹ and much of the ethnographic focus of the chapter is on its most widespread form - Shrine Shinto (*jinjashintō*) - which comprises about 80.000 shrines around the Japanese archipelago. These shrines are administered by the Association of Shinto Shrines (*Jinja Honchō*), an organisation established after the war in order to terminate the intimate nationalist association of Shinto and state and establish Shinto as a distinct apolitical religious institution.⁷⁰

Despite this division the mythico-ritual apparatus of modern Shrine Shinto relies largely on its previous incarnations. During the Meiji reformation (1868-1912) when Buddhism and Shinto were divided - and the latter becoming a *de facto* state religion while the former being pushed outward to the city's margin - the emperor was, after centuries existing uniquely as a symbolic figure, moved back to the forefront of the political stage. The imperial legends of the ancient texts like the *Kojiki* (711AD) and the *Nihon Shoki* (720AD) became the ideological underpinning of imperial worship and of the subsequent waves of nationalism while Shinto was reworked and transformed into a non-religious moral tradition and patriotic practice (Thomas 2001: 188; Zhong 2014: 54). While modern Shinto reclaims itself as a spiritual practice the centrality of the emperor and of the ancient text is unmitigated.⁷¹ The same can be said for Folk Shinto which is still heralded as the purest and original form of Shinto upon which many of the agrarian rituals of modern Shinto are based upon.

69 These are “Shrine Shinto” (*jinjashintō*), “Sect Shinto” (*kyōashintō*), and the non-institutionalised “Folk” Shinto (*minzokushintō*). Sometimes the term “Imperial Shinto” (*koshitsushintō*) is used for the rites performed by the emperor.

70 This is itself not straightforward; see Mullins 2012.

71 Shimazono 2005 argues that until the imperial rites are abolished one can still speak of “State Shinto” in modern Japan. See Treat 1994 for an interesting analysis of the centrality of the emperor through fiction and censorship.

Both the Meiji and post-war reconstructions of Shinto were a patchwork of pre-existing myths and ritual practices to fit a certain ideological agenda of the time. With the help of nativist anthropologists uncovering survivals of a “golden age”, Shinto was constructed as a timeless tradition, which had survived deep in the countryside and the imperial house for centuries and dating to the very roots of Japanese culture (Ryang 2004, Hardacre 2017: 323-54). It is indubitable that Shinto is not a timeless construct passed down unchanged through the centuries and that modern Shinto is, true to its name, a modern construction. However in the discourse of Shinto today one finds this timelessness encoded within its very structure and any talk about it moves inevitably back in time to deeds done in the Tokugawa or Heian period or simply “a long time ago” (*mukashi*). That is, the timelessness of Shinto is a modern construct and yet, in the lives of my interlocutors, a living and breathing one. So when for example I speak about the immortal imperial soul in the next section, although that might not be an officially sanctioned discourse in modern Shinto today, one finds it in my experience often mentioned by *kannushi* and parishioners. In other words when I do shift focus from Shrine Shinto to look at different traditions I do it because the ethnography takes me there. For example, much of the information about the imperial rituals was related to me by the *kannushi* of a Shrine after one of the emperor's *waka* poems was read as part of the ritual invocations in the morning ritual.

Besides Shinto is often assumed to be – like the word “Judeo-Christian” for the “West” – the unconscious substratum behind Japanese culture. Anne Allison (2006) for example explains the proliferation of monsters such as *pokémon* in popular culture as a Shinto “animist unconscious” and allusions to Shinto and animism in the discussions

of the way robots are conceptualised and treated in Japan have been overdone to the point of having reached by now the status of cliché (Robertson 2007). While allusions to robots and *pokémon* might seem out of place in the face of the discourse of Shinto as “traditional” and somehow timeless entity, this is in fact not the case at all. Not only Shinto has adapted to accommodate patronage of many elements of Japanese modernity such as computers. The techno-scientific field itself, usually understood as the antithesis of animist/theistic thinking, has adopted Shinto in return bringing some scholars to the use of words like “techno-animism” (Jensen & Blok 2013). During the launch of Japan's first satellite in 1970, the senior representatives of the space agency visited a Shrine to petition the kami Myōken (the North Star) that their endeavour might succeed, and the huge electron microscope at Osaka University has an amulet pinned to it (Nelson 2000: 1-4). Shinto's endurance seems to be the fruit of an extreme adaptability and willingness to change, and this can be seen clearly in the Chinese lacquers of the Shrine's architecture, the vestments inspired by Korean courts and the modern amenities installed in most shrines.

* * *

Swamps and Rice Paddies: Sacred Kingship, Concealment and Descent.

In this section we focus on one approach to the kami that relies heavily on the mythical apparatus of the *Kojiki* (Philippi 2015), the *Nihon Shoki* (Aston 1972) and the ritual invocations (*norito*) of the *Engi Shiki* (Philippi 1990). As we have seen above these myths are still central to modern Shinto. The entire mythical drama of the *Kojiki* - from the creation of the heavenly plain and the not-yet-formed oily realm that will later become inhabited by humans, through the heartbreaking saga of the twin demiurge

lovers, to the banishment from heaven of the trickster Susano and the legendary deeds of the first emperor Jimmu and his descendants - pivots around the cycle of the “descent to earth” (Philippi 1965). The imperial line is made to start with the descent of a divine ancestor from the Heavenly plains to the inhospitable swamp that was Japan before the kami and their imperial successors settled in and transformed it into an harmonious rice-bearing fertile land. In these myths we see a cosmology based on the separation of the worlds of kami and people, but a separation that can be bridged by ritual action by the emperor. These myths are here a starting point to then move to find the same dynamics in modern Shinto practice – practices based on separation and concealment.

A prominent theme in this mythical cycle is the tale of how a descendant of the celestial gods was sent to earth bringing the gift of rice, the knowledge of its cultivation and the three celestial gifts still allegedly owned by the imperial family today.⁷² Ninigi-no-mikoto, the grandson of the sun goddess Amaterasu, is sent by his grandmother to rule over an earth that was in the throbs of disorder and chaos. The descent and assumption of power by Ninigi is seen by many scholars to encode the historical truth of the defeat of pre-existing tribes and the ascent of the Yamato clan on the one side, and the legitimation of their power through both the creation of founding myths and the manipulation of existing ones on the other (Piggott 1997, Ooms 2009: 1-27). There is no doubt that the myth of the divine descent of the imperial family from the land of the gods has been heavily sanctioned long before the restoration and yet, as Donald Philippi (1965: 138) points out, it is the one dogma that Japanese religiosity has accepted absolutely and unconditionally.

72 A sword, a jewel and a mirror.

From the ascent of the Yamato clan onwards, the emperor had three roles: a secular ruler, a religious ruler, and a living Kami⁷³ and, although at different times in Japanese history each role has been purely symbolic, that symbolism is, in my experience, still deeply ingrained in people's understanding of their own society.⁷⁴ Benedict herself argued against the deposition of the emperor after Japan's defeat on the basis that the imperial system was deeply ingrained in every facet of Japanese life.⁷⁵

The *Kojiki* and *Nihon Shoki* show us a society in which ritual and an agrarian cosmology based on hydraulic rice cultivation form the very core of emperorship (Ohnuki-Tierney 1994: 45). *Ninigi* means “grain spirit” (Waida 1976a, Matsumae 1983) and in his descent he does not only bring the rice but he is himself a grain of rice fertilising the land. Correspondingly, the role of the early emperors was first and foremost the officiation of the “rituals for the rice soul”, bringing down the power of the kami to elicit good crops; that is, the magico-religious element of kingship came before the secular one (Ohnuki-Tierney 1991). The power of the emperor came from his ability to ritually call down divine power and quite literally infuse it into the land making it once again flourish from swamp to rice paddy, in a re-enactment of the descent of the mythical ancestor (Kokan 1990).

In *Crowds and Power* Elias Canetti (1984: 172-78) says that the forest is the collective naturalistic symbol of the Germans, the symbol through which people understand

73 Kitagawa 1988: 234-35; Kitagawa 1990a: xxiii; Takamitsu 2000.

74 For a treatment the metamorphosis of the role of the emperor through history see e.g. Kitagawa 1990b, Ohnuki-Tierney 1991, Wakabayashi 1991, and Kim 2011.

75 Modell 1983: 284, Rosenblatt 2004: 461.

themselves as a people. For the English, he argues, it is the sea, and as long as there are enough ships in the ocean the world is under control. In Japan such a naturalistic symbol would be twofold: the swamp on the one side and the rice field on the other. Marshland is transformed into cultivated land together with an order destined to survive the test of time. However this order is always threatened and the imperial institution is the fulcrum of a dialectic between rice and swamp, order and chaos, which is never resolved. The field is always in danger of reversing to swamp, a shadow of death always present in the threat of dissolution (Tanaka 2011). Like English ships in the seas of Empire, as long as the emperor resides in the capital the land is fertile.⁷⁶

In this transformative guise the imperial figure lies at a complex mythical intersection. The mythical motif of the descent from heaven of ruling dynasties is a common one in East Asia (Obayashi 1984). Even so the foreign origins of the imperial dynasty together with the life-giving power of the imperial body place the Japanese emperor in the wider category of stranger-kings. The link between authority and alterity is a long-standing anthropological refrain from Valeri's analysis of the duality of kingship (1980, 1985) to Leach's writing on the mystical influence of affines (1961: 19). Eduardo Viveiros de Castro notes that in Tupi-Guarani societies "authority is founded on alterity" (1992: 118) and Mary Helms argues that in many societies kingship is related to "distant power filled spaces that carry ancestral and godly associations" (1993: 3). Marshall Sahlins provides perhaps the most complete analysis of the phenomenon of

76 One is reminded here of myths of rice cultivation in Thailand where rice is associated with the origins of Buddhism: "the myth links the arrival of rice and its subsequent vicissitudes with religion, in this case Buddhism [...] [and] betrays a tragic vision of humanity. [...] At the same time, the spirit of rice, reflecting Buddhist moral and ethical values, is fragile and elusive and must be persuaded to stay with man" (Tambiah 1970: 351-66). As we shall see in a moment this "persuasion" is at the centre of the mythico-ritual structure of shrine worship. See also Howe 1991 for the connection between rice, hierarchy and divinity in Bali.

the stranger-king, both in Pacific context (1981, 1985: 73–103) and as a mythical motif more in general (2008, 2011, 2012, 2014). Through its position concurrently extra-social and foundational of society itself the stranger-king's power is predicated at once on violence (cf. Valeri 1985, Dumézil 1988), alliance (cf. Hocart 1927), and separation (cf. Quigley 2005).

The importance of the figure of the stranger has been widely acknowledged at least since Simmel's famous essay (1950a), and theorists such as Girard (1979) saw it as key to the foundation and stability of the cultural order. Likewise, the link between the structural position of the stranger and divinity in Japan has been well documented (Orikuchi 1978.⁷⁷, Yoshida 1981, Blacker 1990b). The work of Masao Yamaguchi (1972, 1977, 1985, 1987, 2014) brings together all these diverse mythical threads to analyse Japanese emperorship and kingship more in general, precisely in terms of its duality as both marginal and at the centre: a stranger-deity (*marebito*) who visited but never left, the scapegoat that keeps the country together.⁷⁸

The imperial accession ritual makes this dimensions clearly visible. The climax of the Shinto liturgical year is the ritual of the *niinamesai* when the emperor dedicates the rice harvest to the kami. Though some scholars came to see commensality as the core of the ritual (e.g. Holtom 1972: 49), many others have argued that it is the death and rebirth of the rice-soul that the ritual facilitates (Knecht 1972, Ellwood 1973, Waida 1976a, Matsumae 1983, Liscutin 1990). In fact, the annual harvest ritual of the *niinamesai* becomes the *ōnamesai* (or *daijōsai*) on the year of accession of a new

⁷⁷ See Falero 2010 for an overview of Orikuchi's life-work on the stranger-deity.

⁷⁸ Like Agamben (1998), Yamaguchi draws an explicit parallel between the *buraku* – *the homo sacer* at the margins of society – and the emperor, seeing marginality and stranger-status as the structural positioning of kingship.

emperor. In this ritual not only the mythical rice symbolism is paramount but we also see a mode of transmission of sacred power which stresses the division between the heavenly power of kami and the material world. Both *niinamesai* and *ōnamesai* are thought to be modelled on earlier harvest rituals – “preserved like a kind of spiritual fossil.. from the ancient world” (Blacker 1990a: 197) - and only with the progressive establishment of Yamato emperorship Amaterasu came to be the kami addressed in the ritual (Matsumae 1983).⁷⁹

When the grain/child Ninigi descends from heaven in the *Nihon Shoki* it is in the form of a newborn baby shrouded in a blanket (*matoko-ofusuma*). During the ascension ritual, the emperor to be is wrapped in the blanket and undergoes initiatory sleeping after which we will emerge as the new emperor (Ellwood 1973, Blacker 1990a). The folklorist Orikuchi Shinobu (1966) argues that imperial power comes to the new emperor through the entrance of the imperial soul in his body - the imperial soul that had descended with Ninigi is passed down from emperor to emperor, i.e. descent is not a matter of blood but of correct transference (Blacker 1990a). This is reminiscent of Ernst Kantorowicz (1985) famous argument that the medieval monarch has two bodies: the body natural - subject to the infirmities of nature and accident, infancy and old age – and the body politic - a body that cannot be seen or handled, constituted by policy and government and utterly independent from the debilities of the physical body.⁸⁰ When a king dies it is only the natural body who perishes, the “soul” - the

79 See Waida 1976b, Bock 1990, Ohnuki-Tierney 1991, 1992, 1994 for a an historical treatment of the ritual; Crump 1991 and Bar-On Cohen 2012 for focused accounts of the ritual for the Showa Emperor; Breen & Teeuwen 2010: 168-98 for an account of the discourse surrounding the accession ritual of the current emperor.

80 In the Japanese case this distinction maps well onto the Meiji concept of *kokutai* (loosely “national essence” but literally “country-body”), an atemporal national essence incarnated in the imperial house (see Kitagawa 1974, Antoni 2002).

immortal body – transmigrates and it is incarnated in the new king transforming the king into the immortal King.⁸¹ Here too we find a similar paradox at the heart of kingship where transcendence and immanence, mortality and immortality are simultaneously present in the royal body.⁸² For Orikuchi, then, mourning is the period of gestation of the imperial soul in transition. The gestation needs to happen in darkness and seclusion and the emperor is wrapped in the aforementioned *fusuma* to consolidate the nascent divine power. Emerging from the cocoon of the coverlet is not the same person who went in: a human stepped into the darkness and a divine emperor comes to the light.⁸³

The cosmology of the *Kojiki* and *Nihon Shoki* upon which much of the ritual apparatus of the imperial institution relies is built on a layered celestial cosmology based on a strict separation of heaven and earth. The kami reside somewhere else and they can be called to dwell on earth following the blueprint of the first descent to earth. There is a clear division between a sacred realm and the world of humans. However, this division is not absolute as it allows the passage of kami and their power between the material world and the world of kami. There is a continuity between the two realms which can be ritually elicited in order for the flow of power to pass through as in the annual ritual of the rice harvest. As we shall see in the rest of this section, this cosmological themes – the separation of kami and earth and the necessity to bridge that separation – are important because they still form the basis of Shrine worship

81 Cf. Warnier 2009 on bodies as vessels.

82 The comparison with the double-nature of Christ – at least in the medieval case – is evident: Kantorowicz sees the idea of the mystic body of Christ as “horizontalised” in the figure of the monarch; as the fictive glue that keeps the state together (Rust 2012).

83 While the funerary rituals changed greatly with the Meiji restoration the succession ritual remained, albeit undoubtedly with small constant changes, constant (Ohnuki-Tierney 1992).

today. Most *kannushi* today would be reticent to treat the place where kami come from as the same “heavenly plains” of the old texts. Although they do not seem in my experience concerned with delineating clearly what or where this place might be, when prompted *kannushi* tend to depict this place as “behind” our world evoking images of two worlds parallel to each other and highlighting the intimacy between ideas of transcendence and seclusion/concealment in Shinto.

Shrines are where the two worlds meet, the focus of interactions between kami and humans, where the kami dwell and where humans go and find them. Shrines can be small roadside enclosures or huge complexes comprising many buildings but, regardless of size, they all contain a sanctuary (*honden*) where the spirit of the kami resides.⁸⁴ In this innermost chamber of the Shrine, to which access is forbidden to all but the head-priest, lies a physical object that acts as residence for the kami.⁸⁵ This object lies in darkness and no human gaze can fall on it - it is wrapped in many layers of cloth and often its true nature has been forgotten in the centuries past. In contemporary Shinto *shintai* are usually human made objects such as mirrors, jewels, swords, ritual wands and sometimes sculptures and figurines but they can still be natural objects such as *sasaki* trees and rocks.

Kami need to take permanent residence in the world in order for people to establish a relationship with them and, in order to do so, they need to be invited, given a place to reside, and persuaded to stay with food and entertainment. The hidden vessel is the place where the kami is made to reside and the shrine the place where people go and

84 Most shrines will have more than one sanctuary and more than one kami enshrined on their precincts.

85 Also *yorishiro* or *mitamashiro*, these latter two referring to the material object per se while *shintai* to the essence within.

interact with it. During the rituals at the shrine the kami is invited to come forward from the darkness where it dwells to partake of the food offered by the participants and fulfil the functions the ritual is trying to achieve, crossing the boundary between the two worlds. The separation of sacred and profane space (cf. Durkheim 1961) is a central tenet of shrine worship and the assiduous purification that precedes every ritual or shrine visit further emphasises this. In the hidden alcove a sacred space is created which is utterly different from human space. Through time the object containing the spirit of the kami is wrapped in more and more layers of precious cloth and stored in more and more boxes without being ever inspected - and its exact identity is often forgotten. The invisibility and isolation of the sacred object mark the distinction between a pure space fit for the kami and the mundane space prone to corruption.⁸⁶

The *tokonoma*, a built-in alcove found in guest-room of traditional houses, fulfils a similar function and no person is allowed to step inside it. A *kannushi* of a local shrine well explained it. Pointing at the floor just outside the *tokonoma*:

86 The emperor himself, as a receptacle for the divine soul, was for much of Japanese history “invisible” to the eyes of the people. Before early 20th century the emperor was secluded in the imperial palace and no one could look upon them or touch them without certain precautions - they would sit behind a gate or a bamboo screen and their words always indirectly carried by a servant (Keene 2002). The darkness in which the receptacle rests might be connected with Orikuchi's idea that sacred power “gestates” in darkness before coming out in the world (Blacker 1999: 98-9).

knocks on the floor 'You see this? This.. is human. This..' *points at the floor in the *tokonoma** “..this is not human. So.. we are making another world. We can use it for something that is not human... a picture, a scroll, flowers... For example..' *points in the direction of the room where the *shintai* is kept* 'there is the holiest thing in our shrine, I've never seen it. When we are doing the cleaning we need to take it out, the only place where we can put it is here. Because this space is not for humans, no one is allowed to step on it. It is also not allowed to put a picture of a human being in it. So actually this is another world. So we can use it for something that is [sacred]'. Also for art, like flower arrangement or calligraphy'.

The word sacred is in square brackets to highlight a failure of translation. The word actually used is *tōtoi* which means precious and valuable, noble and exalted, sacred.

K: 'Like life, isn't it? Or the kami'.

The relationship between kami and the object which contains its spirit is very much the one between container and contained (cf. Venkatesan 2014); like the imperial soul in Orikuchi's interpretation of the accession ritual the kami is not the object and it has to be made to enter it and to stay inside it. The object itself is not changed by the kami's presence: it is hidden and revered in virtue of what it contains, not for what it is. Were the spirit of the kami to leave the object would return to be treated like a common sword, mirror or stone – though with the respect due to its historical function. This is clear in the following conversation with a *kannushi* of Hachiman Shrine.

K: 'We could have a statue of the Kami, but it's not shown. You don't get many because this is not the kami itself, the kami is behind. So it could be a statue like this'. *shows a picture*.

T: 'Is this a kami?'.

K: 'This was a kami, it was used as the body of the kami. But we can move it into another vessel'.

T: 'Is the kami always in a vessel?'.

K: 'We hope so, but we don't know. We try, but we don't know. So it could be ... this kind of mirror in a box. It could be. We give the kami some form, and we say please if you want you can enter here and if you enter here we'll give you these offerings'.

The kami does not easily dwell in the world. K: "People start worshipping in a place, give attention to it and the Kami is invited". I have heard for example of the great invitation of the kami Inari in 711AD. K: "People went to a mountain and prayed for seven days and seven nights and on the last day Inari came". Through an invocation, the kami can be made to come down and dwell into the object hidden in the sanctuary and from that day on it can be worshipped. However, the nature of the kami is so that its spiritual power does not "naturally" dwell in the material world and effort must be put on the part of humans to keep it there and prevent it from returning from where it came from.

For example, every morning at the Hachiman shrine offerings are made to the kami. Three trays are put in front of the mirror containing (left to right) water and salt, rice, and sake. K: "Water and salt and rice are things we need for sustenance, while sake has an added value – as something that takes time and effort and care to make". Those things are offered – fed – to the Kami every morning. The feeding is an integral part of keeping the Kami in this world.

K: 'If I entertain you, feed you, and give you attention you will stay; on the contrary, if I ignore you.. you will end up leaving. The kami come from somewhere right? If ignored they go back to that place'.

The purpose of the daily feeding of the kami, performed at the shrine and by people in their homes, is the permanence of the kami in the world. Even small remote roadside shrines (*hokora*) which do not have attendants are cleaned and given offerings sporadically by a *kannushi* of a bigger local shrine to ensure the permanence of the enshrined kami. People from the villages nearby would help with its upkeep, keeping the kami fed and ensuring its residence in the shrine and blessings upon the community. It must be noted however that although offerings do have a functional aim, that does not exhaust their meaning – a big part of making offers is simply out of respect for something which deserves it, something noble and exalted (*tōtoi*), a form of etiquette and propriety.

The “feeding”, in the form of an offering, is an integral part of the structure of Shinto ritual, be that a casual visit to a roadside shrine or the annual festival that involves the whole neighbourhood.⁸⁷ Food offerings (*shinsen*) consist of a combination rice, sake, mochi, fish, fowl, meat, seaweed, vegetables, fruit, sweets, salt, and water. The content of the offering and the manner of presentation is highly formalised and varies according to the nature and scale of the occasion. At Hachiman shrine, for example, five trays of food are offered in the daily morning ritual, while nine are offered during the annual festival.⁸⁸ The nature of the dishes varies as well. While rice and sake are

87 Rituals are catalogued into minor (*shōsai*), medium (*chūsai*), and major (*taisai*) rites. Medium and major rituals comprise rites to do with public or national concerns while the minor rites include other rites and celebrations happening at a shrine. This classification is, to a certain extent, a modern development.

88 *Shinsen* may exceptionally comprise of up to 75 dishes, though the number normally floats around about 10 (Bocking 1997: 127).

offered at every ritual, particular foods might be added according to the occasion and the nature of the kami. Performance arts such as music, dance, theatre horse-racing and archery contests are also offerings seen at larger rituals. Kagura, for example, is a sacred ritual dance performed for the entertainment of the kami.⁸⁹

At Katori shrine for example during the annual festival (*matsuri*) a version of the Chinese lion dance is performed.⁹⁰ This particular lion is comprised by a small lacquered wooden head articulated so that the mouth can open and close. The head is, uncharacteristically, not worn by the performer but carried instead on a stick covered by patterned fabric. This dance happens in two parts and embodies the two main functions of the ritual dance. The first stop of the ritual procession is at the shrine of the patron *kami* and the first dance is offered to the kami for their own entertainment. The procession then moves outwards, the performer with the head moves through the neighbourhood making the lion swing back and forth opening and closing their mouth while young men follow it singing raucously, playing music and giving blessings to the people who stand outside their houses watching and waiting for the lion to come bless their home.

89 The origin is again mythical, re-enacting the dance of the kami Ame-no-Uzume that lured the sun goddess out of the cave where she hid (Lancashire 2004).

90 The origin of the dance is obviously mainland China. As a *kannushi* emphatically said pointing at the lions protecting the shrine grounds (*komainu*) “there are no lions in Japan!”. He was talking about Shinto's voracious integration of Chinese and Korean themes and indeed lion dances (*shishimai*) have been imported from China sometime in the Nara period and completely absorbed into Japanese tradition to the point that today not only many regional and formal variation exist, but also have been differently integrated in noh, kabuki and bunraku theatre (Ortolani 1995. See also Chapter 3 of Yip 2016 for the cultural translation of the lion dance from China and Korea to Japan; and Chapter 3 of Asai 1999 for a perspective on medieval Japan).

There are here strong parallels with the Sherpa rituals described by Sherry Ortner (1978) where the gods are invited into the world, made to “take a seat” into a statue of dough, and fed in order to maintain divine interest in the world. These offerings of food, attention, and entertainment are techniques, as it were, to keep the kami in the world and with it the blessings that the presence of the kami bestows on the community. The two worlds do not come together easily, as we have seen they start separate and paradoxically need to be kept separate – through the institution of sacred spaces – in order for kami and their power to flow between the two. The cosmology of the ancient texts serves as the basis of ritual and yet it is only a facet of the understanding of the interaction between people and *kami* which is pervasive in contemporary shrine worship. This section would have sounded somehow dissonant to people who, knowing about Shinto, expect an animist world where the kami dwell everywhere. The popular view of Shinto is of a nature-based religion where everything is divine and the kami live in stones, mountains and rivers. This view is also true and existing side by side with what we have just seen. One could also re-frame the same problem by saying that already in this section concealment and seclusion are not the whole story – descent and blessing earmark the very opposite movement, one from the world of kami into the world of people. The next section explores this other movement, one where we find a very different understanding of the nature of spirits and things and a mutual compenetration of kami, people and things as interrelated entities in flux.

* * *

History, Contamination and Relations

While the kami do indeed live shrouded in darkness in deep alcoves they are at the same time deeply involved in the everyday lives of the people worshipping at the shrine: they bestow luck and prosperity, help with admission exams and job interviews, ensure quick recovery from illness and in general are visited almost daily by the neighbourhood denizens. While the previous section has explored a fundamental separation between kami and humans, this section explores a dimension characterised by a constitutional permeability. We dwell briefly in the Hachiman Shrine in Shibuya to then look at the shrines in the gardens of a land-owning family on the island of Shikoku. The kami enshrined in these small alcoves in the shade of the trees suggest a much more involved participation in people's lives than what we have seen previously. In fact the three kami of the Takahashi mansion - and as it turns out also the ones in the Hachiman Shrine - seem to be the product of an engagement between people and kami, not entities "called" from somewhere else and made to reside there. The kami and the community around them are not two distinct entities but the product of their relationship, which transforms both through their shared history. In contrast to the abstract kami of the previous section, ill-at-ease in the world and actively separated, here we encounter the kami as entities in flux intermingling with places, people and things around them.

Hachiman Shrine is situated in a back road among the tall skyscrapers and tower blocks of the Shibuya ward, five minutes away from the busy streets of the Dōgenzaka district. The shrine is, compared to the city outside, remarkably quiet. At lunchtime, a few salarymen eat their lunch sitting on the benches in the yard before crowding in the smoking area outside. A small but steady stream of people comes in for a quick

visit to the enshrined kami (*omairi*) before rushing off. Across the road lies a small Buddhist temple that used to be part of the shrine precincts (*bettoji*) until the Meiji reformation's policies that separated Shinto and Buddhism. The building of the main shrine dates back to the early Edo period (1612) and was built in the "Gongen" style popular at the time comprising colourful woodwork and lacquer protecting the wooden beams. In front of the main building sit two statues of protector lion-dogs (*komainu*) and on the façade a dragon and a *baku*, a mythological creature similar to a tapir, are painted on the lacquered beams.

The shrine has been, in a form or another, in this location for more than 900 years when a warrior clan built a castle in this spot. At the confluence of what were the Shibuya river and one of its tributaries (until 70 years ago flowing in front of the Shrine's *tori* gate, and which are now both culverts) the castle was well defended using the two rivers as a moat. According to a *kannushi* it was the pre-existence of the shrine that made the clan settle in that location and build a castle around a place of worship. As a testament to the closeness of kami and clan the parish of the shrine - the territory whose inhabitants are *ujiko*, children of the kami - covers approximately the clan's tribal area today.

The clan became prominent thanks to its closeness to the famous Minamoto clan during the late Heian era and the later during the time of the Kamakura Shogunate. During the Gosannen war (1087) the castle's leader Kawasaki Motoie and his son Shigeie were the first to join the forces of the Minamoto clan in repelling the intruders from the imperial palace in Kyoto. According to the shrine's chronicles, the Minamoto leader was persuaded that it had been the blessing of Hachiman, whom Motoie

worshipped, that granted them victory and established the shrine where it is today. When Motoie's heir, Shigeie, took the leadership of the clan the emperor awarded him the name of "Shibuya" and continued the Hachiman worship at the shrine.⁹¹

Shigeie and his wife reached old age without an heir and prayed to Hachiman for conception. That night he dreamed that Kongo-Yasha, one of the five wisdom kings of Shingon Buddhism, was conceived in his wife's womb and soon after a boy was born.⁹² In his mid-teens, the young Konnomaru served under the Minamoto leader during the Hōgen and Heiji insurrections in Kyoto (1156, 1160). Legend has it that when the Minamoto leader was killed he fought bravely to return to their wife and report their death. Konnomaru became a popular Kabuki hero during the Edo period and even today modern versions of the Konnomaru legend are played annually in Shibuya. A statue of 17-year-old Konnomaru was carved for his mother before he left – today kept in the annex shrine where his spirit is enshrined and unveiled once a year. The son of the deceased leader of the previous Minamoto leader – the Yoritomo founder of the Kamakura shogunate – stopped at the shrine to dedicate his sword to Hachiman and visit the wooden carving of Konnomaru. To celebrate Konnomaru's loyalty to his father he ordered that a cherry tree should be planted in the yard of the shrine and the spawn of that cherry tree today is famous for producing both single and double blossoms.

91 The affiliation of Hachiman and the Minamoto clan most likely precedes these events although it is possible that it is around this period that Hachiman comes to be associated with warfare and becomes *the* tutelary kami of the clan. The part the Shibuya clan played in the affirmation of the kami as the patron of the clan is likely one of those invented traditions that emerged with the Meiji restoration to legitimise the history of the shrines as self-standing entities (Smyers 1999: 26-7). In fact, the earlier Minamoto leader Yoshiie had already taken on the name of Hachiman-Tarō half a century earlier.

92 In Shingon and Tendai Buddhism the five great wisdom kings (*Godai Myōō*) are wrathful protectors of the Buddhas who represent their wisdom.

The history of the shrine is encoded in its architecture and material culture: a stone of the Shibuya castle, the statue of Konnomaru, the Cherry Blossom tree. The shrine has gone to endless reconstructions in the past 900 years. It survived the great Kanto earthquake and the bombing of Tokyo, it was repainted in the 1980s and then relacquered in the 90s. The history of the shrine feels very tangible; one can see the surviving objects, one can stand where the tributary of the Shibuya river flowed until less than a century ago. The materiality of the shrine tells its history and yet - while the kami stays the same in the hindmost darkness, wrapped by layers folded at different times in the shrine's history - the kami themselves tell the same history through those objects (cf. Sansi 2005). While it is true that the kami lies unchanged and timeless in the darkness behind the mirror if one looks at the shrines on the grounds of the Hachiman shrine one sees the history of Shibuya, the Shrine and its community encoded in the very nature of the kami themselves. In this sense, if the kami in the previous section was understood as - quite literally - outside of history, outside of the world of humans if not as temporary quarantined visitors, here the kami seem to be made of history itself.

The kami Hachiman, the kami enshrined in the main shrine, was first enshrined at Usa Shrine on the island of Kyushu sometimes during the Nara period (710-794). This followed the patterns seen in the last section: the kami was invited from elsewhere into a vessel and later persuaded to stay with gifts and offerings. Today Hachiman shrines count as the most numerous in Japan, after the ones to the kami Inari. After the first invocation, the first time a kami is enshrined, the spirit of the kami can be

divided, multiplied and propagated to a new shrine through a process called *kanjō*. The divided spirit (*bunrei* or *wakemitama*) is then invited to take residence into a new vessel and to a new location. This process of division was described to me – and similarly to Smyers (1999: 235) – as the process of lighting a candle from another. Nothing of the previous flame is lost; it is not a division *per se* but a multiplication without any loss of the previous substance. The original kami remains unaltered in its original shrine while the new one (*kanjōjin*) will sometimes take on a new name and a new function.

Hachiman was first enshrined in 737AD and henceforth was divided and re-enshrined multiple times taking on – or shedding – different “personalities” that emphasise alternative and often new aspects of the kami.⁹³ In its long sojourn in the world, Hachiman has gone through all kinds of representations and functions having been a great bodhisattva, the patron of warriors and archers, the protector of the Japanese nation and the imperial family, the protector of the Buddhist law, patron of agriculture, fishermen, writing, and having been identified with the emperor Ōjin.⁹⁴ Another example is Katori shrine in Tōjima, which enshrines the kami Futsunushi. In the original shrine in Chiba this kami has a strong martial emphasis and many Katori shrines housed at some point martial arts schools.⁹⁵ This particular Katori shrine, however, has completely lost the martial emphasis. A nearby shrine to the same kami has instead shifted its patronage from martial arts to all sports and proudly announces the presence of “the kami of sports” (*supotsu no kami*) at its entrance.

93 See Smyers 1996 on the change and “personalisations” of the kami Inari.

94 See Bender 1978 and 1979, Teeuwen 2000 and the entry in Ashkenazi 2008. Also Kanda 1985 for a history of the evolution of the Hachiman image.

95 The *Katori Shintō-ryū* school of martial arts is still intimately linked with Katori shrine. See Friday 1997 for a good history focused on one of its offshoots.

These divisions are not necessarily only performed for the institution of a new shrine. Many shrines sell the divided spirit of kami to the worshippers (often in the form of a wrapped vessel) so that it can be privately enshrined in their own houses.⁹⁶ Businesses as well sometimes decide to enshrine a kami in order to boost their financial prospects. When an old shopping centre south of Tōjima changed hands, the new owner purchased – on a five-year “lease” - the spirit of the kami *Binbōgami*, the kami of poverty, from a shrine in Iida, Nagano prefecture. He placed the small shrine in the yard, near the stalls selling ice cream, shaved ice and octopus balls. The idea was to promote the shopping centre as a lucky spot – the owner opened a betting shop and employed guides that would accompany customers from the shop to the shrine to dispose of their fruitless lottery tickets and ask the kami to take away their bad luck. The vessel was returned to the main shrine when the lease ended and the shrine converted into a small garden. This sort of financially motivated enshrining is not in any way frowned upon – the kami, *qua* kami, is worthy of respect and many of the locals would visit the shrine and pay respect when walking past the shopping centre without really knowing anything about the kami itself.⁹⁷

The reason for this proliferation of identities is sometimes simply born of a wish of the re-enshrining *kannushi* and the community around them - for example, Inari came to be a patron of fishermen when enshrined near the sea despite the fact that its original “incarnation” is on a landlocked mountain (Smyers 1999). However these new

96 This is different from the *ofuda* amulets that need to be renewed annually.

97 Many locals have told me how they would make a detour in order to pass by the shopping centre and visit the shrine even though they did not consider the kami as “native” to the neighbourhood.

identities are not only something which is decided by *kannushi* and community. The metamorphosis of the kami from mountain god to patron of fishing, from agricultural spirit to patron of communications and computers, is also an emergent process that starts from the establishment of the kami in the new shrine. Like the shrines in which it dwells – the buildings, the architectonic styles, the relics – and Shinto as cultural construct itself (the Korean and Chinese appropriations, the modernisation) - the kami is an entity in flux whose borders are porous and continually shifting.

While remaining the same as the original it was split from, the new kami enters into a relationship with the landscape, the community and the *kannushi* of the new shrine. This relationship is performed in the visits and prayers of the community, in the feeding of the kami in the morning ritual, in the rites of passage like the *shichi-go-san*, in the community's performance of festivals, in the circulation of talismans and amulets between shrines and people's houses. Through this relationship both parties undergo a change, they seep into each other and are transformed by it.

This transformation is well explained by one of the *kannushi* of Hachiman Shrine. The enshrined kami is the same as the one at Usa shrine, and yet centuries of cohabitation with the Shibuya clan first, and with the people that lived in the area afterwards, have changed it. The spirit of kami seeps into the parish, into the souls and actions of the community who worships them, making them fruitful and blessed. In the same way the land and the people seep in turn into the kami changing it slowly into a kami who – despite remaining the kami Hachiman – is unique to the shrine where it dwells and particular to the historical, geographical and social configurations of its parish. The kami at Shibuya shrine is indeed the Hachiman but one who was the patron of a warrior clan building their castle, then of a powerful family closely tied with the

Kamakura shogunate, later of a rice farming lowland outside the city of Edo, and finally – since 1885 when a station of the Yamanote line was built⁹⁸ – a busy railway terminal first and then the major commercial and entertainment centre it is today.

One of the young *kannushi* of the shrine stresses how absurd it is to think that the kami enshrined in a castle in the countryside almost a millennium ago could truly be the same kami who oversees over the busy agglomerate that is Shibuya today. We are sitting at a conveyor-belt sushi restaurant on the 7th floor of a local shopping centre and his words seem particularly poignant. The kami has seen the hamlet around the castle being engulfed by a growing metropolis, the castle disappearing, tower blocks, *izakaya*, convenience stores, love-hotels and seedy massage parlours spawning nearby. Not only this particular Hachiman is strongly tied to the Shibuya clan but it also has changed to accommodate the existence of one of the most crowded towns in the whole of Japan.

In the same way, the other kami that the clan has brought with them from their previous residence in the mountainous north-west of Tokyo have been radically changed by living in the hilly lowlands of western Tokyo, and hence shifted their focus and specialism. These kami are now enshrined in one of the auxiliary shrines on the grounds: a kami of divination (close to the quasi-shamanic practices of the Mitake shrine), a kami revered as matchmaker, his lover and the heroic emperor Yamato Takeru.⁹⁹ It is indicative that these kami - one of which on Mt. Mitake is visited by

98 The best historical account of Tokyo in those years is Seidensticker 1983. See also Mansfield 2009 for a general history of the city.

99 Kushimachi, Ōnamuchi (a young form of Mitake's Ōkuninushi), Sukuna-hikona, and Yamato Takeru. Originally these kami are speculated to have been multiplied from Mt. Mitake.

people looking for love in line with the kami's romantic mythical history and another one for esoteric divinatory purposes - lose their specialism here. Another hosts Ukanomitama, identified with the kami Inari, originally from Mt. Tamaki. These mountain-dwelling kami have adapted to oversee over rice cultivation and later over the life of an urban neighbourhood. The last kami is the young Konnomaru himself - its vessel allegedly the sword that the founder of the Kamakura shogunate offered to the shrine in his honour.

All the kannushi of the shrine are very explicit in depicting the kami as polymorphic entities, radically porous and in constant flux. People and kami are mutually co-constituted through a shared history and this mutual constitution is always ongoing and open-ended. The kami come to embody the history of their relationship with people through time - the nature of the community, its needs, its historical shifts. Here we move to the garden of the main household (*honke*) of a local rice-cultivating family on the island of Shikoku who has been on this land for about 400 years. In this garden three shrines used to stand hidden in the shade of the trees. Through these shrines it becomes clear that kami are, in this mode of understanding that emphasises porousness and co-creation, not only symbols of a relation but, truly, the relation itself.

The history of the Takahashi family begins with a man fleeing from the destruction of war about four hundred years ago. The war is one of the endless battles and skirmishes amongst feudal lords that dominated the period of Japanese history known as "warring country period", or age of civil war (*sengoku jidai*; c. 1467-1603). In a local history and folklore magazine called "native place studies" (*kyōdo kenkyū*) stored in the

Niihama municipal library one can find a small section containing information on the history and the current state of the Takahashi line.¹⁰⁰ The small piece focuses on three shrines in the gardens of the ancestral mansion before its destruction, which we shall hear more about in the next chapter. The main topic of the article is the *Yashikigami*, the tutelary kami of an estate or mansion, and the three shrines serve as local examples for a wider treatment of the concept of *Yashikigami* in north-western Shikoku.

A *yashikigami* - "estate kami" - is a tutelary deity enshrined on the grounds of an estate.¹⁰¹ The term is sometimes used to denote any kami tutelary of a dwelling such as the frequently enshrined Inari. The origin of the term is however more specific and it refers to a Kami cult associated with a particular lineage and their residence (Naoe 1973). The article lists three *Yashikigami* enshrined on the Takahashi grounds. The first is an ancient "miracle working" burial mound (*reigen arataka rokubuzuka*). Though the journal states that nothing is known about the mound, let alone who might have been buried under it centuries ago, it proceeds to speculate that the mound might have been a *dōsojin*, a tutelary Kami of roads. *Dōsojin* exist in standing stones placed at village borders or intersections often shaped as male or female genitalia or engraved with the depiction of an embracing heterosexual couple. Indeed - though most likely a syncretic confluence of kami-cults, Japanese Buddhism and Chinese folk religions - the *dōsojin* is often conflated with the *sae no kami* of the Kojiki, a guardian of borders that protects the community against noxious spirits bringing pollution, pestilence and

100Kondō 1974. Note that this is *not* the homonymous and short-lived journal started in 1913 by the "father of Japanese native folkloristics" Yanagita Kunio, which saw among its contributors the ethnologist Orikuchi Shinobu – see Christy 2012: 16-17.

101 The term is purely academic - I personally have only heard *ujigami* used in common parlance.

misfortune from the outside.¹⁰²

The second *yashikigami* listed is Takahashi Jinushi, whom the document calls "the kami of the rice fields" (*ta no kami*). The kami of the rice fields is an ubiquitous occurrence in rural Shinto, and it is an agricultural kami tutelary of rice paddies. This particular kami, Takahashi Jinushi, literally translates as "landlord Takahashi", or "owner-of-the-land Takahashi", which indicates an understanding of the kami as not only a guardian and protector of the rice paddies but also their owner – to which tribute, gratitude and respect must be given for allowing humans to reap their fruits. Typically *ta no kami* celebrations happen twice a year; one at the sowing of the rice and one at the harvest.

The Takahashi family offered mochi, fish and rice to it in autumn and on the new year and enclosed it with lengths of rope (*shimenawa*). The observance of worship in spring¹⁰³ and autumn likely correlates with the interchange between the kami of the mountain (*yama no kami*) and the kami of the rice paddies (*ta no kami*) we briefly encountered in Chapter 1. The kami of the mountain descends in spring to the valleys to become the kami of the rice fields, which will ascend to the mountain in autumn to become again a mountain spirit (Hori 1994).¹⁰⁴

102 The association with genitalia and fertility is believed to be a later symbolic association sprung from the erect stones at the edges of villages. In this case it is likely that, if the mound was indeed a pre-existing *dōsojin*, it had been associated with this later fertility aspect (Turnbull 2015: 274-323; Czaya 1974 for an art-historic take, Yagi 1988 for a study of the symbolism of village borders; Ch. 4 of Horton 2007 and Glassman 2017 for a treatment of the syncretised buddhist Jizō). It is also possible that, Niihama being close to the circuit of the Shikoku pilgrimage, (*shikoku henro*) the mound could be the burial place of a pilgrim. One can find a similar story in a myth from nearby Tokushima recorded by Yanagita (in Yoshida 2007: 57).

103 Before the adoption of a calendar based on the solar Gregorian one in 1873 with the Meiji modernisation, Japan followed the lunisolar Chinese calendar in which New Year falls in spring (see Sugimoto and Swain 1989 for a treatment of Chinese influence on Japanese sciences).

104 The folklorist Yanagita Kunio (1970) argued that the origin of kami worship is in ancestor worship – that familial kami are the blueprint from which all kami evolved and hence their

The last *yashikigami* in the garden is Takahashi Hachiman. The shrine enshrines the founder of the Takahashi main lineage and first name at the root of the family tree (see figure 3). Four hundred years ago Takahashi Tōtūmimori fled the destruction of his home to arrive in Shikoku. After his enemies invaded his lands and burnt his castle to the ground he escaped and wandered west, arriving at Komeji castle in the north of the island where the main line of another Takahashi clan ruled. After some time Tōtūmimori decided to move again and arrived where the house lies today - here he settled and developed the land into rice paddies. From then on - from the first Takahashi to my friend Kisumu hundreds of years later - the family will gather around the Takahashi Hachiman shrine on the spring and autumn equinox to worship the souls of their ancestors.

The shrines in the Takahashi garden seem to mark the stages of domestication of the land by the Takahashi family, and - in a way - the domestication of the Takahashi by the land in return. While speculations about the mound can only be far-fetched, the other two shrines provide a much more solid ground for speculation. The second shrine can be seen as encapsulating the relationship between the land and the family focusing on the pace of the rice harvest. However, through the connection between mountain and field, the relationship between wilderness and civilisation is still central and the ownership of the land re-established anew every year. The name *jinushi* well encapsulates this duality as it might refer to either (or both) the ownership of the Takahashi over the land but also to a spirit “owner” of the land similar to ones found

nature is originally not celestial but very much tied in genealogy and kinship. Both the mountain and the rice field kami are for Yanagita ancestral archetypes and one can perhaps see Takahashi Jinushi as supporting this theory in the identification of lineage and land.

in animist Siberia (e.g. Willerslev 2007) and Amazonia (e.g. Fausto 2012): a spirit who rules over fertility and abundance of crops and prey. The last shrine is perhaps the most straightforward: the first hands that drove a hoe in the soil, the first seed in the land and the first seed of the lineage. The combination of the patriarch with the kami Hachiman is one of those common syncretic blends of kami and revered ancestors.

In the light of what we have seen above however one cannot understand these shrines as symbols of the relationship between land and family. The relationship between the kami and the people is a transformative one, one that leaves both parties changed and transformed, and these kami clearly show these entanglements. The kami in the shrines of the Takahashi garden are not only symbols - something that stands in the place of something else - but they are the relationship itself: crystallised and alive. In this sense, they are truly “symbols that stand for themselves” (Wagner 1989). Here “relationship” is not a thread that unites two separate and distinct ends but the very “trail along which life is lived” (Ingold 2006: 13), the trail along which people, landscape and kami live their entanglement and interactions.

The *Jinushi* shrine then encapsulates both the kami of the land and the Takahashi as landlords. The relationship of the kami-as-giver and the Takahashi-as-receivers, but also the later rise of the Takahashi as a powerful local land-owning and rice-producing family, are encapsulated - in their historicity - in the very nature of the kami. The kami does not merely “represent” it, but is itself the double ownership of the land and the very relationship between the two owners: a dialectic of mastering and taming based on the land and its yield. One is here reminded of the Zambian Luapula's dictum: every land has two owners, “the original settler who is 'owner'

through the fact of being first, and therefore has ritual authority, and the political 'owner' there by right of might or cunning or duplicity; and each respects the other for the particular attributes for which he is the owner” (Cunnison 1951: 15). The Takahashi ownership of the land cannot but be founded on the relationship with the previous spirit owner – the kami in the shrine today is in this sense the dual constitution of ownership of the Takahashi land.¹⁰⁵ This relationship is, like the kami, kept alive and re-instantiated by the offerings and rituals that the Takahashi performed here for centuries.

The Hachiman shrine in the garden houses the same kami enshrined in Shibuya and in Usa Shrine but one changed by the relation with the Takahashi family to the point of being merged and identified with the ancestor of the family. It is likely that the Takahashi ancestor already worshipped Hachiman and either himself or his descendants enshrined the kami on their new lands. Here, again, Hachiman loses its military patronage to oversee over the rice harvest and through time it becomes intimately connected to the family to the point of fusion.

* * *

The Parade

In an article about the Afro-Brazilian religious tradition of Candomblé, Roger Sansi (2013) explores a tension between the idea that spirits are “made” by people and

¹⁰⁵ “In sum there are two forms of authority and legitimacy, coexisting in a state of mutual dependence and reciprocal incorporation” (Sahlins 2014: 145). Incidentally note that the Takahashi ancestor, like the emperor, fits neatly in the category of the stranger – coming from afar and transforming untamed land into rice fields. The relationship between Takahashi landlords and spirit owners is similar to the one between autochthonous subjects and stranger-kings.

spirits that are “natural”, pre-existing people's agency. The separation is the symptom of the underlying co-existence of two cosmologies in contemporary Candomblé: a West-African “participatory” ontology based on initiation and a Central-African “fetishist” one, based on revelation. While the two ontologies co-exist, in the attempt to avoid essentialising the two “cultures” Sansi argues that the two exist predominantly as possibilities and are in no way mutually exclusive. One relies on the other and vice versa, what is “given” and what is “made” - or “nature” and “culture” - exist in an indivisible continuum in Candomblé. Marcio Goldman, also looking at Candomblé (2007, forthcoming), detects the very same polarity. Goldman works along similar lines to understand how these two “ontologies”, one at which core lies the “given” of blood and another pivoting on the “making” of initiations, do not stand in opposition as discrete entities but are rather intimately interrelated.

In this chapter we have found a similar tension and arrive now at the same problematic crux. We have met two radically different understandings of the nature of spirits and hence of the ways their relationship with people can be expressed. One could at this point be tempted to posit in contemporary Shrine Shinto the existence of an imperial transcendent ontology on the one hand – built and reinterpreted at different historical intersections like the establishment of Yamato rule and the Meiji restoration – and, on the other, a multifaceted and permeable “folk” ontology that understands the kami as irremediably “present” (cf. Engelke 2007), as constantly “made” and inextricable from people's lives.¹⁰⁶ These two approaches, however, are

106 cf. Waghorne 1981 on the transcendental and poetic gods of Greek and Hindu polytheism.

Waghorne argues that one finds there two “theologies”: an abstract transcendent form of being manifested in the material world and revealed in its perfect form in myth on the one hand, and its sensual embodiments who live in “a world of sight sound and taste [...] in fleeting moments of temporal experience” (1981: 46) on the other. The centrality of making – *tsukuru* – to ritual, performance and the very “essence” of objects in Japan has been

not separately found in the landscape of contemporary Shinto – e.g. the folk model in a small countryside shrine and the imperial model at the majestic Grand Shrine of Ise. Rather these two cosmologies are both constitutive parts of the practice of any non-sectarian shrine, be that a tiny wayside shrine or a huge one, and – as we shall explore in this section – of each other.

It has hopefully already emerged that these two systems or understandings of the nature of kami are in no way in antithesis. The emperor's two bodies, with Kantorowicz, sit in a transcendent “outside” - immutable and removed – and at the same time are in the world and transform it. As noted above, descent already connotes a movement antithetic to the one of separating and concealing. The porous and polymorphous *kami* that we have seen change with the landscape and people around them contained the same paradox. While the kami changes with the history it is immanent in at the same time it remains the same. Hachiman remains Hachiman - through its transformations as Buddhist sage, a god of war, the patron of a powerful clan, the ancestor of a local rice-cultivating family it is still the same kami enshrined where it was first invoked. At the same time while kami and people are changing each other the two are still rigidly separated through demarcation of space, light and purification. In short, one can see in every movement – e.g. the flow of kami into the world – its negation – e.g. the flow of kami away from the world. With Goldman and Sansi we are now at the point of having to reckon with the continuum or interdependence of the two systems but, because Shinto is evidently not Candomblé, this continuum needs to be reckoned with the ethnographic tools at hand.

highlighted by Yamaguchi 1991.

While one can heuristically keep the two systems separate, this separation is only in emphasis. In fact, each moment of transcendence (hiding, concealing, separating) already contains its opposite (circulating, in-mixing, bestowing). Its “activation” so to speak requires its own negation – immanence needs transcendence and vice versa. The ethnographic moment in which this can be seen most clearly is the annual festival (*matsuri*) held in every neighbourhood sometime in late summer/early autumn. While the festivals has many parts, the most exciting moment for the community is the parade (*shinko shiki*) where a palanquin (*mikoshi*) containing the soul of the kami is marched around the neighbourhood. The palanquin is a lacquered wooden box lavishly decorated and topped with the golden statues of two phoenixes, resting on wooden beams capped with metal.

Each of the 23 wards (*ku*) of Tokyo is divided into districts (*chō* or *machi*) and each district further subdivided into smaller sub-districts (*chōme*). Within these sub-districts, even smaller clusters of households fall under the jurisdiction of neighbourhood's associations (*chōkai* or sometimes *chōnaikai*) who oversee the organisation of the procession during festivals and serve as a bridge between ward and households. They also oversee sanitation, waste management, care of the elderly and fire-safety.¹⁰⁷ This latter is extremely important in Tōjima which comprises some of the districts of Tokyo most densely populated with wooden housing. Every *chōkai* organises a parade in their territory which means that during the festival of a single shrine in Tokyo there could be up to 200 *mikoshi* circulating the neighbourhood at the

107 See Bestor 1989 and Robertson 1991 for an analysis of the neighbourhood association's activities and symbolism in terms of the native/newcomer divisions in the neighbourhood. See Aoyagi 1983 and Littleton 1986 for a detailed account of the association's involvement in the organisation of a Tokyo *matsuri*. Also Ashkenazi 1996: 83-109.

same time.

The night before the parade, or in some places in the early morning, a ritual is held where the kami is installed into the *mikoshi* of the main shrine. This can happen in one of the following ways. The ritual happens in pitch-black darkness, the *kannushi* carry small lanterns and turn them off before transferring the *shintai*, the vessel wrapped in cloth, into the *mikoshi*.¹⁰⁸ Alternatively, the vessel is concealed by screens of white cloth attached to wooden poles during the transition. All the *kannushi* have undergone purification and abstention the day before and the senior *kannushi* who handles the vessel spent some time in the shrine in seclusion. In both cases the *kannushi* wear a face-mask not to contaminate the spirit of the *kami* with their breath.

The shrine's vessel will go to animate the main *mikoshi* for the Shrine's procession. The process of division of the spirit of the kami described in the previous section (*kanjō*) is used to animate every other *mikoshi* waiting in the parish. The *mikoshi* of every neighbourhood association is kept during the festival in an improvised sacred space, delineated with ropes (*shimenawa*) and paper streamers (*shide*). This space can be anywhere, for my own association it was the workshop of the local door-maker which remained open for the three days of the festival. On the night before the procession a *kannushi*, together with an assistant, visits this temporary shrine and after blessing and purifying it, he installs a vessel holding the spirit of the kami into the *mikoshi*. These are usually paper amulets bearing the name of the kami wrapped in gold foil but in other shrines could be mirrors or other objects. After being thanked by the leader of the neighbourhood association in a customary speech the *kannushi* will rush to the

108 See Nelson 1996: 144-54 for a description of the ritual in darkness.

next *mikoshi* and repeat the process. The same will happen at the end of the festival where the spirit will be removed from all the *mikoshi* to return to the shrine. Here the multiplication of the kami is reversed and the multiple spirits, now “mixed” with the different parts of neighbourhood during the different processions, return to unity into the original vessel in the sanctuary.

During the procession the *mikoshi* is carried by the participants through the neighbourhood. The purpose of the procession is said to be, at once, to spread the blessing of the kami through the neighbourhood, let the kami survey its parish and animating the kami with the vitality of the parishioners (*ujiko*). The festival, especially the ones in Tokyo's eastern *shitamachi*, involve heavy intoxication, raucousness and a high dose of machismo.¹⁰⁹ The parishioners will carry the shrine through the neighbourhood, tracing its perimeter and covering as many of the internal roads as possible. The *mikoshi* is extremely heavy and made to swerve, lurch and bounce unsteadily left to right, aided by the increasing intoxication and exhaustion of the carriers. Breaks are taken at prearranged points during the route where alcohol and food are distributed (from *edamame* to cold MacDonald's hamburgers). An older man walks backwards in front of the procession gesturing to the people carrying the *mikoshi* and trying to steer them away from people and cars parked on the roadside. People ready to take the place of the exhausted carriers walk to the side pushing the beams away from the crowd should the *mikoshi* come too close. Throughout the leader of the association shouts a motivational “*hoi-sa!*” and everyone responds “*hai-za!*”. This is the rhythm of the procession, with every bounce, swerve and shout, gripping the

109 When I declined a beer at 6 am, under-slept and groggy from the previous night's procession and the subsequent drinking, I was met with a belittling: “how old are you?!” (*eeh.. nansai?*).

beams tight against the shoulders trying not to let them bounce away and cause bruising, but trying to swing *with* it and together with everyone else.

The intoxication, extreme tiredness and rhythmic bouncing of the palanquin create a state of indistinction where bodies are packed against each other and voices mingle under the swerving heavy *mikoshi* above. In those moments the palanquin feels like a giant animal with many appendages. The purpose of the procession is, according to many *kannushi* I have spoken to, to reinvigorate the spirit of the kami through shaking (*tamafuri*), to renew a sense of oneness within the neighbourhood and with the kami and, at the high of exhaustion and intoxication, to be possessed by the *kami* itself.¹¹⁰ The language of possession is not always used but is recurrent in the literature. “Possession” here means something different from the individual possessions of, to keep with the Afro-Caribbean comparison, Vodou or Umbanda and more of a collective possession, a loss of sense of self and the participation in a collective rhythm where people are “sharing the soul of the *kami*” and, through this process, both being energised by it and energising it. In a sense the loss of self, and the previous purification¹¹¹, makes people into vessels for the soul of the *kami*. Possession can then be understood in the same way as the relationship between vessel and kami in the shrine, except that one finds, in the procession, also that porous in-mixing we encountered in the previous section.

The procession “activates” the spreading and mixing of the spirit of the *kami* through the neighbourhood and its people. During the procession, while people shout, drink

110 See Hara 2003 for interesting diagrams expressing this process.

111 Every *mikoshi* carrier should take a bath in the morning before the procession. Later a *kannushi* will collectively purify the assembled group of carriers together with the *mikoshi* with a wand (*haraegushi*).

and sweat under it, the kami is hidden in darkness within the *mikoshi* and wrapped in cloth inside its vessel. During the ritual of installation and de-installation of the kami in and from the *mikoshi* every precaution is taken so that the kami is not defiled by pollution and seen by anyone. This is perhaps the point where the indistinction between the two systems is the most ethnographically visible. Every moment where one of the two apparently opposite system expresses itself at its most, every time we are radically on the one side of the continuum, the other system emerges as a constitutive part of that mode. When the emphasis is markedly on spreading a porous kami, on the in-mixing of kami people and buildings, one finds the very opposite – separation and seclusion – as an integral part of that process.

Strict separation, purification and darkness are enforced so that the kami's spirit and blessings permeate the neighbourhood and the circulation of the *kami* is enacted so the kami can remain unseen in the shrine. Every vessel containing the multiplied spirit of the kami that is circulated between new shrines and parishioner's homes is at the same time hidden and wrapped. These spirits become new kami while at the same time remaining perpetually unchanged - the linkage between Hachiman shrines, despite the difference in the enshrined kami's capabilities, is explicitly stated in terms of both genealogy and identity.

The whole of the great circulation of the parade contains at its heart the enduring concealment of the immortal kami, which in turn can only remain – given and transcendent – if it is circulated and kept “alive” through diffusion, feeding and in-mixing. While some moments do emphasise separation and some entanglement, some seclusion and some diffusion, one finds always one nested within the other. In other

moments it becomes impossible to tell where the emphasis lies – while the parade seems to be the epitome of circulation and entanglement one can also see it as a sea of people holding above them a hidden secluded kami. Looking at a movement away – concealment and seclusion – one is immediately met with its flip-side – a movement towards people and things. Every movement contains within itself its negation. The circulation is predicated on concealment, concealment on circulation. Every movement contains its shadow, to a point where one cannot tell, in any of these ethnographic moments, if the movement is one direction of the other. This does not mean that the division delineated in the two sections is fictitious. At times one side is emphasised greatly over the other, although one can always find the other nested somewhere. Other times, like in the festival parade, the two are impossible to tell apart. These moments seem to be the most powerful.

* * *

Conclusion

In this chapter we have seen how, in contemporary Shinto, we find two very different understandings of what the kami are and how one might go about entering in relationship with them. On the one hand we have seen a model where the kami is ill at ease in the world, transcendent and eternal, and needs to be kept secluded and separate. Here the relationship between the kami and the material world is very much one of container and contained, the kami is, in the literal sense of the word, an “essence”. We then however moved on to a radically different model where the kami is seen as an integral part of the tumultuous stream of history - both national, personal and family ones. Here the kami is ever-mutable, changed by every engagement with

people and things, changing *with* them. Here the relation between kami and things is one of pure dissolution of one in the other, like salt in water, and I argued that the kami is, in this sense, the relation itself. Not only one finds both models in any non-sectarian shrine but when one looks at one model – e.g. “the “essence” - one already finds the other nested within it – e.g. the “relation” - that is once one goes far enough in one direction one finds themselves inevitably in the other. I then focused on the yearly autumn festival in order to show how in some moments, when the kami is felt most powerfully by the community, these two models are fully indistinguishable – both essence and relation overlap and blur in the ruckus of the parade.

This does not however mean that the binary delineated in the chapter is fictitious. The use of terms like immanence and transcendence was indeed heuristic and, through the ethnography, has been re-understood as an interdependent binary of seclusion/concealment and diffusion/circulation. By looking at the distinction ethnographically what emerged is more of a direction and a movement: one away from people, the creation of separation, and one towards them, the promotion of in-mixing and suffusion. The two directions are emically understood and treated as fully separate. The precautions about purification that ensure the seclusion of the kami, for example, are there to explicitly forbid any in-mixing, to keep the kami untouched and untainted by the profane world outside. However, it is precisely through keeping the kami separated, through purification and seclusion, that people are able to interact with the kami and thus invite their power and elicit a transformative relationship. The binary is constantly maintained and yet its terms constantly fold into each other – going in one direction leads paradoxically to the other. Its maintenance however is fundamental, the two directions must be kept separated so that they can feed back into

each other and blur.

We saw in this chapter a facet of the logic of blurring that is central to both Shinto and the thesis itself: things must change continuously in order to stay the same, and they must stay the same in order to change. Shinto is, as we have seen at different points in this chapter, remarkably adaptable – it has accommodated through the centuries new technologies and elements from different cultures and traditions. While a critical look might argue that there was never any “Shinto” per se, but only a modern ideological construct that claims a long and lasting lineage, the *kannushi* of many shrines would, predictably, disagree. However this is not, I would argue, an instance of nationalist false-consciousness against the objective facts of history (cf. Introduction). *Kannushi* readily admit the constant changes that it underwent and, to my surprise, how hybrid Shinto is as a cultural and social form. Many *kannushi* I have spoken to readily admit that vestments, architecture, and even rituals are the fruit of historical intermingling with Korea and China and with Japan's own domestic political vicissitudes. Yet to a critique pointing out Shinto's contingent nature a *kannushi* would answer something like - “of course it has changed continuously, how else could it have stayed the same for so long?”



CHAPTER 3:

PERMANENCE AND TRANSITION IN THE JAPANESE HOUSEHOLD (IE)

"daffodils/ for my homecoming /
elder brother's house"

- Takahashi Kashō, 1945.

Introduction

This chapter, like the last, takes one of the social and cultural forms that were heralded as the blueprints for Japanese essentialism, carrying connotations of timelessness and uniqueness, and finds them relying upon a logic of blurring. In people's engagement with these forms we do find their essentialised timeless version – in the previous chapter an engagement based on concealment and separation – but, together with it, it very opposite – one based on intermingling and change. This chapter looks at the structure of the Japanese family, an institution that has been often considered the model upon which Japanese society is modelled. In the family we find, like in Shinto, an essentialised model based on lineages which carries connotations of timelessness and uniqueness, together with an engagement with kinship that moves with history, one where the family changes and becomes nuclear and bilateral, where families break up and move away from each other, where people move away from the countryside and to the cities. Again, it is a logic of blurring that provides the nexus that makes kinship work, and here the blurring is not achieved through ephemeral moments of

aesthetic or spiritual experience but in the solidity of stone and wood. It is the material culture of the house – graves, shrines, heirlooms, but also pictures – that blurs the two dimensions and ties together kin through time.

The chapter takes a diachronic approach by looking at the changes through time that the Takahashi family from north-western Shikoku has gone through from the end of WWII until the time I sat down with Takahashi Kisumu to hear its story in 2015/16. Takahashi Kisumu is the last born of the collateral line of a very old household. He is 78 years old and lives together with his wife in a residential area of Tokyo.¹¹² They live in a small detached house tucked away in the streets behind the *shōtengai*, the shopping street that forms the artery of the neighbourhood and leads to the train station. Before retiring Kisumu used to work in human resources for a shipbuilding company while his wife was a middle school teacher and then, after their first son was born, a full-time housewife (*shufu*; cf. Hendry 1993b; Imai 1994; Goldstein-Gidoni 2012). Today they live the typical life of the ageing urban middle-class split between hobbies, friends, and trips to *onsen* towns around the region.¹¹³ What is left of those meetings is a bundle of pictures and notes both he and I scribbled on notebooks and napkins. Always around food – around steaming *nabe* pots in his living room in winter, around cups of coffee in modern family restaurants, around beers and skewers in cheap *izakaya*, around high-balls in a café in the neighbourhood. On the table – stained with grease, sauce or coffee – pictures of family gatherings and of visits to the ancestral places of his family. In the pictures family members can be seen getting older, Kisumu's hair turning grey and slowly thinning year by year. Next to this cast of

112 While the pseudonym “Kisumu” is used here to distinguish him from the myriad of other Takahashi in the narrative, for me he has always been Takahashi-san.

113 See Kavedžija 2015 on ageing, hobbies and happiness; also Traphagan 2000.

characters, Kisumu's immediate kin-group, one can always see other presences – a cast of objects such as graves, trees, memorial stones and scrolls, and houses.

In most of the pictures people are stiffly posing next to these artefacts as if in the proximity of a respected family member. While the people age from picture to picture, these objects seem to remain unchanged – immutable presences around which the family gathers to reassert kinship ties. Except we shall see in this chapter that these objects *do* change – they are replaced, destroyed, moved, sold and made by the whims of both people and history. This chapter starts with a focus on family structure to land on an analysis of the role that these objects play in indigenous understandings of kinship. It starts by introducing the events of Kisumu's childhood to then move to look at the “problem” of the *ie*, whether it is based on patrilineal descent or bilateral bonds. Looking at the movement, creation and destruction of the family's material culture, the chapter argues that it is precisely in embodying these two dimensions, essentialised vertical bonds of descent on the one hand and fluid affects embedded in historical change on the other, that objects, including photographs, bridge the tension between group continuity and individual affects. Following a trail left by objects and photographs, it posits that it is by entering in relation with them that the two dimensions become indistinguishable and kinship, through its ruptures and continuities, is lived and maintained.

Japanese society (Kuwayama 2001; Ryang 2004: 101-138). The family had been enlarged to map over the whole of Japan, a “family-based society” where hierarchical relationships of duty and dependence are replicated at home, in the workplace, and in every other aspect of social life.¹¹⁵

The model of the household (*ie*) was sanctioned by state policy during the Meiji restoration – which established a strong central government headed by the emperor and abolished the clan and caste systems previously in place during the shogunate. It took a few decades to formalise but in 1898 inter-family relationships and inheritance – which were in pre-modern Japan subject to different rules in different feudal provinces (and between nobility and commoners)¹¹⁶ – were crystallised into the model of the patrilineal stem-family that we understand today to constitute the *ie* system (Röhl 2005: 166-329; Mizuno 2014). The Meiji Civil Code understood the *ie* to be a codification of an already existing situation – a description, that is, of what the Japanese household had already always looked like throughout the archipelago. In the wake of the atomic bomb and Japan's surrender a new Civil Code (1947) was promulgated, this time trying to disband the traditional household in favour of the nuclear family structure (Steiner 1950). In the years immediately after the war both Japanese and American anthropologists scoured the Japanese countryside in search of the disappearing *ie*, fading away with the encroaching modernisation. With the essentialist efforts to define “the” *ie* came the anxiety about its disappearance and the search for its survivals.

115 cf. Daikichi 1985: 280-287. See especially Chie Nakane's (1970) extremely influential conceptualisation of Japan as vertical society (*tate shakai*).

116 See e.g. Hayami 1986 on inheritance and primogeniture.

In a beautiful ethnography of urban family industry Dorinne Kondo notes that, despite post-war anxieties and the assumption of an inevitable convergence of Japanese life with the social forms of Western modernity, her own experience had somehow proved otherwise. Far from being defunct, among the crowded family businesses of *shitamachi* she finds the “traditional” family structure to be very much alive (1990: 121). The nuclear family itself has been already seen as undergoing the same erosion (Ochiai 1997; White 2002; Ueno 2009; Allison 2013) and yet, a quarter of a century after Kondo's fieldwork, I found the same presence of the *ie* not only in *shitamachi* but also among families in wealthier western Yamanote. Others have at different times recognised this persistence in both urban and rural environments (e.g. Hamabata 1990; Kuwayama 2001; Tsutsumi 2001; White 2002; Hendry 2011: 28-29; Hidaka 2011).¹¹⁷

Of course this is not to deny that new/different kinship forms and patterns are being assumed, adapted, or created. Indeed there is a prolific literature on the changing Japanese family, with its consequences on marriage, gender roles, work, and affection.¹¹⁸ While such research is relevant and important, when one thinks about what these changes are measured against – i.e. what is the family changing *from* – one finds, in my experience, that the ideology of the *ie* is still the assumed backdrop. While

117 There are theories as to why this is the case – notably the fact that people were taught it at school until the end of WWII (Mackie 1995; Hendry 2011), the preservation of the Family Register (*koseki*) law (Iwakami 2003; Krogness 2011), notions of filial piety encoded in life-cycle rituals (Hidaka 2011: 115), and – my own guess – funerary patterns attached to existing household graves.

118 Examples of general literature on the changing family are Traphagan and Knight 2003; Rebeck and Takenaka 2006; Hendry 2011; Ronald and Alexy 2011. Particularly relevant is literature on people that reject, self-consciously or not, “traditional” family structures, e.g. Lunsing 2011; Allison 2012, 2013; Mirza 2016; also on “freeters” see Smith 2006; Slater 2009, 2010; Cook 2013, 2014. See also Hansen's argument (2013) that urban Japan and notions of Japaneseness are becoming “post-familial”.

one could be tempted to see the *ie* surviving ideologically and the nuclear family and its new developments being the practical reality, this chapter argues otherwise. The main argument is that both *ie* and the ever-evolving new family structures are present, both tangibly and pragmatically, in people's lives. As we shall see the continuity of the *ie* is ensured precisely through its ruptures and the new situations they engender. It is the dialectic of immutability and change, of which the material culture of the family is the focus, that provides the basis for kinship in both space and time.

The term *ie* connotes the family understood through this state-sanctioned model based on descent and there are other words for “family”, such as *kazoku* and *uchi* which tend to connote the more intimate realm of the immediate kin ties. However, it would not be accurate to say that *ie* represents a politico-jural domain and *uchi* the domain of kinship – in parallel to Evans-Pritchard (1951) and Fortes (1970), *contra* Radcliffe-Brown (1952), regarding descent groups. In fact, as we shall see, the *ie* is here a dimension of kinship, full of affects and bonds. Finally, it must be noted that here the term *ie* covers both a single lineage and a group of different lineages related by main- and branch-household ties. The latter has been sometimes called *dozoku* in the literature (e.g. Nakane 1962; Brown 1968; Shimizu 1987; Kitano 2004) but since the two are not always distinguished, and talk of *dozoku* has largely disappeared from the mainstream discourse after the war, I here use *ie* for both single and extended lineages. And, echoing the introduction, I am not here talking about an objective pan-Japanese *ie* but about the “Japanese” *ie* as it is constructed in the urban imagination today, which does not in reality encompass the many regional variations that can be found across the Japanese archipelago.

Families Divided and Reunited: Family (and) History



4: Kisumu's family in 1936. In the centre Kisumu's father is sitting in a western-style suit, on his right side his three male sons and at his left his daughter and his wife, dressed in traditional kimono. Kisumu will be born the following year.¹¹⁹

The picture was taken in Kobe in 1936, a year before Kisumu's birth. This section covers the first years of Kisumu's life through the tempestuous events of WWII while providing a preliminary picture of the structure of the Japanese household. While this section is very much a frame for what is to follow, it already contains many of the themes of the chapter: migration, succession, siblingship and memory.

119 One can see here a reflection of Goldstein-Gidoni's argument (1990) that after Meiji women were made, through the wearing of kimono in formal occasions and in photographic studios, to represent traditional Japanese femininity while men to represent western rationality through the wearing of the suit.

1937 is a turbulent year. A year that starts with the escalation of Japan's military expansion into a full-scale conflict with China. A year that sees the bloody battle of Shanghai and ends with the taking of Nanjing and a massacre that still today haunts Sino-Japanese relations. 78 years later, in front of a cup of tea, Kisumu says that his generation had the better deal – though born under a sign of blood and war those memories faded fast and what was left in front of them were forty years of economic growth. More historically conscious and less competitive than the later baby-boomers - the famed *dankai no sedai*, the mass generation whose consumerist desire fuelled the 80s bubble - they rebuilt Japan with a spirit of cooperation and endurance. They all retired just before the bubble burst in the early 90s and witnessed Japan's plunge into economic crisis only from the safety of old age.

When Kisumu was born his siblings were already all in their late teens. T: "Why do you think your parents had you so late?". Perhaps, he says, during wartime people felt pressured to have kids for the country, to keep the birth-rate up while most families were separated by the war. Perhaps his parents were not planning to have any more children but the historical demand at that time made them try to have another late in life. Kisumu's guess is likely to be quite accurate and his conception may indeed be one of the achievements of the largely unsuccessful government fertility and eugenics campaigns that aimed to "to cause women to move from an individualistic view of marriage to a national one and to make young women recognize motherhood as the national destiny" (Havens 1975: 927).¹²⁰ And so Kisumu was born 15 years after their last child. They'll try again soon after him but a stillbirth will put an end to their

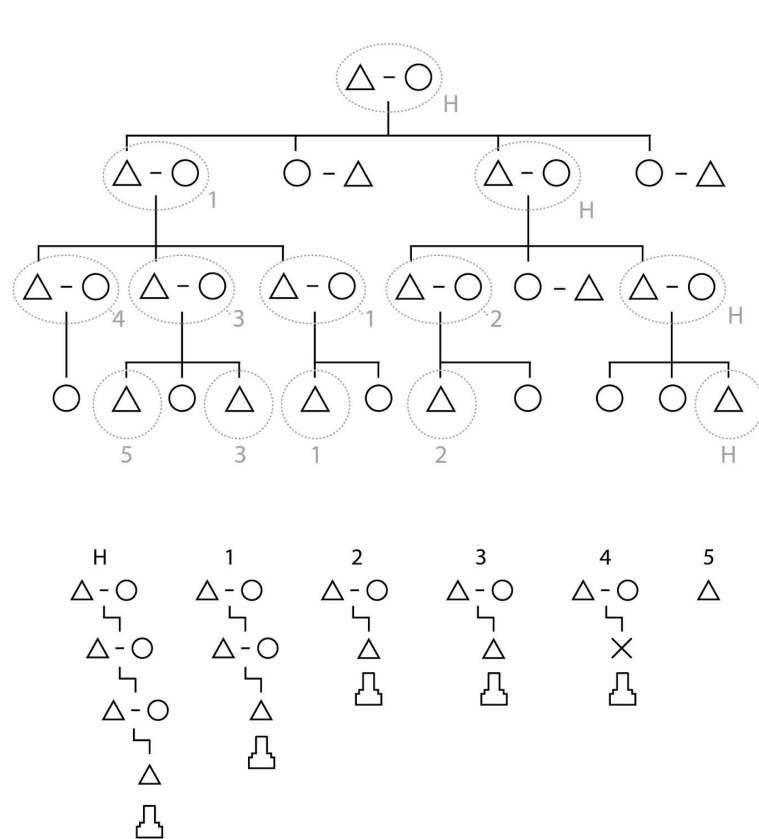
120 For further reading on eugenics in those years see Suzuki 1975, Weiner 1997, Otsubo 1998 and 1999; Otsubo & Bartholomew 1998; Chung 2002; and Ch. 4 and 5 of Frühstück 2003.

attempts.

When he was about 8 years old, in 1945, the house where he lived with his parents in Kobe was destroyed in an American air-strike and, after being evacuated to a temporary shelter in the suburbs of Osaka for a few months, his father decided to move back to his *furusato* in Niihama, on the island of Shikoku.¹²¹ Abandoning the ruins of his house and his former life, Kisumu's father returned to the ancestral home where he grew up, together with his three unmarried sons. Before the new Civil Code of 1947 the *chonan*, the first male son, inherited the entire asset: Kisumu's uncle and his family inherited the ancestral home of the Takahashi family while the other brothers and sisters had to move on and find their own fortune.

Before the 1947 Civil Code both family line and inheritance flowed through the paternal line. The first male son (*chonan*) inherited responsibility for the *ie* upon marrying, together with the headship position that was his father's. The daughters will marry out and join their husband's lineage while the younger brothers will move out to establish their own collateral lineages. Even today the patterns of burial in the family grave (*haka*) offer a clear illustration of this system. The family line always flows through the elder brother who will be the only one of a set of siblings to be buried in his father's grave together with his wife. The younger brothers will have to each build their own grave where they will be buried with their wives and their first-born.

121 The fire-bombing of Kobe was carried out on the 16th and 17th of March 1945 and then again on June 5th. The most vivid description of the bombings is in Nosaka Akiyuki's (1978) autobiographical short story *Grave of the Fireflies* (*Hotaru no Haka*) widely popularised by the animated film (1988). See also Werrel 1996 for a history of American fire-bombing raids on Japan and the effects on cities mostly built of wooden structures.



5. Burial Patterns in the *iz*. H indicates the main household line (*honke*) and the numbers the branch families (*bunke*). The second diagram shows the different lines and how they relate to different graves.

In the diagram the main lineage flows through the main line (H). The diagram follows Japanese conventions in order to easily map onto the Takahashi family tree, so the order of birth goes from right (eldest) to left (youngest). The system is patrilineal and patrilocal and women join their husbands' families both in name and residence. In the second generation, the first-born male will be buried, together with his wife, in the same grave as his mother and father, while his younger brother will have to build his own grave and start his own household line (1). This will be a collateral line (*bunke*). In the third generation, the first-born male of the main line will join his parents and grandparents while his younger brother will again start his own (2). The children of

the collateral line (1) will do the same – the first born male and his wife will join his parents in the grave of the (1) line while his two siblings will make tombs and household lines of their own (3 and 4). In the fourth generation, still young and unmarried, we can notice that the (2) line does not have yet a male heir and, as we shall see, might have to resort to adoption. The same can be said for the fledgeling line (4). The second born of the (3) line will have to create his own line and grave, (5).

Kisumu's father, the second born, returned then to a house and a land over which he had no right or claim asking for assistance. The old stables were re-adapted to house Kisumu's family starting the time of Kisumu's life that holds all his dearest childhood memories. Those are the years of his junior high-school and high-school, culturally enshrined as the happiest moment of a lifetime, and years in which Kisumu made most of his friends and met his future wife. “We were really cold in winter and the house was really small, but we were really happy” – despite the hardships of the post-war period, the emotional toll of depending on the *honke* and the economic difficulties that made them live in a cramped space, for Kisumu those years were the happiest. The family eventually moved out and found a house in the neighbourhood with the economic aid of his uncle.



6. Kisumu's uncle's family and the mansion before the war.

*

(A Memory of Kisumu's)

Kisumu's eldest brother fought in Manchuria and was later dispatched to the southern battlefield of Okinawa. He was in Okinawa when Kobe was bombed and, for a long time, no one heard anything from him. After the destruction of the house and the move to Shikoku the possibility of receiving letters from him disappeared and hopes to see him again thinned. The thought of him was a lingering presence at the edges of their lives and conversations. During that first year in the stables of the ancestral home he was finally discharged and went back to Kobe only to stand in front of an empty plot cleared from the rubble

of destruction. He wandered the neighbourhood in a daze, he will tell later to the family sitting around the *kotatsu* table, until he recognised a familiar face and managed to track down a former neighbour who could tell him where the family had gone.

He travelled to Shikoku, where he had only been once a year at *Bon* to visit his ancestors. "I still remember the moment when my brother arrived.. I was sitting in the house studying and suddenly I heard his voice. I ran out of the house and he was there, standing.. in his uniform with his rucksack on his back. I still remember the uniform well.. I thought he looked incredible.. and the rucksack.. it had a bullet hole on the side.. I looked at it and realised that he had almost died in the war". The day after his return Kisumu walked behind his brother and his family to visit the shrine where they had worshipped for generations, feeling happy.

*

The same spring the first-born of the main line - Kisumu's uncle's heir - also returned from the war, frail and weakened by a disease contracted on the front. That night the grounds of the Takahashi ancestral home were ablaze with exultation and drunkenness celebrating the return of the *chonan*. The happiness of the main line, however, turned out to be short lived. The severity of the illness degenerated rapidly and his energies started waning by the day. Kisumu remembers him walking through the gardens, pale and silent, holding onto a carer while staring glassy-eyed into the

distance. To him he was like a ghost, always present in people's whispers but only visible sporadically from a distance. T: "What do you think he thought about then?". J: "Maybe the war.. maybe he knew he was looking at his garden for the last time.. I think he must have been happy to have been able to return to his native place (*furusato*)". He died shortly after, unmarried, and his younger brother joined the main line in his place.

* * *

"Japanese" kinship and the Japanese "House": problems in the analysis of the ie

The previous section introduced Kisumu's story and, in so doing, the overall structure of the *ie*. At the same time it introduced some key themes of the chapter – inheritance, memory, siblingship, the importance of the ancestral soil. In this section that structure is problematised by focusing on the post-war debates about what the "Japanese family" actually looked like, not as formalised by the law but in its practical everyday dimension.

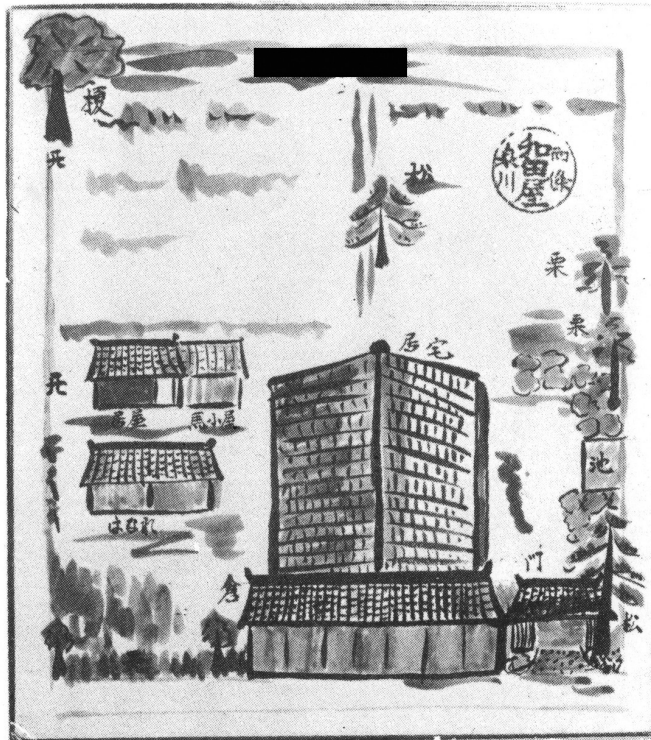
A very close problem in the history of anthropology is found in Lévi-Strauss' work on "house societies" and I start from there in order to frame the problem and then move to the literature on the *ie*. Lévi-Strauss' thinking on the "house" first emerges from a reinterpretation of Franz Boas' long ethnographic engagement with the Kwakiutl of Vancouver Island.¹²² Kwakiutl kinship structure proved itself resistant to be fitted in any conventional kinship category as it exhibited both patrilineal and matrilineal

¹²² Especially Boas 1897, 1909, 1920, 1930, 1935 and 1966. While it Boas' work that inspired Lévi-Strauss, these kinds of problem were by no means unique to the analysis of Kwakiutl kinship – see e.g. Firth 1929: 98 on the Maori and Gluckman 1951: 71-76 on the Lozi.

characteristics. While in matters of succession and inheritance patrilineal ideology seemed to be at the core of Kwakiutl kinship, not all of the members of the kin group traced common descent making it difficult to properly categorise it as a “descent group” (Boas 1966, Goldman 1975). Defeated by the impossibility to fit the uniqueness of the Kwakiutl kinship unit in any comparative category Boas branded it with the indigenous term, *numayma*. In reviewing Boas' work, Lévi-Strauss (1982, 1987) does not see the Kwakiutl family unit as a unique and anomalous pattern, but instead connects it to the Yurok in California and much further afield to non-unilineal descent groups in Polynesia and European noble houses, thus branding this newly forged comparative grouping *sociétés à maison*, “house societies”.

In this section we see why the concept of house society might be useful here for a number of reasons. The first is that it seems to provide a way out of a long debate in the anthropology of Japan about the structure of the Japanese family unit. Analogously to the Kwakiutl *numayma*, the Japanese family unit seems to exhibit both patrilineal and bilateral (and fictive) characteristics leaving kinship theorists to debate as to what the true structure of Japanese Kinship might be (Uno 1996). The Lévi-Straussian House (capitalised from now on) marked an important shift in perspective. In line with what will later become a more “processual” approach (e.g. Strathern 1992; Carsten 1995a, 1997; Weismantel 1995; Rival 1998) in response to David Schneider's critique of the concept of kinship (1968, 1984), the House moves the focus from genealogical descent to different ways in which people relate to each other – not only the relationships of alliance Lévi-Strauss had already analysed in the *Elementary Structures of Kinship* (1969b), but also non-kin relations to do with rank and locality. On top of that, the House provides a new holistic language that transcends and brings

together not only antinomies such as descent/alliance, filiation/residence, matrilineage/patrilineage but also wider categories like “kinship”, “economy” and “architecture” (Carsten & Hugh-Jones 1995: 6-21). The shift of focus on material culture will become salient later on but, for now, this section shows two different ways of thinking about the household – a classic ego-centred lineage model and a group-centred one. Later it will become apparent how these two are not only analytical models but two dimensions that coexist in the household, often problematically.



7. An old map of the ancestral *yashiki*, mansion. The map is stamped with the family seal: in the middle of the seal the name of the family is not Takahashi but the name the family would have been known as in business context: Wadaya.¹²³ To the left of the name one can see the name of the local area where the *yashiki* and the Takahashi's lands would have been while the name to the right it is likely to be the name of the wider area before the introduction of the prefectural system.¹²⁴ In the centre of the the main building where the members of the *honke* lived and to the left two smaller buildings; one used to house the stables that will later become Kisumu's family house, and the other - cryptically named "detached room" - had already long been demolished by the time Kisumu lived there. Apart from the gate to the mansion's gardens the map only goes into detail in marking the position of the wells and what are probably the oldest and biggest trees in the gardens. The treatment of the trees as prominent features is a symptom of the intimate connection between the natural features of the ancestral landscape - in particular trees and mountains - and, at least for Kisumu, the notion of *urusato*.

123 Wadaya is a *yagō*, literally "house name". On the relation between *yagō* and household continuity see Thompson 2004. *Yagō* would often be passed down through guilds or workshops so that apprentices would carry the name of their master's studio after leaving apprenticeship and later themselves pass it on. Though the term is most often associated with guilds of Kabuki actors, for a long stretch of Japanese history *yagō* functioned as surnames for craftsmen or merchant houses.

124 "Saijō" is likely to be the name of the lands under the Saijo-han samurai clan. 1871 sees the abolition of the feudal clan system and the introduction of the current prefectural system (*haihan-chiken*: literally "abolish clans, place prefectures"), see Umegaki 1986.

Because of the household's, at first analysis, manifest patrilineal and patrilocal ideology, its anthropological analysis has used descent theory as its main framework. This is unsurprising given that descent theory dominated the study of social organisation after the war (Kuper 1982). The theory, formulated in the African context by Evans-Pritchard and Fortes (Fortes and Evans-Pritchard 1940; Evans-Pritchard 1940, 1951; Fortes 1945, 1953), saw patrilineal tribes fragmenting and coming together in the face of external threat. One of the first forays outside the African context, and pointedly in East Asia, is Freedman's analysis of the lineage system in southeastern China (1958; 1966). The southeastern system (and Freedman is the first to see diverse phenomena in the region to do with land, ancestors, agnatic village organisation, etc. as a unitary "system") does not emerge – like the "stateless" models of Evans-Pritchard and Fortes – from decentralised political control. Instead the dynamics of kinship organisation and centralised political control – importantly for later Japanese applications - coexist and reinforce each other, especially through the double-faced figure of the scholar-official juggling the needs of both lineage and state.

While the later application of lineage theory to Melanesia will eventually bring about its downfall (Kuper 1988: 190-209), descent theory comes to be, among both Japanese ethnologists and Western anthropologists, the agreed model for the Japanese family.¹²⁵ Although regional diversity in kinship patterns was acknowledged, the general assumption was that the *ie* structure was indeed at the core of Japanese kinship and that it was, generally, patrilineal. Furthermore, it was assumed that such system had

125 For Japanese works on the unilineal *ie* see e.g. Kitano 2004; Ch.4 of Ryang 2004; for Western works before the occupation see Embree 1939, after the occupation Norbeck 1954; Beardsley et al. 1959; Johnson 1964.

been in place for a long time in Japanese history and that modernisation, which post-war writers such as Norbeck (1954) put at the centre of their ethnographic concerns, was threatening to make it disappear.

When Lewis Henry Morgan compiled his monumental “atlas” of kinship systems (1870) he classified Japanese kinship terminology as a bilateral Eskimo type; a joint family system that places no difference between maternal and paternal kin.¹²⁶ While terminology and structure are not the same thing, the fact that an allegedly strongly unilineal system would work through a fully bilateral categorisation should raise a few alarm bells. In fact soon bilateral patterns start cropping up all over Japan, casting a shadow over the appropriateness of the descent model.

The problem of the presence of bilateral extensions to the unilineal descent group is not new to Japan. Indeed Evans-Pritchard (1940; and especially 1951) had already struggled with fitting into his model these “awkward appendages” (McKinnon 2000): modes of affiliation that were far from patrilineal or patrilocal. Harumi Befu (2004 [1963]), one of the most prolific anthropologists of Japan of the post-war period, despite being one of the proponents of the unilateral *ie*, tries to explain these “appendages” by depicting an emerging dual system. Despite the strong patrilineal emphasis, one can after the war find the presence of a “personal kindred” (cf. Freeman 1961), a kin group constituted by both bilateral and fictive links across households whose patterns of cooperation are visible in economic and emergency situations. Despite attempts to keep patrilineal descent at the centre of the Japanese family, many scholars see the establishment of the bilateral nuclear family as a successful post-war adaption rising from the ashes of the disappearing *ie* (e.g. Blood 1967; Kumagai 1987).

¹²⁶ Almost century later both Murdock (1949) and Lowie (1928; 1948) will reaffirm the Eskimo typology in regard to Japanese family structure.

The issue became just how “endangered” the traditional *ie* might be, if not already extinct.

While Lévi-Strauss does include feudal Japan in his examples of house societies, the concept of the House enters the debate on the structure of Japanese kinship only marginally, if at all.¹²⁷ Nonetheless, the House-model does appear to solve some of the hurdles in the classification of Japanese kinship. One of the main problems in classifying the *ie* within pre-existing kinship classification is the presence of these awkward appendages – the establishment of kinship ties beyond the bounds of the patrilineal lineage. While bilaterality can – and has been – explained as a pattern emerging from the promotion of the nuclear family in the post-war period, one finds the presence of non-blood kins within the patrilineage at least since the Meiji civil code, which suggests that descent might not be the prime principle at work. While in contemporary Japan blood is undoubtedly a strong symbolic attractor bringing together notions of national-cultural identity, biology and kinship (Robertson 2002a, 2012) when one looks at the patterns of succession and inheritance – “the axis of the structure of the *ie*” (Nakane 1967: 2) – there is clearly more going on.

One of the central features and innovations of the House as a kinship category is the moving away from an ego-centred analysis – which in Boas' and the Japanese case ended up bogged down in the paradox of the coexistence of unilineal descent, bilaterality and non-kin affiliations – towards one that puts the group and not the person at the centre. This analysis sees the House as a corporate entity – a “moral person” (Gillespie 2000: 24) – owning land, herloom and a building. Succession in the

¹²⁷ Waterson 1990 and 2000 uses the *ie* as a paradigmatic example of the House while Shimizu 1991 makes a case for *not* using the concept of house in regards to it.

House can then be understood as entering an “office” or “position” in the domestic group. Relations within the *ie* are as well better understood as a set of positions instead of kin-relations (Kitaoji 1971; Bachnik 1983).¹²⁸ In any generation the positions are two: the Husband and Wife.¹²⁹ Both positions come with a series of gender-based duties and tasks such as managing the family assets for one and cleaning and maintaining the house and the family grave for the other. The most important task of the married couple is the production of an heir. In the *ie* succession flows down the patrilineage; the first male son (*chonnan*) inherits responsibility for the *ie* upon marrying¹³⁰ together with the headship position that was his father's and, before 1947, the material possessions.¹³¹ As we have seen already the daughters will marry out and join their spouse's family while the younger brothers will move out and establish their own family outside the main household. While this blood-based descent is the favoured mode of succession there are plenty of occasions where the primogeniture rule does not apply and other practices are followed: succession by other sons, by the eldest daughter, by non-kin outsiders.

Primogeniture is not essential, as it were, but positional – the status of first-born heir shift downwards to the younger sibling in case the original heir should die without producing a male son himself. The death of the eldest son of the main lineage at the end of the last section was one of these occasions. In the same way should there not be

128 It is interesting to note that both, before Lévi-Strauss' work on the House as corporate group, characterised the move from kin-relations to positions as “sociocentric” (Kitaoji 1971) and “group-centred” (Bachnik 1982).

129 Alternatively, the household being multi-generational, one can see the previous and future holders as positions themselves – grandfathers and grandmothers, sons and daughters.

130 It has been often remarked how, to be a full-fledged social being (*ichininmae no otoko/shakaijin*), a man has to marry (Edwards 1989: 124-9; Hamabata 1990: 129; Hendry 2011: 206-7) while a woman must also have a son (Lebra 1984: 87-100; cf. Kondo 1992).

131 Before 1947 the heir inherited the entirety of the family asset.

younger sons the eldest daughter takes on the headship of the *ie* and her husband will be required to join the family. Adoption (*yoshi*) has been a widely accepted practice from at least the sixth century and has been common up to today (Norbeck 1954, Beardsley, Hall & Ward 1959, Pelzel 1967, Moore 1970, Bachnik 1983; Hendry 2011: 97-107). Adoption overwhelming happens at the time of marriage - the adopted is usually an adult male either marrying into the family or being adopted in order to marry and continue the line (Matsumoto 2004).

The House provides an important shift in emphasis – from ego to group – together with the importance of architecture and material culture which, as we shall see soon, is an important theme in the *ie*. However, the model accounts for many of the problems that prevented the placement of the *ie* in one model or another, categorising the *ie* as House does not solve the matter. With a shift in emphasis new problems come to light. The house “solves” the problem of bilaterality vs patrilinearity while leaving another tension, one between ego-centred kinship, the individual and their affects, and a group centred one. The tension is not only a feature of past anthropological analyses but, I argue below, a feature of the *ie* itself; a tension that is never resolved and yet the foundational dialectic upon which the continuity of the household is predicated.

* * *

Kinship as "Problem": Tombs and Their Migrations

One of the merits of the shift in focus from individual to corporate group is the renewed investment in understanding the role that material culture plays in the household (Carsten & Hugh-Jones 1995). The corporate group owns the material house, the land and the family heirlooms, and the person who inherits them has a duty to preserve and look after these material possessions. The symbolic House and the material house are one and their preservation is the main responsibility of the people holding positions in the household. This emphasis on conservation, however, gives the House a static and essentialist character. The House "offers people a kind of immortality" (Waterson 2000) – while people change the immaterial House itself is eternal and by entering the House they partake in a different scale of time.

In their comparative work on the symbolism and morality of money Bloch and Parry (1989) propose that exchange often relies on two distinct but related transactional orders – a long-term cycle corresponding to the transcendent social order and a short-term one to do with the life of the individual. In the House these transactional orders seem to be central to understanding the relationship between people and the transcendental positions they hold. On the one hand individuals have their own prerogatives, interests and desires, while on the other they need to abide by the overarching desire of the House to be preserved and reproduced. The *ie* is ideally eternal although the only household who maintained an unbroken lineage from mythical times to the present day is, allegedly, the imperial family. The household can, in theory, exist without a presence in the material world: lineages can disappear and be revived later on in virtue of their immaterial permanence.

This stress on conservation is very much a feature of Lévi-Strauss' understanding of the House and it puts the short-term order of the individual at the service of the transcendental one of the House. In other words it values the long-term cycle of the household over the short-term one, putting the short-term actions of the individual fully at the service of the corporate group.

In these section I want to argue two things. The first is that the split between an ego-centred and a group-centred approach to kinship is not only a feature of anthropological analysis – as in the section above – *but a feature of the House itself*, or at least of the Japanese household. The *ie* already contains a tension between the individuals and their affects on the one hand, and a transcendental and eternal dimension to do with the ancestors and the group on the other. The second point is that once we look at the material culture of the household we do not find houses and heirlooms as symbols of stability and permanence – instead we find constant movement, destruction, and reassembling. The group centred approach falls short of understanding these movements which lie at the intersection of both individual and group dimensions This intersection is what the rest of the chapter will go on to explore.

The first point can be clearly understood by looking at family tombs, the objects that perhaps more clearly express the intersection between the two orders in the *ie*. In discussions about ancestor worship (e.g Plath 1964; Smith 1974; Ooms 1976; Hamabata 1990; Kawano 2003) it is often stressed how the dead have an enduring role in the household. Ancestors are permanently enshrined in the family altar (*butsudan*) and in the grave (*haka*); they continue to maintain a bond with the living by receiving regular offerings, visits and greetings together with gratitude and wishes for the well-being of

the members of the household. From a ego-centred point of view the positions in the household are only two but from a group-centred one there are many: the string of Husband/Wife couples that fulfilled the positions through time is also counted as having full membership and it is in this sense the dead are actively part of the household (Nakane 1967, Shimizu 1991).



8., 9. – A stone (*kuhi*) carved with an haiku written by Kisumu's father, resting in the shades of a pine and a hackberry tree. The stone was erected for Kisumu's father's *beiju*, celebrations of longevity held on one's 88th birthday, in the garden of the ancestral home. The symbolic importance of the trees in the ancestral landscape is reflected in Kisumu's father's choice of a pen-name (*haigō*) for his haiku writing after the return to the *honke*'s residence. The characters for *enoki* (Japanese Hackberry tree) and pine tree, the two most eminent trees on the old map, form his pseudonym: *Kashō*.

Again it is the flora of the ancestral landscape that opens the haiku on the stone:

Daffodils	<i>suisenya</i>
for my homecoming	<i>kikyō no ware ni</i>
elder brother's house	<i>oni no ie</i>

The daffodils fulfil the formal role of *kigo*, the seasonal word used in haiku and other traditional forms of Japanese poetry. As a winter-blooming flower, the daffodil indicates that the homecoming has happened in winter. The flowers however also fulfil a symbolic role; syntactically the daffodils seem to be blooming for the writer's homecoming, as if to welcome him home.¹³² The elder brother's house at the end is probably being juxtaposed with the flowers: one being an escape from the destruction of war, and the other blooming in the dead of winter, they fulfil a similar function in the writer's mind.¹³³ The haiku was written in the winter of 1945, after *Kashō*'s return to his childhood's home. The erection of a monument in the garden to celebrate his 88th birthday is a strong symbol of the closeness of Kisumu's father's collateral line with the main household.

132 The "ni" after the "ware" suggests that something is directed towards the speaker, implying that the daffodils are somehow "for" the writer's homecoming, as a celebration or a welcoming in the folds of the ancestral land.

133 I owe this reading of the *haiku* entirely to Lindsay R. Morrison.

David Plath (1964) distinguishes between two kinds of deceased souls: the departed, who have recently died and whose names are still in the memories of the living, and the ancestors, who have died long ago and whose names are forgotten.¹³⁴ The departed are memorialised in a personal tablet (*ihai*) with their name on it (though husband and wife often share a tablet) which are placed on the family altar in the house. The ancestors, on the other hand, are too far in time and are usually memorialised in a simple general tablet.¹³⁵ The two categories represent, for Plath, two affective dimensions which map well on the temporal orders of the individual and the House. The departed are in a realm of personal affection – they and the living are full of mutual affection, they are significant others who love and care for each other. They still retain their human qualities and idiosyncrasies and are honoured at their anniversaries. The ancestors encapsulate a different affective realm, the one of the transcendental group: feelings of gratefulness and belonging reciprocated by their happiness in seeing that the line continues to prosper. In the grave both departed and ancestors co-exist and expressions of worship, piety, and affection are elicited both in a deeply personal and direct manner - like in the case of someone mourning a dead partner - and in feelings of belonging and familiarity with the household.

In a sense the grave *is* the lineage, it is the material counterpart to the immaterial household line. The grave contains all the people who filled the positions of Husband/Wife and will contain all of the Husband/Wife couples to come. If material houses in House societies are important in virtue of their symbolising the transcendental household we have, in the Japanese case, to consider the grave at least

134 See also Smith 2013: 170-203.

135 See Kawano 2005 and Irizarry 2014 for a thorough treatment of the role of memorial tablets in family rituals.

as important as the ancestral mansion. The family grave *is* a house – a house where all of the past members of the household live.¹³⁶ At the same time the grave is in the world and maintained by the current Husband-Wife pair. If they do not live in the grave, they at least have to live *with* the grave and care for it to the best of their abilities. This duty of care anchors them to a place and to their past – to a strong feeling of kinship as group. The care of the tomb brings them together with all of the people who maintained the grave before; like them, the individual is fulfilling their duty to the corporate group and, like them, they will see their ashes and bones rest underneath the gravestone. Both the faceless ancestors and one's beloved dead lie in the same place, united, together with the intimation of one's future status as a beloved dead first, and a faceless ancestor eventually.

In a brilliant analysis of succession in the *ie* Jane Bachnik in passing states that “the existence of both kinds of continuity [of the *ie*-as-corporate group and of the *ie*-as-members] in the *ie* is a problem *in* the *ie* (rather than in the researcher's model)” (Bachnik 1983: 162). The way to understand the Japanese household might not be a matter of perfecting either an ego-centred or group-centred analysis but to come to terms with the fact that individual and group scales are both present in the household and their simultaneous co-existence presents itself, at times, as “problem”. The grave, for example, clearly shows that these two dimensions do exist concomitantly in the household. Bachnik paper focuses on the “event” of succession in order to understand how primogeniture, marriage and adoption form a unitary system based on practical solutions. Here I chose to look at more dilated time-scale: how the maintenance of graves and heirlooms in time brings these two dimensions, if not necessarily head-to-

136 From a diachronic point of view that is, from a synchronic one the grave is an archive.

head, to a slow grind against each other. In other words, I look at the social dramas (*sensu* Turner 1957)¹³⁷ that these tombs engender not in their sudden appearance but, in line with a slower temporality of stone and the dead, in their slow unfolding across time. The “problem” of coexistence manifests itself in decisions fraught with anxiety and sense of duty but also empowerment and desire. The manifestation of these decisions is the movement of both people and tombs away from the ancestral soil and back. The narration which follows is an attempt to bring the individual scale back into play by showing that these movements are best understood not under the rubric of a group-centred approach – as only attempts at conservation – but as manifestations and temporary solutions to the coexistence of both group and individual continuity in the *ie*.

*

The post-war period has seen families moving away from the ancestral lands that contain the family grave to settle in the main regional or national urban agglomerates. These historical circumstances often create a situation whereby the “carers” of the grave and the grave itself are separated by thousands of miles thus creating dramas of duty where one's obligation to look after the family tomb clashes with one's desires and practical concerns. For someone who moved to Tokyo from as far as Shikoku having to care for a grave a thousand miles away is a considerable inconvenience and, although the monks of the Buddhist temple that houses the graveyard do take on most of the cleaning duties for the family, people increasingly choose to move the grave close to their residence instead of remaining close to the *furusato*.

137 Aptly, here Turner argues that social dramas arise from conflicts that are *inherent* in society.

Kisumu's older brother – whom we left having just returned home from the war – found himself forced to do just that and so did other members of the family slowly moving away from Niihama. Already past the prime age for marriage, uprooted from the place he grew up in and living in the stables with his entire family; returning to a normal life after the war must have been hard. He was not a desirable candidate for marriage in the local families. He was already ageing, without a clear career because of the years spent as a soldier and without an inheritance because of his father's losses to American B-29 bombers. Besides, having grown up in Kobe he found himself quite isolated without his childhood friends. And even if he found a wife.. could he have possibly brought her to live in the cramped stables with three brothers and his parents?

The poverty of the Takahashi branch families at this point of time is very much a symptom of the war; on top of the economic losses of the war the new land reform dispossessed landlords from agricultural land and redistributed it. Kisumu's grandfather was a land-owner (*jinushi*). Before the war most of his land were cultivated by tenant farmers (*kosakunin*) who would pay the landlord in a percentage of their rice production. As part of the post-war agricultural reform (*nōchikaikaku*) imposed by the occupation government, the tenant farmers were made owners of the plot of land they cultivated hence revolutionising the social structure of the Japanese countryside and leaving land-owning families, including the Takahashi, much poorer than they had been before.¹³⁸ Thanks to the importance of the main line eventually a suitable candidate for marriage was found, their first meeting arranged by a matchmaker

138 On the land reform see Takigawa 1972 and Dore 2012.

(*nakōdo*), and the marriage planned. The problem of residence was solved by agreeing that the Takahashi's eldest would go and live with his in-laws – in a reversal of the traditional marriage arrangement where the bride joins her spouse's family – and manage their mandarin farm.¹³⁹ A few years after his father died he decided to move the family grave away from Niihama and westward to Matsuyama where he lived with his in-laws.

¹³⁹ Note that this is a “deviant” pattern in the general *ie* structure and not a regional variation.



10, 11 – Two pictures of Kisumu's father's "new" grave in Matsuyama. The first is a picture of the grave alone taken by Kisumu on a family trip in 1991. The grave is well tended, many flowers adorn it and a *sotōba* rests next to it.¹⁴⁰ The next is a picture of the same grave five years later, at the memorial service (*hōji*) for the 13th anniversary of their father's death. It is mid-August and there is not a cloud in the sky. In the sweltering heat of the Japanese summer Kisumu's eldest brother, by now in his eighties, stand to the side of his first-born watching him laying incense in front of the grave. On the other side a Buddhist priest directs the service and in the background one can see the other two brothers.

¹⁴⁰ The offertory wooden strips which are normally placed next to the grave and are inscribed with sutra and the posthumous name of the deceased.

“Moving” the grave means building a new one in a different graveyard, moving the bones and ashes to the new location and leaving the old one behind. While it was practical concerns that led Kisumu's elder brother to build a new tomb for his household, he could not bring himself to give up the one built by his father. The tomb in Niihama symbolised too much – after Kisumu's uncle welcomed their family back the two households were intimately linked, and the ancestral mansion in Niihama an important place for Kashō's children. The grave in Niihama remained empty, while the new grave in Matsuyama will come to host the future of his father's line.

The next in Kashō's line is Kisumu's cousin, who we see leading the memorial rites in the picture above. Kisumu says that after that day in the summer of '96 himself and one of his brothers spoke about the possibility of the demise of their father's line – his cousin was getting old and still without heir. Today Kisumu acknowledges it as a real possibility: his cousin is in his seventies, without an heir and not considering adoption.

For this reason Kisumu, almost 80 year old, has been stalling the building of his own grave in Tokyo and is considering “moving into” the empty grave in Niihama. His older brothers are all already dead and buried elsewhere, apart from one who had already built his own grave in Osaka when his wife passed. Kisumu's children have lived in Tokyo all their life and it makes sense for Kisumu and his wife to place their family grave in the metropolis. Their childhood memories and most probably their future children will be in Tokyo making it the most pertinent place for it. The souls of Kisumu's and his future line would also benefit from the vicinity of the living kin for

the prayers and offerings of the living nourish the dead. Moving his remains to Niihama puts his own heir in a difficult position – thousands of mile away from his father's grave in a place where he has never himself lived. On the other hand, it makes sense that his soul should rest in the ancestral lands and, if his father's lineage is to disappear with Kisumu's cousin, then moving into the empty grave creates a continuity, if only symbolic, for his father's line through himself. Kisumu is still considering all these things and is yet to build is grave.



12, 13, 14. These are all from the same occasion. In the first picture Kashō's first- and third-born walk towards the camera on their way to the graveyard. In the second picture the priest, Kisumu's eldest brother and his first-born kneel in front of the *butsudan* – the Buddhist ancestral house altar, while the rest of the family sits behind them. They are at the elder brother's house in Matsuyama: incense burns in front of the ancestral altar and to its right one can see a huge scroll hanging from the ceiling that contains the stamps of the 88 temples of the Shikoku pilgrimage (*hachijūhakkashō*).¹⁴¹ The third is a family picture taken after the service, the whole of Kashō's lineage poses in front of a table laden with food and alcohol.

¹⁴¹ The scroll is complete meaning that Kisumu's elder brother has done the whole pilgrimage. Kisumu himself has visited 22 of the 88 temples of the pilgrimage and possesses an incomplete scroll at his house.

As we have seen the continuation and preservation of the household is indeed a concern of the people within it. These objects become symbols of permanence and their enduring a mirror of the immaterial social structure of the household. The grave is in a sense the immaterial household itself and embodies its transcendental dimension. The emphasis on conservation in the treatment of house societies is very much a feature of Lévi-Strauss' analysis who frames the house as a static crystallisation of conflicting processes and unstable relations. Later works have tried to loosen the stress in conservation by showing how the House itself can be processual – a constant work in progress. This process is mirrored by the material objects themselves who are not static but at times rebuilt and moved together with the people who inhabit them. Bloch (1995) for example has shown how the Zafimaniry house in Madagascar solidifies and matures with the people who inhabit them and Errington (1989) how houses are sometimes very flimsy and far from projecting an image of permanence.

Like the graves of the *ie*, material houses move as well. Ivanoff (1987, 1999) has argued for the boat-communities of the Moken sea nomads in Thailand to be considered house societies in virtue of their – like Japanese families at *bon* – return to their island of origin to perform rituals, and Cededercreutz (2013) has proposed the same for the boats of Bogo fishermen in North Sulawesi. The move away from the House as a classificatory type and the attention to the dynamic everyday dimensions of the house has allowed the concept of house society to survive and expand to accommodate society as different as nomadic sea dwellers, the houses of feudal Europe and Middle-eastern Bronze Age societies.

However many of these processual approaches to the House end up seeing the everyday activities of the members of the house as a mirror of the wider processes of societal and group regeneration and conservation going on on the long-term scale of the group. Recombining houses mirror processes of marriage and alliance, processes of social and biological reproduction that ultimately keep the House going. The mirroring of the transcendental and material house implies an harmony between the two dimensions - one where everyday activities feed and maintain the bigger transcendental whole. This is partially to do with the type of analysis that the House elicits in placing the group at the centre of processes of kinship. However if it is true that in the *ie* the coexistence of both group and individual prerogatives - what Bachnik calls "continuities" - is indeed a problem, it becomes clear that attention must be paid not only to the way in which the latter serves the former - how people maintain the house - but to all of the times in which there is no clear answer as to how the continuity of both house and individual might be pursued.

The eldest brother's decision to move the grave was explicitly out of a sense of duty; moving the grave closer made it easier to look after it. Despite the fact that to some people in the family that move seemed motivated but more than duty - desire to move away from a painful past, to start again - the grave is still well looked after. Because of that decision, Kisumu is torn between duty to the corporate group - stepping in to fill a void left by his brother, and his children to symbolically fill the void that his cousin will leave behind by not producing an heir - and practical considerations for his immediate family. At the same time the main lineage - which in its 400-year-old history is the one who is supposed to most embody stability and continuity - had been

going through similar trials.

The heir of the main Takahashi lineage today is Kisumu's nephew, his uncle's grandson. Because of the changes in inheritance law brought by American occupation he did not inherit the ancestral home for himself. Instead, because of the new law of equal inheritance, he found himself having shared possession of it with his two younger brothers. By the time their father died the three brothers had moved away from Shikoku to study in university and later marry and work in big companies. Living and working in three of the largest cities in Japan on the cusp of the millennium they found themselves not knowing what to do with an old house far away in the countryside. A few years after their father's death they decided to sell it. Even if they wanted to, they couldn't have lived in a small town in Shikoku and found work, their lives were the ones of the metropolitan middle class and the joint ownership of a decaying mansion only a burden.

While the conservation of the family is clearly a concern in the Takahashi households, there is rarely a straightforward way in which the household might be maintained. In all these examples there is not a clear conflict between duty and desire, between the will of the group versus the will of the person. Instead, people find themselves with no clear path towards one or the other – at a difficult junction in which the convergence of corporate group and the individual's immediate prerogatives exists as a problem with no immediate solution. The “problem” expresses itself the most in moments of indistinction in which personal and group continuity are not clearly mapped on a course of action, in which one cannot easily follow pre-established paths. Joint-ownership, migrations to cities – these historical demands precipitate the problem of

group/individual coexistence in a confusion between the ways one might go about choosing one over the other.

In what follows I try to salvage something from that contradictory ego-centred analysis that we left stuck in a conundrum between horizontal and vertical kins. Once again that tension is, like the one between group and individual, a tension within the *ie* – the tension between a vertical system that pulls kin apart and the individuals' effort to assert horizontal kin-ties and pull these divergent lines closer to each other. While there is no solution to the “problem” of the *ie* – a vertical genealogical model that presents itself as a transcendent corporate group on the one hand, and an horizontal constant process of creating kinship on the other – the material culture of the household become “anchors” that tie together people's histories and hence create kinship ties.

* * *

Objects, Kinship and Memory

“They sold the house!” When the three siblings sold the ancestral home Kisumu received a letter from his cousin informing him of the event. He had heard already, gossip moves amongst the branch families like a swarm. Her and Kisumu grew up together, and his father acted as her match-maker helping her to find a husband. In the letter, she expressed her deep sorrow and shock at the news. The garden where they both played as kids, where generations of Takahashi children played near the shrines in the shadows of the pines and hackberry trees, was now gone.

That year the three siblings do not show up at the annual meeting where cousins from all the branches of the Takahashi family meet and drink together (*itoko-kai*). All that was talked about was the house. The memories. Pangs of pain between sentences. A few years later, in 2006, Kisumu travels down to Shikoku for *bon* and, after visiting his father's grave in Matsuyama and his wife's family grave in Niihama, he walks to the ancestral grounds and takes the pictures below. The grounds are now a car-park containing a convenience store. All that is left in Niihama of the Takahashi family are two graves and some names carved behind the moss on a shrine's wall. The other branch families have been slowly moving out of Shikoku after the war, most taking their dead and their graves with them. On that 2006 trip Kisumu had also gone to the tomb of the main lineage, cleaned it, burnt incense, put fresh flowers on it. He wonders if the current head of the main line will move the tomb to Hiroshima where he lives and nothing will be left of the Takahashi family in Niihama but the empty tomb that might become his own.



15, 16. The house in 2006, now a car-park. Inside the car-park there is a convenience store, on its side a provincial road lined with big retail stores and newly built housing units. It's a scene from any Japanese suburb, a few car passing by on the big road and nobody walking past. Underneath one of the pictures of the car park Kisumu has scribbled: site of the former ancestral residence (*honke atochi*).



17. The grave of the main Takahashi line (*honke*) in 2006. The grave itself is about 150 years old, Kisumu is not sure why it has been moved or rebuilt in the 400 years the lineage has been on these lands. The grave is clean and fresh flowers have been placed in front of it.

In the story of Kisumu's family we have seen the slow dissolution of the material objects that anchor the Takahashi extended household into the ancestral land. However, we have also seen the striking presence that these objects have in the history of the family and the way their presence impact on the lives of its members. In all the pictures that Kisumu showed me one can always see one of these objects in the background – a family altar, a tree of the ancestral garden, a grave, a memorial stone. In line with Alfred Gell's (1998) insistence on the agency of things – and with Kathleen Stewards' maxim that agency, being “strange, twisted, caught up in things, passive, or exhausted” (Stewart 2007: 86), pertains to things as much as people - these objects are central agents in the process of asserting kinship. While centrifugal historical forces

bring the family away from the symbolic centre of the ancestral land these objects exert an opposing centripetal force that attracts people to them. They become centres of gravity around which the extended family can gather – tombs, altars and memorial stones are the pivots around which the different households can come together and assert their unity. While these material possessions move away from each other, people move towards them to assert their bonds as kinds and their unity as household. Travelling to tombs, houses and memorials is not only circumscribed to family occasions – people also visit them independently to take pictures with them and display them in their houses. These trips inscribe people into the history of the family – they bring that history to life and assert one's inclusion in it.

In the first pages of one of the most famous anthropological texts about the structure of Japanese society Chie Nakane (1970) quotes a Japanese saying that encapsulates much of her theory and it well represents the structural weakening of kinship-ties with time - “the sibling is the beginning of the stranger” (Nakane 1970: 6). Looking back at the diagrams in Figure 5 one can easily understand why. A married sibling will go and live in a different household and, within a few generations, the distance between two household lines will be huge. Nakane stresses that a married sibling is “a kind of outsider”, obligations to each other are limited to the seasonal exchange of greetings and attendance to funeral and wedding ceremonies. The distance between the siblings might be so big as to leave no common ground; “the elder brother might be major, while the younger is a postman in the same city; or a brother might be a lawyer or businessman, while his widowed sister works as a domestic servant in another household” (ibid.). While the absence of horizontal ties has been widely disputed by the narrative so far, what we can take from Nakane here is the fact that in

the *ie* there is a structural principle of fragmentation that, generation after generation, pushes households apart from each other. Vertical lines run away from each other: every sibling will form a different household with a different tomb and so will their children, households moving further and further away.

While the *ie*'s material culture embodies and pertains to the vertical lines (e.g. one tomb per household, mansion representing the main line) they also act as catalysts for these horizontal relationships between households. The meetings between the horizontal members of the extended household – as opposed to the vertical lines; e.g. sibling and bilateral kin – happen always near to one of these objects: around the tomb – like in the pictures in the last section – around the family altar in the house of the heir of the household line, or before the sale in the ancestral mansion. While processual models of kinship dispute the fact that kinship is necessarily something given – showing how it is instead sometimes constructed and in flux – in the *ie* we find something given indeed. What is given in the *ie* is a place in the vertical genealogical model that slowly pulls household lines further and further from each other. This model of genealogical descent is always a concern for the family members and presents an essentialised household line with the characters of transcendence and eternity. However despite the structural tendency towards fragmentation people constantly pull these divergent family lines closer to each other and tie them together in shared histories and narratives in acts of “making” of kinship.



18, 19 - A picture of Kisumu and his first-born son in 1990 posing in front of Kashō's (empty) grave in Niihama. Kisumu looks young and his son still has a boyishness to him though he must be in his late twenties then. They pose stiffly in front of the grave, Kisumu with his arms rigid along his body while his son holding his hands together behind his back. The next picture is of the grave alone, fifteen years later. Although the grave is clean and cared for there are no flowers and no *sotōba*.



20, 21 - The stone wall at Urado shrine in Niihama, whose parish encompasses the Takahashi land, carved in it the names of Kisumu's father and uncle. In the next picture Kisumu and his son pose in front of the Shrine on the same 1990 trip to Shikoku. This time their posture is much more natural and informal, Kisumu's son smoking a cigarette with his shoulders relaxed and his feet far apart.

These objects are the focus of this work of kinship. While the lineage does Nakane's vertical work, these objects are the centres of gravity of the horizontal glue that binds households together. The closeness of Kisumu's father's and uncle's line is crystallised in the memorial *haiku* in the ancestral garden in one way, and by Kisumu's father's decision to place his grave next to the *honke's* one in another. The construction and placing of these objects elicits processes of horizontal kinship by which Kisumu's father children will tend to the ancestral grave together with their father's and, vice versa, the main line's members will place flowers and incense at his father's grave. The haiku in the garden asserts horizontal bonds and becomes part of the history of the main line. For example, in the article on the household shrines we saw in the last chapter Kashō and his poems are treated as a constitutive part of its history. These objects act as knots between the vertical lines, horizontal entanglements that implicate people in each other's histories and households.

There is of course a deep involvement between personal histories and kinship. Michael Lambek (1996, 2002, 2007) has argued that remembering is a moral act, it is the rediscovery of the obligations of kinship and the affirmation of a social relationship in deep temporality. Inscribing one's history into another's creates relationships of care – of caring for, taking care, caring about; relationships both protective and vulnerable. Rebecca Empson (2007) has shown the importance of material objects such as photographic montages and tapestries in creating narratives and thus configuring kinship at distance. The caring of distant family graves is just an example of how one might come to be entangled in the histories of other households.

There is one more actor that has been central to the chapter but somehow unacknowledged – photography. These inscriptions into family histories do not only happen at gatherings but they are also sought by individuals in their own time. People travel from the urban centres to these objects to see them, take care of them, and more importantly take pictures of and with them. In the pictures in this section we can see Kisumu and his family posing in front of a number of tombs, in the garden of the ancestral mansion, at the shrine where the family has worshipped for generations. These pictures capture horizontal entanglements between the vertical lines – Kisumu's and the main line, Kisumu and his father's line. These entanglements are materialised into pictures and then exhibited in people's houses. They are meta-objects, one might say, that cement relations between people and objects, and hence between people and households. Each picture enshrines a relation but also a moment in time and a story. If one slowly comes to learn the history of the Takahashi family through Kisumu's pictures that is because the history of the Takahashi line is the same as Kisumu's history, despite his own lineage being twice removed from the main line.¹⁴²

¹⁴² Pictures are here eminently themselves material objects (cf. Edwards 2002; Edwards and Hart 2004) – they are placed in people's houses and, like graves and their movements, embody both historical events and dimensions of kinship. Saying that they are “meta-object” is then not in a way accurate, they are on the same level as the material culture of the house and as such are here understood through their embodied engagement with an affective world of social relations (cf. Barthes 1981; Edwards 2012).



22, 23. February 1994. In the first picture a much younger Kisumu poses in front of the gate of the ancestral residence. In the other picture Kisumu's wife poses amongst the early flowering bushes of the garden, smiling to the camera. Behind both, the roof of the mansion can be seen.

However, objects do not only do the “glueing” work of horizontal kinship, but also the dividing work of the vertical lineage. In the previous section we have seen these objects doing a very different work – their presence being agents of conflict between individual and corporate scale. By being in relations with these objects people experience conflict between the demands of the household and the demands of their immediate affects, for example in the controversial decision to sell the ancestral home or in Kisumu's indecision over where to place his own grave. Objects put siblings and cousins against each other – placing people between diverging lines (e.g. in Kisumu's choice of grave, or the sibling's sale of the house) and demanding a choice. The whole of the last section has shown how objects are not only a solution to the problem of diverging lineages – like we have seen in this section so far – but *also the problem itself*. Kinship - as Veena Das (1995a), Michael Peletz (2000) and Michael Lambek (2011) have highlighted – carries often not only warmth and intimacy, but also ambivalent or negative qualities.

Every movement is both the root of and the solution to a problem. Should Kisumu decide to put his bones in his father's grave, solving the problem of its emptiness and continuity on ancestral soil, he would leave another problem to his own heirs. His eldest brother's decision to move the grave to Matsuyama is, like his own move to the in-laws' house, a practical solution to a problem raised by the harsh historical circumstances but it ripples outwards creating problems for his siblings' households – problems which will converge onto the last-born Kisumu. Importantly we have seen in the last section how in some of these problematic conjunctures one cannot simply ascribe problem to the paradigmatic conflict between (group) duty and (personal) desire. In fact, one often cannot tell what is duty and what desire – group and

individual scale, the corporate and ego dimension of kinship, are blurred creating confusion over which course of action would satisfy which demands. This confusion, or rather blurring, mirrors – or is elicited by – a logic of blurring that is already part of the *ie* and of which these objects are the nexus.

Tim Ingold (2007, 2015) has famously brought attention to the ways in which life-worlds proceed along lines and are woven from knots. The material culture of the household is the knots where all the lines of kin converge, merge and diverge. In these objects embody both the work of knotting and binding of horizontal kinship that we have seen Kisumu's kin frantically doing throughout this chapter, and the diverging structure of the *ie*. They embody both the abstract corporate group and the individual's kin-ties. They are both knots and crossroads – they are nexuses of, both, coming together and splitting apart where, as we have seen, the two are indistinguishable. Every solution births a problem and every problem born of a solution. In this blurring one cannot map duty and desire over horizontal or vertical bonds, group and individual: these binaries are so indistinguishable that one cannot bring those considerations to bear in the decisions about the objects. What is important is that these objects are given a lot of attention, they are visited often and cared for with pride and love, but this is also because they *demand* attention – they cannot be ignored, they scream for attention, they make engaging with the process of kinship something unavoidable.

In these objects one finds a blurring of binaries – a given vertical lineage structure, timeless and eternal, essentialised and heralded as the “Japanese household” by both state and ethnographers, but also a fluid horizontal work of kinship which is always

made and highly intermingled with the history and circumstances of individuals. This blurring creates a dialectic of harmony and conflict, stability and instability, immutability and change where the two sides of the binary are indistinguishable. The Takahashi main line, in its essentialised eternal form, has survived the rocky last century *because* it has changed and it all the changes made by its main and collateral members where made so that it could remain eternal. Every movement is the harbinger of rupture and change, while at the same time securing continuity. The long-term and the short-term, the group and the individual, the vertical and the horizontal, are all knotted around these objects which record and embody both history and anti-history, immutability and change.

* * *

Conclusion

In this chapter I started by delineating a double split – between vertical and horizontal bonds and, through the House, between group and individual dimensions of kinship. Note that while Lévi-Strauss's House solved the problem of the coexistence of the principles of alliance and descent here the problem presented itself in a different guise. “Horizontal” had to do less with alliance and more with siblinghood, making the *ie* a peculiar kind of “House” in more than one sense. The argument is that the fracture is not, as in the post-war debates on Japanese kinship, a problem of analysis but rather an inherent problem in the household, a problem that manifests itself in a dialectic of stability and change that is central to it. The material culture of the household is the nexus of this dialectic. On the one hand, it allows kin to tie their histories and affects to each other pulling structurally diverging family lines together.

Here, these objects are the knots that tie these lines together, things to tie the lines to in order to keep them together. However, these objects are the very nexus of the “problem” - it is in them that the friction between the two dimensions manifests. Objects elicit “dramas of duty” which bring about their movement, creation or destruction thus creating more instances of the problem. In them, one sees the convergence of two dimensions and their blurring until indistinguishable. On the one hand the eternal dimension of the *ie* - which is given, vertical, diverging- and on the other “historical” (as in, in history and time) life of the individuals - which is always made through horizontal bonds, changing and fluid. The objects are the nexus of a logic of blurring that, by blurring these two dimensions, renders them indistinguishable - blurring duty and desire, change and stability, harmony and conflict.

I want to focus here on these last two binaries, one at the time, starting with the last (the first, to do with affect, will be addressed in Chapter 5). The binary of conflict vs. harmony is one of Benedict's paradoxical binaries in the *Chrysanthemum*. While for Benedict this binary is one of the many paradoxical co-presences in the personality of “the Japanese”, many anthropologists after her have seen one side or the other of the binary as central to Japanese society. Chie Nakane, one of the most influential anthropologists of the post-war period, sees group solidarity as the main principle of Japanese society (1970). She posits the family as the blueprint for Japanese society and, as we have seen, rigid vertical relations as its structure. For Nakane the logic of the relation between individual and group is identification: competition is between lines, inter-group, while within the group's hierarchy and ranking keep harmony and cooperation. Many anthropologists criticised this approach (e.g. Krauss et al. 1984;

Eisenstadt and Ben-Ari 1990), the most scathing critiques coming from Harumi Befu, Ross Mouer and Yoshio Sugimoto (Befu 1980, 1989a, 1989b ; Mouer and Sugimoto 1986; Sugimoto and Mouer 1989). For these latter scholars it is conflict, not identification and cooperation, that characterises group-individual relations. Through the argument in this chapter it is possible to make a case for both sides. In the nexus of material culture, both cooperation (compromise, solutions, duty) and conflict (problems rippling outwards and downwards for siblings and heirs) are central to the dynamic of the *ie*. In fact when I say that it is possible to make a case for “both” I pointedly do not mean “either” - through the logic of blurring cooperation and conflict are indistinguishable and flip into each other, in a way vindicating Benedict in her resolve to maintain the binary.

Temporality is another key player in kinship and the dialectic of change and immutability a central one to the *ie*. As Lambek (2011) pointed out, many recent kinship studies have tended to put emphasis on procreation and birth rather than other moments or processes such as marriage, death, or succession. Through the engagement with family history and long-term processes this chapter has tried to unveil a different story in the processes of kinship in Japan. These processes are punctuated and propelled by events – not only births (the forks in the family tree) but also every movement of the material culture of the household, with its consequences both vertically and horizontally. These movements, destructions, foundations are peculiar events – both vehicles of rupture (cf. Humphrey 2008) and, with thinkers such as Gluckman (1958) and Munn (1990), “vehicles of continuity” (Radu 2010: 428). These events are themselves embedded in the wider circumstances of Japanese modern history – like the war, the change in inheritance law, in land ownership –

themselves “critical events” (Das 1995b) that change the shape of the lives of people, like the Takahashi, who are caught up in them. Every event, historically embedded and particular, both disrupts continuity and, by demanding action and change, ensures it. In a dialectic between eternity and circumstance, the *ie* has to continuously change in order to stay the same.

Going back to the problem of social change at the beginning we saw a tendency to assume that modernisation entails that the traditional *ie* is giving way to the urban nuclear family. Indeed we have seen the move away from rural ancestral soil to the big urban agglomerates such as Osaka and Tokyo. Although from the 50s onwards there have been constant conservative calls to protect the traditional family (Lock 1993: 107-170), it has been pointed out that the family has been changing throughout Japanese modernity (Ueno 2009: xxii). However, “change” here does not mean demise – and half a century later we can echo Keith Brown's (1966) claim that modernisation does not have to mean that the *ie* has to disappear. Through the blurring of the two dimensions – long and short term, vertical and horizontal – the *ie* can change, beyond tradition, while at the same time remaining for people the essentialised eternal Japanese household carrying, through every beat or event, people and ancestors through the centuries and towards the future.

Kumagai Fumie (1984, 1986, 1996, 2008, 2015) has argued that, like society more in general, the family in Japan has a dual structure which encompasses both a layer of modernity and one of tradition. Kumagai's model is one where a patchwork of different elements coexists and creates the mosaic that is the Japanese family today. This chapter has somehow gone further in arguing not only that one can find these

two layers in the contemporary family, but that it is the interaction and blurring of the two that makes the family as it is lived and understood today.



CHAPTER 4:

ENCOMPASSMENT AND CULTURE CHANGE IN A SHITAMACHI CATHOLIC CHURCH

“A tree which flourishes in one kind of soil may wither if the soil is changed. As for the tree of Christianity, in a foreign country its leaves may grow thick and the buds may be rich, while in Japan the leaves wither and no bud appears. Father, have you never thought of the difference in the soil, the difference in the water?”

- Endō Shūsaku
- *Silence (Chinmoku)*

Introduction

The last two chapters have taken some of the paradigmatic nexuses of Japanese essentialism and found that, together with a predictable essentialism that casts them as timeless and authentic, one can find the very opposite, an emphasis on change and hybridity. In the heart of this essentialised social forms, one finds a logic of overlapping and blurring of this binary as the abiding logic upon which people's engagement with them is predicated. The family and Shinto are indeed understood as essentialised atemporal wholes, but at the same time understood in their momentous historical embedded transformation, and it is in the moments in which these two paradigms eclipse and become indistinguishable that true engagement is found. The Introduction and Chapter 1 had already set the scene and, on the strength of that work, these chapters have dived into the heart of the problem, into the heart of essentialism, in order to look at this logic ethnographically. This chapter takes a

different approach to the issue, instead of looking at one of the classic nexuses of essentialist discourses here I take a lateral approach by looking at what can be defined as a “minority culture” in order to explore that overlap between the “foreign and the “indigenous” that we have seen in the opening vignette.

This chapter is based on a continued 18 months engagement with a small Catholic community on the fringes of Tōjima. The main problem of the chapter is understanding the experience of continuity that the community feels in the face of strong narratives of rupture imposed on them by both inside and outside. “Rupture” has become, since Joel Robbins placed it at the heart of the Christian experience (2007), one of the main paradigms through which conversion to Christianity in both Western and non-Western contexts has been understood. Rupture signifies a clean break with the past that carves out two distinct parts in a person's life story: a sinful one before conversion and a righteous one after it. Robbins' understanding of “rupture” develops from his earlier work with the Urapmin in Papua New Guinea (2004), where he looked at conversion on a group-scale and framed it as part of the wider problem of culture change – the transition from “traditional” to Christian ways of life. While the Urapmin experience the coexistence of the two “cultures” in the form of intense moral torment, in my experience with the community of the Church of the Holy Family, I have found surprisingly little emphasis on experiences of guilt, torment and spiritual loss. This is particularly relevant in situations, such as the nights of heavy drinking the chapter hinges on, when people are explicitly breaking the prohibitions set on them by Christian morality while understanding their own acts as part of the Christian life. Through this paradox, I revisit Robbins' framework and try to understand the ways in which the community creates continuity in the face of

rupture.

After briefly introducing the community, the next two sections are dedicated to delineating the presence of narratives and experiences of rupture in the lives of its people. Firstly I show how, in their own stories of conversion, people feel a strong sense of continuity between their lives before and after joining the church, and between their lives as Christians and the lives of non-believers. I then move on to explore the double narrative of rupture they live in. On the one hand, the priest puts Christianity in direct opposition to many things that are considered part of everyday life in Tokyo, restricting activities that people consider normal and setting the community's lives on a different course compared to people outside the church. On the other, society outside circumscribes Christianity by classifying it as clearly foreign and different, as it is attested by the difficult histories of Christian communities in the neighbourhood. In other words I here treat Christianity and the society surrounding it as two separate "wholes" (cf. Hirsch 2008) precisely because they are indigenously conceptualised as such.

The enduring sense of continuity in the face of these narratives of rupture is explored through focusing on one particular evening, which is one of many similar experiences I had during my time with the community. Through Robbins' analysis and Dumont's notion of encompassment, I move on to try to understand these dynamics. The community, I argue, understands Christianity through an engagement that is both highly formal and highly participatory. The church and its sanctioned life only fulfils one of these two aspects of the Christian life leaving people to explore other ways through the framework of the urban society they are embedded in. Through an act of

dual-encompassment people manage to both frame their activities through Christianity and at the same through the form of sociality of urban modernity, banned by the priest. Through this double act in the haze of drunkenness, Christianity and Japanese sociality come, for the community, to overlap despite their incompatibility – making their identities as Japanese people and as Christians continuous, one and the same.

* * *

Setting the Scene: The Church of the Holy Family

The Church of the Holy Family is a small Catholic church about 10 minutes southward along the canal from my house, where the maze of alleyways of the northern part of the ward gives way to the grid system of the industrial and more modern southern part. The church building is white and built in a simple European style architecture. The building stands in a yard which is shared with the Christian school next door, and which also comprises a small community centre, the offices of the church and a single cherry tree standing in the middle of the car-park. Overall the church is unassuming, it is set apart from the road and it would be easily missed by someone walking or cycling by.

The inside is similarly unadorned in a way that, although uncommon for the usually ostentatious style of Catholic sacred design, is perhaps more in line with Japanese aesthetic sensibilities. Upon entering one is met, on the two sides of the main door, by two stoups for the holy water mounted respectively by a statue of St. Francis Xavier,

the missionary who brought Catholicism to Japan in the 16th century, and the Virgin Mary. With the exception of another statue of the Virgin at the end of one of the aisles – the focus of the community's veneration outside of mass – these are the only anthropomorphic statues in the church. Small stained glass windows follow the aisles on the two sides separated by wooden carvings of the Stations of the Cross, yet the nave is in penumbra even during a bright day. The pews are made of dark wood and so is the simple crucifix behind the altar. Overall a sober atmosphere of simplicity pervades the building which remains mostly empty during the week. The feeling of quiet emptiness persists during the daily weekly mass which is usually attended only by the same two or three people. These masses last only half an hour and if one was to pay a visit after lunch they find the church empty, only the sounds of the children playing in the school-yard disturbing the dust motes flying in the oblique light of the afternoon.

Sunday Mass is a different matter altogether. The pews are packed with well dressed elderly couples, old women with their head veiled and holding rosaries, families trying to keep their children quiet. Although the crowd is undoubtedly predominantly old – and this is partially due to the demographics of the area – I was surprised to see how many young people actually come to mass on Sunday. After mass, people spill out in the church-yard to converse and catch up on each other's lives and, for a few hours, the community hall is open for people to sit and drink tea. Most people attending church do so only on a Sunday and the time after Mass is thus an opportunity for the community to socialise. In the afternoon, when all the cars and bikes have left and the churchyard has returned to its usual stillness, the church runs a Sunday school for the children. A few people, mainly self-appointed “grannies” or “aunties” (*obachan*), help with the running of the school where the children learn Christian songs, stories

from the scriptures and play together for the rest of the afternoon. I attended Sunday school sporadically to help out, mainly helping some of the children with their English homework.

My impression is that, although the children can be counted on the fingers of two hands, the community shows a tremendous investment in the organisation of activities for them. In a way the children, together with the ritual of Mass, are at the centre of the church's life. While people in their 30s tend to be already married and with a family, the least represented demographics is people in their teens and twenties, counting only a handful who participate as altar boys and girls. One in particular is studying Christian theology at Sophia, a Jesuit university, and plans to become a priest. Despite his young age he is the chief altar boy and the main entertainer at the church's informal events, marking him as the successor of the current priest.¹⁴³

The upkeep of the church is taken care of by volunteers, a core of about ten retired people who clean, cook, and take care of the administration. The liturgical activities, on the other hand, are run entirely by the priest - whom everyone simply calls "priest" (*shimpu-sama*). I found a page in my notebooks from my early days at the church where I comment on his preaching style and demeanour - back then he seemed to me to be a "priest of the people" as opposed to a highly intellectual priest concerned with theology as I have met in Benedictine monasteries in Europe. As spurious as the distinction might be, his sermons are simple and relatable - they talk about keeping faith in hard times of loss and grief, to trust in the Lord (*kami-sama*) when things don't go the way you desire, of the love of God being reflected in the family and between co-

¹⁴³ Of course this is not how it works, and yet that is the role that the community has assigned him.

workers. When he preaches from the pulpit he talks too fast and stutters, he gets visibly nervous or excited, he turns red and waves his hands in the air. In the common room drinking tea someone once laughed - “you must not understand anything, even I often don't know what he is saying!”. Indeed I rarely catch the whole of the sermon and have to ask for a printed version to look at when I get home. After mass, the priest waits outside the door and greets the people leaving the church, as it is customary in Roman Catholicism - he inquires about their health and thanks them for coming to mass.

As we shall see in this chapter my assessment of the priest as a “priest of the people” does not resonate with the way the community conceptualises him. The priest represents prohibitions and dogma, often curbing the desires of the community by prohibiting things that people find important. The priest is for the community the very voice of Christianity and his prohibitions delineate a clear separation between the Church and the world outside. Activities that people considered normal before joining the church are suddenly prohibited: visiting Shrines, participating in local festivals, drinking to excess. People adore and respect him, and yet often actively contravene his precepts behind his back. The strict separation of Catholicism and the world outside posited by the priest does not resonate with the ways people understand themselves as Christians. The two sections delineate the main problem of the chapter. In the next section, this sense of continuity is explored by looking at people's stories of conversion. However, while it is continuity and not rupture that marks people's experiences, we shall see afterwards how rupture is still central to their experience.

* * *

Continuity and the Stories of Conversion of the Church of the Holy Family

The work of Joel Robbins especially (2007; 2010) has identified the importance of temporal ruptures for the Christian world-view and imagination. Conversion is identified as the breaking-point with the past, a divine invasion into the self that leaves everything changed – a radical juncture that spurs people to cut with the old traditions and replace them with new virtuous ways of life (e.g. Meyer 1999; Robbins 2003, 2004, 2010; Engelke 2004; Keller 2005; Keane 2007; Vilaça 2014). The scholar of religion Lewis Rambo (1993) had already come up with a similar framework with its identification of seven stages of religious conversion. While the *process* of conversion involves the totality of seven stages, the whole process pivots on “crisis” which he defines as a rupture in world-view that precipitates change. The rest is dealing with the world post-rupture through the processes of re-adjustment, reconciliation and re-interpretation that many anthropologists have studied in converted groups (e.g. Lienhardt 1982; also Kan 1991; Robbins 2004; Scott 2005; Cannell 2006; Vaté 2009; Chua 2012).

The community at the Church of the Holy Family in Tokyo, however, has very different stories of conversion that seem to emphasise not rupture but rather an unproblematic continuity that sees entering into the faith as a chapter in a continuous life-narrative. This might be due to the fact that, as it has been noted in the nascent “anthropology of Catholicism”, this tends to put – compared to Protestantism which set the agenda for the anthropology of Christianity about a decade ago - less emphasis on rupture (Brown and Feener 2017; Mayblin et al. 2017). Many anthropologists studying long-established Catholic communities have in fact highlighted the syncretic

persistence of local beliefs intertwined with the entrenched Catholic faith (e.g. Espirito Santo 2010; Mosse 2012; Espirito Santo and Tassi 2013; Henn 2014; Mayblin 2014). However Japanese Catholicism is, despite the first rooting attempts in the 16th century, a relatively new phenomenon. This is true especially in the community where most people are either second generation converts, taught the faith by converted parents, or converts themselves. This section follows some of these stories of conversion in order to show an uncharacteristic emphasis on continuity in the way the community understands the place of Catholicism in their own life.

For the vast majority of people in the community, their personal Catholic legacy does not stretch backwards for more than one generation. Many people in the community had inherited their faith from their parents or older siblings, who had themselves converted sometime after the war. In that period, I was often told, Christianity promoted itself as a religion of pacifism and love in a country traumatised by decades of aggressive nationalism and the atomic bombs that ravaged Hiroshima and Nagasaki in 1945. Christianity resonated with the new national pacifist consciousness as well as asserting its presence by investing heavily in volunteering and welfare activities (Goodman 2000: 48).¹⁴⁴ People who did convert had in most cases been at a Christian school at some point during their education. Christian schools were an aspiration of the urban middle class and the vast majority of parents who sent their children to these schools simply wanted the perceived benefits of a Western education without considering the Christian baggage that came with it. Many times conversion had been

¹⁴⁴ The sharp increase in converts in those years just after the war is sometimes called “Christian boom”. Douglas MacArthur, Supreme Commander of the Allied Powers in charge of the early occupation of Japan, allegedly promoted missionary activity from the US and oversaw the spiritual conversion of the nation (Wittner 1971). The conversion rate which had spiked in those years however dramatically shrank as soon as the national socio-economic situation stabilised.

simply a by-product of such education. Yoshida and Sasaki-san are two of such examples. Yoshida-san was sent to a Catholic kindergarten and then to Christian schools for most of his primary and secondary education:

'At that time people wanted Western life; the clothes, food, houses, movies. My mother sent me to Christian school and asked me to not believe in Jesus, only learn love and Western culture from the Christian teachers. In senior high-school (*kōkō*) I did not follow her advice.. and when she finally allowed me I got baptised'.

Others, like Sasaki-san, did not convert until much later. He was baptised in his 50s when, nostalgic about his youth, remembered fondly the times at Catholic school – the church, the bells, the songs – and developed an interest in Christianity that in a few years led them to be an active part of the church's community. Maeda-san's story is a bit different – now in his 70s he first was exposed to Christianity when his wife started to frequent church more assiduously after the birth of their first child. Her mother was Christian but she had not paid much attention to it in her youth. Later in life, when she became a housewife (*shufu*), she started to visit the local church on the way to the supermarket. Her interest in Christianity grew and she soon started to fill her time with the church's activities. Soon her husband started to attend as well, and both are today part of what constitutes the core of the church's community.¹⁴⁵

“I developed an interest” (*kyōmi wo mochimashita*) is a phrase I heard often when I asked about conversion. No intense religious experiences, hierophanies, or moral epiphanies. No conversions in time of illness, loneliness and despair. The way people

¹⁴⁵ Note that even the story of conversion of one of the key figures of Japanese Christianity – Uchimura Kanzō, the founder of the Non-Church Movement (*mukyōkai*) – is underwhelming and gradual (Ch.1 in Kanzō 1985; see also Mullins 1988).

talked about their conversion was astonishingly mundane and lacked the radical temporal and existential quality that Robbins (2007) and much anthropology on Christianity after him have seen as the core of conversion. Many anthropologists have noted how, with conversion, relations “turn inward” (Pedersen 2012) and a new moral space of interiority is created¹⁴⁶, or how relational or non-dualist notions of personhood flake apart and give way to individualism (Robbins 2003). The gradual and casual nature of the community's stories of conversion tell however a very different story – one where conversion is only a chapter in the longer and continuous trajectory of one's personal history.

For people at the church of the Holy Family conversion came as a slow process and deliberate decision. Christianity came as a flavour or an after-thought, something that was investigated in one's spare time, at the edges of the everyday. Stories of slow conversion are not unique – e.g. often in Christian monasticism, although rupture is central to the nun's or monk's experience of taking vows, looking back one can often recognise how a trail of half-hidden clues and synchronicities led them to that rupture, hence establishing a sort of continuity (e.g. Lester 2003)¹⁴⁷. The point here, however, is that baptism and conversion do not leave the person and the world any different. Although people do gain a new social circle and new routines there is a sense that things are, at a fundamental level, the same as they have ever been. Everyone I spoke to for example has very fond memories of their home-town (*furusato*), of its festivals (as we shall soon see deemed heathen rites by the priest), its

146 See Mauss (1985) and Dumont (1982) for the seminal thesis of the Christian origins of the notion of person and individual. Fundamental to this “new” converted person is then the notion of interiority where – as Foucault (1990) also pointed out in his characterization of the modern western person as a “confessing animal” – morality and selfhood dwell.

147 This is also the case in my own experience during fieldwork for my MSc dissertation on Benedictine monasticism (Farnetti 2012).

shrines (of a heathen faith) and their experiences as young women and men. The strong bonds developed in secondary education are still key relationships in people's lives: not parts of a previous life but core building blocks of an enduring sense of identity and continuity.

Fukuzawa-san for example meets every two months for dinner with two of her oldest friends. Through their youth they travelled together periodically, mainly in Japan but also Italy and France. They are somehow extraordinary people for the place and time they grew up in, three women cherishing their bond, travelling without men and having successful working lives. Every two months they get drunk at a different restaurant and look at pictures of their travels, always of them three smiling in front of a rural shrine in Kumamoto or in a restaurant in Florence. Her friends are not Christian (and, as we will see later on, their activities in the restaurant are not that Christian either) but for Fukuzawa-san these meetings are extremely important – they punctuate her time, infuse a sense of belonging and nostalgia in her life and - through pictures and memories (cf. Ch. 3) - create a sense of continuity. The time-line existing in and through those meetings and pictures has nothing to do with the time-line of her conversion; it is not a two-part narrative of before/after but a snaking continuous narrative of growth, adventure, and friendship in which her conversion only provides a background element.



24. Fukuzawa and her friends, holding a picture of themselves on holidays decades ago.

Rupture is then not a word that describes the experiences of many people in the community. Their conversion did not create a radical break with the past; personal histories are not divided into two halves with conversion as the watershed between a sinful past and a virtuous present. Instead, we find narratives of continuity that embed conversion, an often slow and subtle process, in an already existing life-narrative. However rupture is, in a different way, central to their experience insofar as they are indeed Christians frequenting a Catholic church. Both from the wider urban society surrounding it and from the heart of the church itself, the priest as its moral bastion, a rupture is imposed between these two worlds – the church on one side and modern urban Japan on the other.

* * *

Rupture in a Minority Religion

In this section I attempt to show how, although the community does not conceptualise and experience their own conversion and participation in Christianity as such, rupture is still a key element in the life of the church. A clear boundary, demarcating difference in behaviour and norms, is imposed on the community both from the inside and from the outside. The priest on one side, and the general perception of Christianity in the surrounding society on the other, clearly establish and maintain the separation between a uniform cultural frame outside and a small minority group within – thus marking the lives of the community as different and divergent.

Christianity in Tokyo today is very much a minority. On a national scale the number of Japanese people partaking in any Christian denomination amounts to less than 0.9%, of which only 0.4% is Catholic. In the Archdiocese of Tokyo the number of Catholics amounts to about 0.5% and similar numbers are seen in the surrounding diocese of Saitama and Yokohama. The demographics tend to be largely constituted by the middle class of the main urban agglomerates with the exception, albeit dwindling, of the countryside in the Nagasaki area.¹⁴⁸ As of today the numbers of Japanese Catholics have been steadily decreasing since shortly after the post-war boom (Mullins 2011) and it is mostly the influx of migrants, mainly from the Philippines and Korea, that allows the percentage to stay the same. Most churches would provide services in Tagalog, Korean and other languages along with the

¹⁴⁸ The urban and middle-class nature of Catholicism had been already noted by Spae (1965) in the 1960s and it still holds true in my experience. Although in a working-class neighbourhood, the demographics of my church were undoubtedly on the wealthier end of the neighbourhood's spectrum – many people living in the western-style blocks of flats in the south instead of the typical low houses of *shitamachi*.

Japanese Mass and church membership tends to be ethnically quite mixed.¹⁴⁹

While Shinto shrines are ever-present features of the urban landscape, the statistical imperceptibility of Christianity is visually reflected in the scenery of the city where churches are near to invisible. When I found churches or Christian communities in my neighbourhood it was always in back alleys, few and scattered, and always extremely inconspicuous. Protestant churches tend to be architecturally indistinguishable from the surrounding landscape, seamlessly blending in with the neighbouring buildings - only a few posters on a billboard indicating the nature of the place. Catholic churches are more conspicuous, and yet much rarer, and tend to either adopt simple European church architecture or adopt a much modern design in the case of the major ones such as the Cathedral of Tokyo or St. Ignatius Church at Sophia University.

This invisibility is partially reinforced from within. Andreas Bandak (2014) portrays Catholics in the Syrian city of Damascus as enacting insistent appearances in public. He shows how Damascene Christians employ visibility and repeated display as a political tactic to counteract their minority status. In Tokyo Catholicism's minority status is not as intensely politicised as in Syria and Japanese Catholics adopt behaviours that are very much the opposite: public displays are not encouraged, the only rituals (or overtly Christian meeting) I have witnessed outdoors were a section of the Mass on Palm Friday - in the church-yard - and paying respects at tombs on the day chosen as a surrogate for All Souls Day - in a graveyard.

¹⁴⁹ This is not the case at the Church of the Holy Family where Mass is always in Japanese and only a handful of non-Japanese people attend sporadically.



25. Outdoor service on Palm Sunday under the cherry tree at the Church of the Holy Family.

In its minority status the perception of Christianity in Japan today is a complex matter. It is grouped under the category of *shūkyō* – a word translatable with “religion” but that does not comprise the amalgam of Buddhist and Shinto practices that virtually everyone partakes in. As we have seen in Ch. 2 Buddhist and Shinto weddings, funerals, Shrine visits, ancestor worship, local festivals – all these fall under the wider notion of *dentō*, tradition, together with tourist vistas, kimonos, local delicacies, common architectural elements, imperial regalia, and so on. *Dentō* is inextricably connected with concepts like traditional art (*dentō geijutsu*), traditional entertainment (*dentōgeinō*) and traditional culture (*dentō bunka*) (Oedewald 2007): calligraphy, flower

arrangement, Nō theatre and *kyōgen*¹⁵⁰, *wagashi*¹⁵¹ and Shinto. A blend of syncretic elements and secular daily practices that people simply define as “part of their culture” (Martinez 2004). In other words, the Shinto and Buddhist elements that pervade the lifestyle of a Japanese person are not necessarily a religious expression, but parts of a wider life-world of signifiers that constitutes – in the collective imaginary – *being Japanese*. Foreign religions on the other hand are, in a real sense, “religions” – and they imply a certain break with that horizon of signifiers that grounds one in the culturally specific being-in-the-world of Japan. “Religion” is pointedly not tradition; it is something other.

When one says *shūkyō* the image that generally forms in people's minds is, inevitably, one of the numerous “new religions” (*shin-shūkyō* or *shinkō-shūkyō*)¹⁵² that cropped up just after the Meiji reformation and more intensely after WWII (Clarke 2000). “New religions” are viewed negatively or with suspicion, especially after the Tokyo subway sarin attacks by the group *Aum Shinrikyo* (*Oumu Shinrikyō*) in 1995.¹⁵³ Most people today see members of new religions as dangerous cultists and, fundamentally, outsiders. This is true in Tōjima where the many members of the neo-Buddhist group *Sōka Gakkai* are seen with suspicion, wariness and fear to the point that people, when talking about it, either whisper or use aliases such as “SKG” (pronounced in English).

150 Comic theatre traditionally meant to be a humorous relief between the long acts of Nō theatre.

151 Stylised confections eaten with tea.

152 Respectively “new religions” and “newly arisen religions”. The latter term came to be preferred in recent scholarship to refer to groups founded in the inter-war and post-war period.

153 The literature on Aum and the Subway Attack is extensive. See Kaplan & Marshall 1996 and Reader 2000 for two well-established overviews.

Catholicism is not a *shin-shūkyō* itself, although many groups like Jehovah's Witnesses and other modern denominations are considered Christianity-based forms of the category. Yet the denomination *shūkyō* recalls, if not the extremism of early *Sōka Gakkai* and *Aum*, a certain dissonance with Japanese society and its structures; with the family, its beats of inheritance, marriage, burial and so on. The perception of religious people is, from the mainstream point of view, one of strangeness and difference which breeds suspicion and diffidence. For the non-religious person being affiliated with religiosity is difficult, potentially dangerous (*abunai*) and embarrassing (cf. Mullins 2011). In a sense, Christianity in Japan is indeed perceived as that “repugnant cultural other” (Harding 1991, 2000) that early anthropology deemed it to be (cf. Cannell 2006).

Because of this perceived distance between “religions” and majority culture the post-Meiji history of Christianity is not an easy one. Christians in Japan have gone through many challenges, from discrimination to outright violence (see e.g. Mullins 1994; Ghanbarpour 2014). The Church of the Holy Family was established as part of a missionary effort from the Tsukiji parish to spread Catholicism in the east of Tokyo.¹⁵⁴

¹⁵⁴ The modern history of Japanese Christianity starts with the Meiji restoration. However, Christianity had landed in Japan in the mid-16th century in Kagoshima, in southern Kyushu, spearheaded by Francis Xavier. After first successful missionary activity that saw Nagasaki becoming the centre of Japanese Christianity - what the historian C.R. Boxer (1951) has baptised Japan's “Christian Century” - from 1587 onwards missionary activity started to be banned, culminating in the crucifixion of those today known as the 23 Japanese Martyrs (*Nihon Nijūroku Seijin*). By 1614 missionaries were expelled and Christians prosecuted. The crushing of the (largely Christian) peasant rebellion of Shimabara (1637) puts an end to this early chapter of Japanese Christianity. There is however an element of continuity in this story - when missionaries returned in the 19th century a group of underground Christians revealed themselves to them. In the recent scholarship they are called “hidden Christians” (*kakure kirishitan*), groups who had secretly kept Christian worship alive through the 200 years of national isolation. “Hidden Christians” have today disappeared and modern Japanese Christianity traces its legacy to the modern missionaries. On the history of the early mission see Boxer 1951, Jennes 1973, Elison 1973 and Part 1 of Cary 2008. I found useful looking at Üçerler 2008 for a Jesuit-focused account. For an important work on the role of women in Christian expansion see Ward 2009. An excellent PhD thesis on the production of sacred spaces in Christian Nagasaki during this period is Tronu 2012. On the Shimabara rebellion see, among many, Totman 1993: 111-116 and Keith 2008 (for a film on

After mounting tensions following the intervention of European powers over the treaty between Japan and China at the end of the First Sino-Japanese War (see Beasley 1987: 55-68), with the signing of the treaty of Portsmouth riots, spread through Tokyo and nationwide (Gordon 1988, 2004). Churches, representing “the West”, were a prime target for the rioting masses and the Church of the Holy Family, together with its newly established school and the houses of many of its members, was burned to ashes. Today there are no tensions between church and neighbourhood and the community doesn't like to talk about the difficulties that they encountered from those riots to today.

I found a strong parallel in the story of Ishigawa-san who, together with his wife, runs a non-denominational Protestant church in the neighbourhood. The church is hosted in the remains of American WWII army barracks and when Mr and Mrs Ishikawa took over from a foreign pastor, about thirty years ago, the community was hostile and diffident. “It was horrible”, she says before a candle-lit service, “people would break our windows at night.. I was so scared.” Their attempts to spread the word of God were met with silence, hostility and threats. While things are different today, some of these sentiments linger and Christianity is still seen with a measure of diffidence.

The gulf between Christians and mainstream urban society is however not only asserted from the outside, but also from within. While things like festivals, visiting shrines, keeping an household Shrine (*kamidana*) are perceived in the mainstream as “tradition”, the priest himself marks them as religious activities. In so doing partaking

the topic by the great director Ōshima Nagisa see “Shiro Amakusa, the Christian Rebel” [*Amakusa Shirō Tokisada*, 1962]). On the hidden Christians see Turnbull 1998, 2000 and, especially, Christal Whelan's excellent work (1992, 1994, 1995, 1996).

in these acts, which are by most people perceived as important moments of bonding with family or the local community, becomes a sinful activity: the worshipping of false idols and gods beside the Christian one. For the priest kami worship, together with Buddhist worship, is incompatible with the doctrine of Catholicism and its one and true God (*kami-sama*).

This creates considerable problems if one has close family members that are not themselves Christian. Important rituals such as *bon* or the new year celebrations are incompatible with the Christian life creating an awkward situation which is, in practical terms, a real rupture between Christians and non-Christians. The same can be said of important rituals of passage, such as *shichi-go-san*, which children from the church cannot partake in. Thinking back to the previous chapter it is clear that - the family structure being mediated through Buddhist institutions such as Buddhist funeral, Buddhist graves, Buddhist remembrance rituals - partaking in these structures cannot then be acceptable from the point of view of the priest. If one does not come from a long lineage of Christians, which is impossible looking back at the history of the faith in Japan, Christianity then brings a clear break with kinship and its structures. This is not so much of a problem for women and people who are not heirs (second-, third-born and so on) but it is a huge problem for the first-born who is then required to be buried elsewhere and break the continuity of the grave. This “elsewhere” is either Christian cemeteries one can find in the suburbs, or an out-of-the-way part of bigger existing graveyards. The families of a large part of the community, for example, are buried at one extremity of the famous Yanaka cemetery in Ueno, on a downward slope next to the fence that overlooks the railway lines.



26. A Christian graveyard at the edges of Tokyo.

The Christian ban on these cultural forms considered part of everyday life outside the church effectively maps an alternative life-course from the moment one joins the church onwards – the same break with the old life towards new virtuous behaviours that we have seen in Robbins' work on Protestantism. People in the community have to live with their own sense of continuity in the face of strong discourses, and experiences, of rupture imposed on them. In the next section I bring in an ethnographic puzzle in order to see this disjunction at work and the rest of the chapter will frame the problem through Robbins' work on the Urapmin - which contains already much of his later thoughts on conversion – in order to understand how people assert their sense of continuity over the gulf between the Christian minority and the wider society.

* * *

“Don't Tell the Priest”

The bans on things like festivals and shrine worship are not perceived by the community as coming from the dogmas of the church, but from the priest himself. This does not mean that people believe these restrictions to be his arbitrary whim. Rather the priest is, in this small community, the only real connection with the wider church and the very source of moral and spiritual authority. As we have seen the priest puts restrictions on activities the community considers “normal” and this chapter takes one of these, drinking, in order to see how the community deals with them. By looking at a moment where these two different outlooks come into conflict, this section explores ethnographically this disjunction finding the community untouched by that moral torment that Robbins (2004) had seen as central to the spiritual life of the converted Urapmin, but instead contravening the priest's ban behind his back without a hint of guilt.

On the national holiday of the Day of Culture (*bunka no hi*) the community went on an all-day guided trip around Catholic cemeteries in order to pay respect to the Church's deceased. The day was chosen because of its proximity to All Souls' Day, the Catholic day of remembrance for the departed, which was in Japan a working day. On the coach on our way back, someone opened a cooler and handed out bottles of water, green tea and, surprisingly, beer and hi-ball. The priest does not approve of the community drinking – I was repeatedly told that “the priest doesn't like it” - but today he had allowed one drink as celebration. “Only one”, he had said, “only today”, and

beers were passed around on the way back.¹⁵⁵ After a long day of remembrance, pack-lunches and prayers the coach leaves us back in the churchyard and people start to say goodbye.

Saitō-san, a lady in her 70s, gives me knowing looks while the community slowly disperses. We are waiting for the priest to go away. Saitō-san has organised a secret drinking party (*nomikai*) after the trip. When she invited me she emphatically whispered “don't tell the priest!” and after the priest has left the conspirators (I surely felt like one) gather and the address of the restaurant is disclosed. Saitō-san walks to me and my friend Nakamura-san and asks: “Are you coming with us?” to which I say “yes” while Nakamura brings his hand to the back of his head, sucks some air through his teeth and says: “I have to wake up at 5am for work, I want to come but.. it's a bit...”. As Donald Keene beautifully pointed out “Japanese sentences are apt to trail off into thin smoke” (1955: 26) - and Camille Paglia has added: “a vapour of hanging participles” (1990: 174). “It's a bit...” - the silence hangs in the air for only second before Saitō-san's hand falls on his arm heavily and she exclaims: “Just come for one drink won't you?”. Afterwards, I see him awkwardly standing there for a minute - outside the church holding a beer he didn't want to drink, already warm in his hand. Then he sighs and walks over to where I am standing with a few other ladies and asks: “Should we walk together?”.

Drinking is arguably an almost indispensable part of Japanese urban social life. Brian Moeran (1986) suggestively painted the cities of Japanese industrial capitalism as

¹⁵⁵ Gender plays a big part in the way people accept the priest's concessions - only men drank alcohol publicly despite the fact that women will be later some of the heaviest drinkers in the community.

comprising of two words. A world of light, populated by salarymen and housewives moving between office buildings and department stores, and the world of darkness of the entertainment districts. The *mizu-shōbai*, the “water trade”, made of *izakaya*¹⁵⁶, bars, hostess clubs and snack-bars. Even thirty years after Moeran was writing, before the bubble burst and the “Japanese miracle” led way to enduring economic crisis, the world of darkness is in full force and entertainment districts cluster around many train and underground stations, like the hilly love-hotel-strewn *dōgenzaka* or the steamy cluster of *izakaya* known affectionately as *shōben-yokochō*, “piss alley.” Linhart (1986) has called these spaces “zones of evaporation”: nether regions where the pressures of work and family dissipate in vapour and smoke and one can relax into a warmer and more relaxed social mode of being.

From the industrial surroundings of the church we enter the neon-lit alleys full of *izakaya*, bars, clubs and snack-bars. It is a public holiday so only a few people are around and the touts are trying hard to get people to enter the semi-deserted restaurants. When we arrive at destination Watanabe-san, one of the elders of the community, stands up and gives a short speech thanking everyone for the good day and encouraging all to have fun and drink plenty. Drinking starts and the atmosphere gets raucous, glasses are filled and speech gets slurred. The conversation moves between recent church activities and members of the community. “Have you seen Hashimoto-san recently? Is the baby born yet? I heard she went down to Fukuoka to stay with her mother”. There is no elephant in the room, no acknowledgement of sin through omission. All conversations rotate around the church, around its activities and its members. The priest is frequently mentioned, always with respect and affection, and yet we are do-

156 A drinking establishment that also serves small dishes of food such as skewers, fried chicken, pickles and fried noodles.

ing something that the priest has explicitly banned the community from doing.

On a Friday night around the entertainment districts of Tokyo one is likely to see scenes of extreme loss of control - “throwing up, urinating in public, dancing on train platforms, falling asleep stretched out on the seats of a train, making passes at or otherwise insulting someone normally shown respect, speaking openly about things that usually go unsaid” (Allison 1994: 45) are common behaviours at these times and places. Such scenes dramatically clash not only with the demeanour one expects in the “world of light” but with the usual personality of one's acquaintances as well. In Tokyo there is an extreme leniency towards inappropriate drunken behaviours and what is said while dead drunk is often quickly forgotten the day after.¹⁵⁷ In my experience one can go as far as to say that drinking and drunkenness are positively valued if the social occasion is appropriate – being drunk (*yotte iru*) is a desirable condition and drinking to get drunk is explicitly many people's intent when going out (Smith 1998; cf. Befu 1974).¹⁵⁸

Catholic morality works explicitly against this tendency. The loss of control, the breaking of boundaries, the spectre of addiction are all hauled at the community from the pulpit as examples of sinful behaviour and spiritual loss. Around the end of December - when most workplaces, voluntary groups and associations hold their end-of-the-year drinks (*bōnenkai*) - warnings about the spiritual and physical dangers to one's health intensify. True community, says the priest, is not the one you reach

157 Moeran's work provides an important counterpoint to this and shows how in the pottery community where he worked intoxication and the speech it allows is part of the local political processes the making and unmaking of coalitions (1997).

158 Smith's work, together with Christensen's (2015), shows how problems with alcoholism are indeed present through differently conceptualised.

through intoxication but the one you reach through love and care, through the love of God expressed through the people around you. The priest here is targeting the age-old Japanese trope that intoxication provides a “frame” for egalitarian relationships (see Nakane 1970), that in the *communitas* of drunkenness one can express their true self and let go of the façades that one has to wear navigating the hierarchies of everyday life. That is not real community, real community is in the heart. I write it in my notebook. When I read it back in London I excitedly write in the margin that this is an example of those changes in the self Christianity imposes on non-European communities, an attempt of fostering that interiority that is a fundamental part of Christian individualism. Yet, although the attempt might be there, right now I am drunk with a group of Catholics who did hear that sermon and are ordering another round. Tonight is not an exception. I went drinking with members of the community countless times, and every time we drank to get drunk, against all moral prescriptions, and yet talked about the church and its community.

That night we left the restaurant drunk. Suddenly we are out on the streets again, it is dark now and the cold evening air wakes us up. A few people bow goodbye but Fukuzawa-san pulls my sleeve and asks “won't you come for another drink?”. Hanada-san and few others nod. We set off into the chilly air of the night where insistent touts show us menus and try to pull us into their restaurants. Nakamura-san, who was reticent from the beginning, tries to point out that he is starting work early and, really, he should go but finds himself agreeing to another drink. “Just one.. then I really have to go.” Eventually we set for a restaurant and the same ritual starts. This time it is my turn to stand up and thank everyone for the great day and for inviting me. I conclude with a customary encouragement to drink and have fun.

Clapping, more food and drinks come to the table, more laughing. Nakamura-san finally manages to slip out apologising and thanking everyone. Later we are outside again, a few people disappear in the night and four of us wander drunkenly to another *izakaya*. The first restaurant had been picked carefully – an expensive restaurant specialising in dishes and liquor from Kyushu - but by the time we go for a third round we are sitting in a cheap drinking hole in the tunnels of the underground, drinking mass-produced nameless liquor and snacking on dried squid. That night I have to carry Fukuzawa-san all the way home, she quietly sings songs of her childhood and tries to make me sing along, she mumbles apologies and praises my kindness while I pull her weight on my shoulders. I leave her at her door after helping her find her keys.

This night is only one of many. People would often furtively organise dinners at their houses with the explicit intention of getting drunk – plan ahead what we would be drinking and who should bring what. Inevitably the alcohol would not be enough and from drinking nice French wine people would end up drinking whatever they could find in their cupboard, or making a trip to the corner shop to buy cheap liquor. While the main topic of conversation throughout all the drunken evenings I have participated in is always the church, one cannot detect a hint of moral torment, of guilt. Asking about the prohibitions over dinner one gets joking replies such as “ah it's bad isn't it” or, like Fukuzawa-san always does, an upward glance at the sky, the joining of hands as if in prayer and, with a childish voice, “..I am sorry God” (*gomenne kami-sama*). In the churchyard after mass people joke about the drunkenness of their fellow diners when far from the ears of the priest.

* * *

Culture Change and Christian Ways

The key problem of this chapter is the one of continuity and rupture. Much anthropology has emphasised rupture as Christianity's abiding existential experience, and so do the priest of the Church and the wider society around it. We have found however in the community's histories a distinct emphasis on continuity and, in looking at the drunken evenings of the past section, it is clear that a rupture is not perceived between the activities the priest had banned and their identity as Christians. Drinking is not the only example of prohibitions that go ignored – participating in festivals and visiting shrines are two other notable transgressions that people enact seemingly without a trace of guilt or moral torment. People would invite me with pride to the procession of their particular neighbourhood association (see Ch. 2), to drink with their non-Christian friends at these occasions, and even gift me amulets from shrines they visited. In this section I bring these considerations on rupture and continuity in dialogue with Robbins' theory of conversion as culture change (2004). Robbins sees conversion as the framing of one culture on the part of another – either the existing culture assimilating Christianity thus remaining unchanged or Christianity assimilating the existing culture until none of its core features remain. This framework is useful insofar as it works with the same ideas of rupture and continuity while at the same time framing them in the context of the conflictual meeting of two cultures.

Robbins' concern with rupture is a development of his previous work with the Urapmin (2004) of Papua New Guinea. By the time of Robbins' fieldwork in the early

90s Christianity in Oceania is not merely a foreign intrusion but an established part of a widespread religious hybridity (cf. Barker 1990). Robbins focuses on the existential impact that this hybridity has on the Urapmin, locked in an incomplete transition between “traditional” and Christian value-systems that manifests itself in the form of moral torment. Leaning heavily on Sahlins' work (1985, 1992) on culture change as well as Dumont's on values (1977, 1980, 1986), Robbins here frames the question of conversion as the question of the transition between two cultural and religious systems and the existential implication of this process. The Urapmin, he argues, have adopted Christianity but they are yet to fully integrate it in their own way of life. They still live between two cultural systems which are in the process of being synthesised and yet are still distinct, and this disjuncture manifests itself in moral contradictions. In other words, the Urapmin still have two value-frames for understanding behaviour and these often clash without resolution leaving people in moral ambiguity and torment. The key analytical framework of this work is borrowed from Sahlins and distinguishes three types of outcomes that might emerge from the colonial/missionary encounter: assimilation, transformation or adoption.

Assimilation and adoption are the most straightforward and the ones Robbins' analysis is concerned with. Assimilation is a situation where cultural meanings are altered but the wider cultural categories remain untouched. Sahlins (1992) depicts this process as a “stretching” of these categories to encompass new situations. Classic examples are ones where indigenous spirits are replaced by Christian iconography while the modes of engagement remain within the bounds of the pre-Christian cultural system. The indigenous cosmos adapts itself to incorporate foreign elements and yet it remains structurally unchanged and hence able to propagate itself. We find

an example of this dynamic in Viveiros de Castro's (2011) illustration of the deep frustration experienced by Portuguese missionaries in the evangelisation of the Tupi in 16th century Amazonia. Far from embracing God with that deep “belief” that the mission was trying to instil in them, the Tupi appeared to appropriate only some of the aspects of Christianity in order to validate their own cosmology and reproduce themselves the traditional way. Robbins understands the Urapmin's engagement with Christianity to have been initially a form of assimilation – an “utilitarian conversion” motivated by existing cultural motives (2004: 115).

Adoption is the inverse: a situation where people cease to try to reproduce “traditional” systems and embrace the new culture as a “whole”, as a self-conscious effort accompanied by the eradication of old values (cf. Ortiz 1995: 102-3). This, what Sahlins calls “modernization”, Robbins defines as the moment in which people take on the new cultural system “on its own terms” (2004: 115), the old culture stops providing the frame for action and Christianity takes its place. This is what can be properly defined as “conversion”, with that temporal quality of rupture that will later become central to his work.

What the Urapmin were experiencing in the 90s was the long road to adoption – a process whereby they had accepted the categories of Christianity but not fully completed the transition to the new culture. People had radically turned away from their traditional culture and fully embraced Christianity, yet their social and economic structure remained the same as it was before. This disjunction brings moments where ideas about social structure come into conflict with Christian ideas of the moral person leaving the Urapmin in intense moral conundrums (Robbins 2004: 35). They

are living with “two cultures”, in the friction between them. A touching example of this kind of process is the heartbreaking moment when Michelle Rosaldo's friend, a Christianised Ilongot, breaks into tears when listening to a tape playing the old head-hunting songs of their people (Rosaldo 1980).

Robbins' model has been criticised (e.g. Rumsey 2004) for treating “Urapmin traditional culture” and “Christianity as two “wholes” (cf. Hirsch 2008) and not recognising the hybridity that already preceded Urapmin conversion (cf. Barker 1990). Indeed Robbins sees Christianity and Urapmin traditional culture as two distinct cultural logics that can be conceptualised as “cultures” (Robbins 2004: 4). While I have no opinion about the validity of this framework in Melanesian context, in Tokyo such an analysis is somehow fitting. This is not because of a lack of hybridity, and in a moment we shall focus on this, but because the two systems are indigenously – both from the priest and from non-Christian people – understood as distinct holistic logics, and the passage between one and the other not a synthesis but a total transition. These wholes are Christianity on the one side and on the other, from an emic point of view, “Japanese society and culture”, and, from an etic one, the modern urban society of Tokyo.

The transgressions of the community are not one of the attempts to protect one's own cultural boundaries that Shaw and Stewart (1994) branded “anti-syncretism”. People are not pushing back against the priest and his morality nor assimilating Christianity into their existing framework. At the same time, one cannot argue that people have fully adopted Christianity given their behaviour and their sense of continuity. While the coexistence of the two cultures that we see among the Urapmin resonates with

some aspects of the life of the people of the Church of the Holy Family the utter absence of moral torment does not seem to be representative of that central friction. In order to make sense of this the next section focuses on the ways the community engages Christianity and its dogma in order to later understand, in reference to Robbins' work, how people can feel such unproblematic continuity in the face of moral and social rupture. The community understands Christianity in two distinct ways and the Church only covers one of them leaving people to find ways to live the Christian life outside its bounds.

* * *

Dogma and Community

The priest, away from whose eyes and ears those deeds are done, is very much the moral beacon of the community and the person people look at to tell them what is right or wrong. Although the prescriptions of Catholicism are laid out in the holy books the relationship with the scriptures is, for the community, not always an easy one. The bible is not an object of everyday devotion like in other Christian communities around the world – it is engaged with only in bible class once a week and through the hard-to-follow sermons of the priest on Sunday. The text, sermons, bible reading classes; all these elements are commonly found to be at the very centre of the Christian life (Robbins 2012). The strong emphasis on the importance of the scriptures one finds in many ethnographies of Christianity is here eclipsed into the background in favour of other activities. In the Church of the Holy Family the language of the Scriptures is far from that “spirit writing” (cf. Keane 2013) where transcendence is made immanent in the holy texts and it is instead inert, obfuscated and, above all, difficult.

In this section I focus on the relationship between people and dogma in order to examine the different ways in which people understand Christianity and what kind of activities these understandings engender.

The unintelligibility of the Scriptures does not trigger processes of intense engagement with the bible like it is often found in narratives of American Protestantism. Carpanzano's (2000) account of Evangelical literalism, Bielo's (2008, 2009) portrayal of the intense processes of Biblical exegesis and knowledge production in Bible studies classes and Malley's (2004) description of the way people link Biblical readings with their own life circumstances are all examples of ways in which people place the word of God at the very heart of what it means to believe. On the Catholic side, Irvine (2010) has looked at the practice of *lectio divina* in a British Benedictine monastery showing how reading the bible is a spiritual exercise in itself. For the community of the Church of the Holy Family the scriptures do not have such aliveness and do not demand such vehemence. Instead they become inert, a chore, something that is not part of the vibrant life of the community but a duty that simply has to be done – sometimes easily, when one can be carried by the lull of the ritual of Mass, and others more burdensomely, for example trying to decipher them at Bible study class.

While the Scriptures are not at the centre of the Christian life, it is in the participation in church activities that the identification with Christianity is performed. The ritual of Mass is important and everyone I have spoken to enjoys participating in it. However when asked details on the ritual itself or the readings of the day people claim ignorance and defer to the priest. It is important to note at this point that the community is – with exceptions – middle class and educated. The deference to the priest is not a

case of perceiving oneself as uneducated but an acceptance of ignorance on Christian dogma. This ignorance is never met with frustration but with a placid acceptance – people do try to listen to the Gospels but they are not moved, do try to go to bible study class but it's too difficult to understand. While these misunderstandings could be corrected with hard work and a stronger commitment, people do not seem to be motivated to spend more time studying and asking questions about the meaning of the Scriptures. What seems to be important instead is *being there* – being at Mass and participating in it. Fukuzawa-san, for example, felt strongly moved when she was asked to do the First Reading from the pulpit at Mass and she spent hours rehearsing the few lines of the book of Isaiah. T: “Was it interesting?” F: “Yes very interesting” T: “What do you think it means?” F: “Oh I do not know.. it's difficult.. I do not understand it” (cf. Engelke 2006).

Although modesty undoubtedly plays a part in the answer, the point of the rehearsal was never to let the meaning sink in but rather a purely formal concern with getting the reading right and not blunder. Of course a rehearsal is about performance, and yet the engagement with the Scriptures through the repetitive reading of a few lines of the Old Testament was never for her a spiritual or meditative act. In the same way, the most moving parts of Mass are singing together (especially when one is leading the choir), participating in bringing the offerings to the altar, and simply being there and being seen. Communion is not a moment of recollection but an occasion to dart one's gaze around and see who is around, bow slightly to greet people and smile at friends. This is not to deny that communion has a spiritual dimension, but to say that the participation in the ritual is intensely social even if one merely goes and sits at Mass. For the same reasons the informal reception in the community hall after mass and the

time spent in the church-yard outside are extremely important, and people often head off afterwards to spend time together in a café or at a sushi restaurant. Time spent together is, for the community, where the Christian life truly “happens”, where the self-determination as Catholic believers is performed, embodied and most acutely felt.

Harvey Whitehouse's has formulated an interesting cognitive theory of two “modes of religiosity” (1995, 2000). Despite the Melanesian focus the theory's span is much wider and it posits that religious and ritual behaviour tends to solidify around one of the two divergent modalities – the doctrinal and the imaginistic.¹⁵⁹ In the doctrinal mode religious knowledge is spread through repetitive and heavily discursive teachings that tend to produce large organised abstract communities. Christianity's focus on spreading the Word is primarily focused on such mode and global Protestantism, as we have seen at the beginning of this section, lies at the end of the doctrinal gradient. Imaginistic religious forms, on the other hand, are based on sporadic rituals of high-intensity that bonds tightly knit small communities together. We can here make a loose equivalence by noting that the community's engagement with the church is far from the dogmatic side but instead concerned with participation and the building of community. This is not a non-religious endeavour but, with Whitehouse's imaginistic mode, merely a different mode of religiosity.

However, this does not mean that people would rather see the church abandon those activities. Even though the bible is hard to understand and the rituals are sometimes tedious, people cherish them and they wouldn't want them to be “friendlier” or easier.

Indeed when I asked about conversion many people told me that they chose Catholi-

¹⁵⁹ I am also reminded of Benedict's similar, and somehow more charming, distinction between apollinean and dyonisian cultures (1935).

cism *because* of its rigid structure, because it felt old and legitimate (cf. Brown 2017). People like that the ritual of Mass feels formal and someone went as far as proposing that songs in Latin songs be introduced in the choir's repertoire. There is indeed a certain anxiety about authenticity, people are concerned with their church, their rituals, and even the aesthetics of their leisure time resonating their original source: Catholicism in Europe and the US. I was asked multiple times if Mass was like the ones I attended in Italy or how one should host a wedding party "Italian Catholicism style". The strict adherence to the rituals, meetings, classes to the Italian and American model is what makes people feel connected to a transnational Catholic community. It is not in other words a loose feeling of an international *communitas*, a spiritual community united in the love of God, that holds the church together in the minds of my interlocutors but, much like the monastic model, a formal resemblance. "When I went to Mass in Italy", says Fukuzawa-san dreamily showing me a picture of herself posing in front of the Coliseum, "it was just like in our church!". The rigid formalism of the Catholic spiritual life is also what distinguishes the community from the other Protestant churches in the neighbourhood - "see.. our church looks like a real church.. the other churches just look like houses".

The point here is that the community's understanding of Christianity as extremely social, as something to do with the collectivity, is not opposed to the dogmatic form of which the priest is understood to be the keeper. The dogmatic form is for the community fundamental to their identity as Catholics even though they do not need to fully understand it. Form is here precisely what it is meant to be - form - and it does not demand the grasping of meaning. However the more "communitarian" form of religiosity is not entirely part of the Catholicism the priest is painstakingly teaching the

community. In church these religious forms seem almost an emergent phenomenon, something that the community does in order to sit more comfortably in partial foreignness of Roman Catholicism. The priest values the commitment to community, and yet still wishes people would dogmatically (*sensu* Whitehouse) engage with scriptures and mass.

The community's engagement with the Church is however genuine and marked by a deep commitment. One cannot say that people are framing their Christianity through traditional values. For Robbins the Urapmin initial conversion was utilitarian, an attempt at assimilation and I hope it is clear here that this is not what is going on. In fact one could say that the community is doing extra work, is engaging the church beyond the bounds of what the church gives them. The faith as promulgated by the priest is highly dogmatic and does not give the community the tools to build and strengthen community - it provides a centre of gravity around which to build such community but almost no occasions and tools to do so. I often thought that the guitar-slinging protestants in Ishikawa's small church did much better at that with their open concerts, social afternoons and film nights. Life at church satisfies a certain craving for form and exerts a strong centripetal force that brings people together.

However, how to perform and enact a communitarian religiosity is another matter. Time in church is always too short and too sporadic and people are constantly creating spaces of sociality outside it where they can *live* the Christian life *together*, as a community. Church only lasts a few hours on a Sunday and on Thursdays at Bible study class. People need more, and thus create occasions to meaningfully perform the Christian life. Like in the case of the Urapmin Christianity might have been accepted

and people might be working hard to integrate it into their life but pre-existing relational paradigms have not been obliterated. When people foster their communitarian mode of Catholicism it is through a certain understanding of what community means that is not fully provided by the Catholic framework. In these places sociality follows the modalities one uses in everyday life. In these spaces it is the wider framework of urban Japanese sociality that gives meaning to action. Drinking is, as we have seen, a powerful way to build such bonds in the social world surrounding the church.

* * *

Dual-Encompassment and the Japanese Catholic Life

People's engagement with the church suggests that what we are seeing in the community is neither a form of assimilation nor a form of resistance. One could be tempted to see the community on a similar trajectory as the Urapmin were in the 1990s, moving from traditional to Christian culture. Similarly two different cultures seem to guide people's behaviour, and yet it is the Christian one that people are ultimately working towards. This section argues otherwise. The community's strong sense of continuity, both with their own past and with the society outside, and the absence of moral torment indicate that something different is going on, that people are not going through a process of adoption but finding ways to make two incompatible worlds - "Christianity" and "Japan" - overlap and coexist in their actions.

In Robbins' analysis assimilation and adoption are understood as processes whereby one culture comes to frame another (cf. Bateson 1972; Goffman 1974), where one of the two cultures gives meaning and motivation for engaging in elements of the other. A

good way to understand this process is Dumont's notion of “encompassment”. Dumont (1980) saw encompassment as the ground for his theory of hierarchy: encompassment is for him a part/whole relationship in which contraries can co-exist. Impurity can be encompassed by purity letting the two coexist even while being incompatible. He calls this relationship “the encompassing of the contrary” (1980: 239) and gives, fittingly here, a Biblical example. Sexual differentiation in the garden of Eden is predicated on a double relation – Adam and Eve are, as members of the human species of opposite genders, in a binary opposition. However given that Eve was created from Adam's rib, that he is the original member of the species from which she was created, he encompasses her; a relationship of identity is established between the two.¹⁶⁰

We can then understand Robbins' two outcomes through encompassment. The “assimilation” of Christianity in other cultures, such as the failed conversion of the Amazonian Tupi, is a situation where the traditional culture encompasses Christian elements. The relationship is hierarchical, as Sahlins noted, only the categories change and not the relationship between them – the system remains unchanged. The Urapmin were going through the opposite process, they were slowly encompassing elements of their traditional culture (e.g. notions of big-manship) within the Catholic framework. Robbins' point is that this encompassment is unfinished and the hierarchy has not been properly established yet.¹⁶¹ Given that the two “cultures” were at times equally important their friction generated moral torment and guilt.

¹⁶⁰ The same happens linguistically in the use of “man” for the species, encompassing both women and men.

¹⁶¹ Strong adoption however entails the complete rejection of traditional survivals, which Robbins sees as the inevitable outcome of Urapmin social change.

When looking at the community's practices, however, it is hard to determine which “direction” this encompassment is working towards. When people are out drinking they are encompassing Christianity with the wider norms of Japanese society. They are asserting continuity by acting like any other non-Christian person, but within this frame understanding themselves as Christians. In other words this can be understood as a form of assimilation where Christianity has been encompassed into the wider framework of Japanese society: the content has changed, now a Christian community instead of a group of friends, but not the framework, everything is understood through the categories of urban Japanese modernity. This can be also applied to the commitment to church we have seen in the previous section – people are taking in the formal elements of Christianity but understanding them through their own categories: what it means to be together as a community.

On the other hand the opposite is also true. People are encompassing elements of their “old life” into their Catholic one. Their understanding of Christianity is precisely what is giving meaning to their meetings and the drinking is encompassed within that understanding. People are first and foremost Christians engaging in what they understand as the Christian life – drinking is not antithetical because encompassed into Christianity, hierarchically subordinated to the wider framework that gives meaning to people's lives as Catholics. In the same way people's engagement with Church was deeply motivated by their desire to lead a Christian life, a desire that brings them to explore territories uncharted by the sparse schedules and activities provided by the church. In other words, it is hard to determine if the process is one of assimilation or adoption – which of the two cultures is encompassing the other.

This confusion in determining the direction of encompassment and change can be also found on the macro-level, in looking at the relation between the two “cultures” on the canvas of wider society. Since the Second Vatican Council (1962-65) “inculturation”, or “acculturation”, has been part of the Catholic Church's tactic to make the faith resonate with non-Western cultures. Christian dogma, for instance, condemns ancestral worship as it runs contrary to its ideas of afterlife and yet many Christians today have an ancestral altar in their house and honour the spirits of their ancestors. David Reid (1981, 1989, 1991) has found in the 1980s that 25% of Japanese protestants who answered his questionnaires have an ancestral altar in their homes and, relevantly, he concludes that people have a sort of “dual belief system”. While before Vatican II the orthodox line was to advise people to dispose of them, with the publishing of a pamphlet called “Guidelines for Catholics with Regards to the Ancestors and the Dead” (*sozen to shisha ni tsuite no katorikku shinja no tebiki*; 1985) people were allowed to pay respect to ancestral altars as long as all Buddhist iconography was replaced with Christian symbols and they prayed as Christians (see Swyngedouw 1984, 1985; also Mullins 2011). This is true of many other activities, for example the maintenance of Christianised family graves, only different in their bearing of a crucifix next to the family name.¹⁶²

While looking “within Christianity” one finds one kind of encompassment, pointing at processes of adoption, in the wider canvas of urban modernity one finds the opposite process. In manga, anime and videogames, which are engaged by virtually everyone in the metropolis, Christian – and overwhelmingly Catholic – symbolism and themes

¹⁶² Note that the only activities that are encompassed are Buddhist, never Shinto. Shinto, with its perceived polytheism, seems to be much more threatening to the Church than Buddhism. Altars and graves are reinterpreted and encompassed, but never household shrines or amulets.

crop up everywhere (e.g. Barkamna 2010; Suter 2015). These imaginative spaces are inhabited by people on a daily basis and bleed into the “real” world through advertising, corporate branding, fashion and gadgets. Appadurai (1996) has argued that imaginative spaces acquire a new power with modernity, and indeed modernity and Christianity seem to share a special relationship in Tokyo (cf. Doak 2011). Christmas, white weddings, churches and crosses; all these are appropriated and fused into the wider fresco of Japanese modernity.

For example while the nation-building of the past has cast Shinto weddings as one of the necessary rites of passage of the Japanese person - themselves an “invented traditions” (Shida 1999, Antoni 2001) - today two-thirds of weddings celebrated in Tokyo are western-style ceremonies; and here Western-style means Christian. Wedding chapels are usually held in expensive hotels in the centre of town, modern halls with neon crosses, off-white walls and futuristic interior design in transparent plastics and glass. The pastor performing the ritual is usually a Western actor reading a script and the ceremony a short affair that follows the ritual steps immortalised in the last scene of every romantic comedy (Fisch 1999; LeFebvre 2015). The “encompassing” of graves too goes two ways and first-borns of long lines (very rarely converts) resort to simply putting a cross on the urn they will place in the family grave, leaving the line unbroken.

In other words one finds, both in the community and in the wider “cultures” they are embedded in, an ambiguity as to exactly what is encompassing what and thus towards which outcome the Church of the Holy family is moving. This is because people are, in a real sense, enacting encompassment both ways. When people partake in Shinto

festivals and rituals or drink with their non-Christian friends one could indeed say that only one act of encompassment is going on. The same can be said of the opposite. When people move their grave to a Christian graveyard or change their ancestral altar for a Christian one they are performing an act of adoption. We find in the life of the community an oscillation, to borrow Leach's term, where people successfully manage to let one system encompass the other at one time, and the opposite at others. For Leach (1974), Kachin social structure existed in an "oscillating equilibrium" between a feudal hierarchical system and an anarchistic and egalitarian one – in a 150 years span the social structure of Kachin communities can be seen fluctuating between the Gumsa/Gumlao poles. He uses an analogue framework to understand the Aryan heresy (1972): with a similarly synchronic analysis he posits an oscillation between subversive anti-structural modes and orthodox formal ones. In the life of the community one can see a similar oscillation, albeit on a much smaller temporal scale. People manage to at times let Christianity encompass the social forms of majority culture – in their dealing with the altars, with life and death rituals – and in other times letting the social habits of majority culture encompass their Christian identity (cf. Daswani 2011; Werbner 2011).

Drinking, however, achieves both. When people transgress the priest's restrictions they are not, in their minds, acting against Christian values but they are precisely living the Christian life. As we have seen those drunken hours are dominated by conversations about the church and its life stories. One of the members proudly tells the waitress at the restaurant that we are the community of the Church of the Holy Family, showing her the badge pinned to his jacket for the occasion – a small silver crucifix. One could say that what people are doing is actually simply taking the formal ele-

ments of Christianity and encompassing them within the wider framework. The opposite is obviously not true either – Christianity is not encompassing Japanese social modes of interaction because the priest is vocally telling people that it is not possible. Those meetings seem to contain, simultaneously, both kinds of encompassing acts.

Drinking outings exist in a continuum with the life of the church, they are just another facet of it. They also exist in a continuum with people's life outside it, with the other meetings they have with friends and family. The reason why people do not feel any moral torment and any contradiction in those drunken nights is because in those moments there is no difference whatsoever between the Christian life and wider Japan, between intoxication and piousness, between the world inside the church and the world outside it. In those moments people are indeed breaking the rules of Christianity, framing their Christian endeavours within the framework of urban Japanese sociality, interpreting their actions through the latter. However the drinking itself is understood through their Catholic life, as a means to be a group, to build bonds and a strong Christian community. Being Christian is never hidden, it is never ignored – it is indeed the whole point of drinking, of breaking the priest's restrictions. Through a series of figure ground-reversals, through a dual encompassment where inside encompasses outside and vice versa, the two “cultures” blur and become indistinguishable – sinning can be the very Christian life and being Christian can mean its opposite: participating in heathen rites, intoxication, and so on. It is impossible in these moments to point out which of the two frames is encompassing the other – which system is giving meaning to people's actions: by partaking in activities constitutive of life “outside” they come closer to the “inside”, and by converting and coming “inside” they find a community to be built through the “outside”.

* * *

Conclusion

In this chapter I have tried to understand the coexistence of rupture and continuity in the lives of the community of the Church of the Holy Family. In particular I have focused on paradoxical moments in which the community seems to be contravening the restrictions of Christian morality not only without a shade of guilt or moral torment, but also seemingly understanding their act as part of their Christian life and identity. The chapter works with two big “wholes” - Christianity on the one hand and “urban Japanese modernity” on the other. I tried to show how people oscillate between the two, letting one encompass the other, bridging the gulf of rupture every time they go in and out of church. In the drinking nights of the community, which are frequent and very important for people, a double-encompassment is achieved - the two cultures overlap and it is impossible to establish which one is giving a frame of meaning for action. Sinful activities become virtuous, transgression becomes the performance of the Christian life.

The chapter worked, with Robbins and Sahlins, with two extreme outcomes of culture contact and change - the success or failure of the mission and resulting survival or demise of the existing one. This is because the Christian mission has had, before Vatican II, as its explicit goal the eradication of pre-existing behaviours that it perceived as sinful. There is however a middle way, one where the two “cultures” come to a sort of Hegelian synthesis. This is close to what is much anthropological literature has called syncretism (e.g. Shaw and Stewart 1994) or creolisation (e.g. Hannerz 1987; Palmié

2006; Stewart 2007).¹⁶³ However this is openly not an ethnographic examination of syncretism, nor it is an ethnography of – like Robbins' – a process with a definite teleology. Robbins had seen the coexistence of the cultures as a symptom of an incomplete process towards a definite outcome – the encompassment of traditional Urapmin culture into Christian values. As the steady number of Catholics in Tokyo suggests, I do not believe that what we see here is a process at all, nor it is an accomplished syncretic hybrid.

The community of the Church of the Holy Family is not striving towards Christianity and stumbling on the way but finding ways to exist on both sides of the rupture that is imposed on them from both within and without. This feels very much like the accomplishment of an equilibrium and not like the symptom of an incomplete process. People have no intention of giving up many of the things the priest wants them to give up. “Giving up” is not something the community does lightly, even giving up chocolate at Lent usually lasts only a few days before people give in (and, in recounting it, do so with the same levity with which they talk about their drinking). The perceived continuity of Christian and “Japanese” life in the face of rupture brings people to find a comfortable equilibrium hinged on silence, compromise and socialising. However true continuity is only achieved in the blur of drunkenness when Catholic and “Japanese” life overlap and become indistinguishable and true Catholic *communitas* is achieved. As it is by now a refrain of the thesis it is though the chaos, through the stumbling clumsy acts of drunkenness, that true harmony is achieved. One might comment that, if the community had their way, their Catholicism would develop into a

¹⁶³ syncretism, mixing, hybridity, creolisation - these terms have alternatively used interchangeably or with distinct meanings (cf. Stewart 1999, 2011). Here I use them simply with the connotation of a middle way between adoption and assimilation.

syncretic form. This might be the truth, but it might also be overlooking the community's craving for form and dogma. Their affectionate transgressions of the priest's dogma might not mark a desire to be rid of them, but a particular affective way of engaging rupture.

Here saliently morality has not been part of the picture, and the notion of encompassment tried to capture the same process without its moral dimension. However morality has, albeit briefly, surfaced in the ethnography. In Robbins' analysis the Urapmin experienced what Bateson (1972: 201-27; 271-8) has called a "double-bind": an emotionally distressing dilemma where one receives two conflicting and mutually negating messages. Nakamura-san, whom we have seen unsuccessfully trying to avoid drinking with the community, is the closest example I have seen to a moral double-bind. Like in the notion of encompassment, for Bateson there is a hierarchical element to the double-bind, a verbal message is framed by non-verbal ones which directly contradict the first. Nakamura was stuck between the priest's dogma - thou shall not drink - and a situation where drinking was encouraged if not required. While he would have never stated this publicly on the night, when asked on different occasions he confirmed that his reticence and discomfort were explicitly to do with the awareness of the "wrongness" (*warui*) of the act (although this would never come through as a criticism of the other diners). Nakamura-san is, one could say, only encompassing one way - he is the kind of Christian the priest wants the community to be and hence, paradoxically, struggling to be part of it.



CHAPTER 5:

A PHENOMENOLOGY OF BLURRING

“Henceforth it seems right to analyse the ways in which the subject is affected, its ways of receiving and experiencing feelings, its ways of judging works. This is how aesthetics, the analysis of the addressee's feelings, comes to supplant poetics and rhetoric, which are didactic forms, of and by the understanding, intended for the artist as sender. No longer 'How does one make a work of art?', but 'What is it to experience an affect proper to art?' And indeterminacy returns, even within the analysis of this last question.”

- Jean-François Lyotard
- *The Sublime and the Avant-Garde*

Affect has been so far an overlooked component in this thesis – or at least it has been so in the past three chapters. This is because the middle section of the thesis was concerned with understanding a “logic”, and hence invested in trying to fathom its shapes and workings. In other words those three chapters tried to understand the “structure” of this logic but, as we have seen both in the introduction and in Chapter 1, there is more than structure to these experiences. The whole point of these moments of blurring is precisely the kind of feeling that they elicit, they are powerful *because* of that feeling. Or one should perhaps say that the feeling and the “blurring” (again as an heuristic container for all the different phenomena we have encountered) are inseparable – the blurring *is* the feeling, and separating the two does not make sense. Putting the Chapter 1 at the beginning was an attempt to establish this fact before artificially separating feeling and structure in order to move step by step and untangle

this complex logic. In this chapter affect is put back into blurring, that is the focus moves from structure to experience and to understanding exactly what kind of experience, what kind of feeling, this blurring might be.

This chapter is then about “affect” but affect is a word that is both very hard and very easy to use. Since the mid-1980s attention has been given, especially from feminist theorists, to the emotional lives and labours of women (e.g. Lorde 1984; Abu-Lughod 1986; Lutz 1988; Hooks 1989) and “affect” remained circumscribed to that field. Since the end of the 1990s, with what has been branded as the “affective turn” (Woodward 1996; Berlant 1997; Nicholson 1999), “affect” has become a stable presence in anthropology, philosophy and critical theory. The term has travelled through many disciplines, including the neurosciences (Damasio 1994, 2003), and yet it still remains nebulous today. In this thesis the term comes to express a tangle of emotions and certain experiences of “being affected”. In the third section of the chapter I shall run through the previous chapters to pick out the particular affective modes that we have seen so far, but for now it suffices to say that affect here points to a non-ordinary experience that arises out of the ordinary, an experience the intensity of which is qualitatively different from the experience of the everyday. The first chapter provides a template for this kind of experiences – the aesthetic intensities seen in that chapter clearly mark these phenomena as something that bursts out of the everyday and brings the subject to a place that is utterly other to ordinary existence. However, as we have seen in the introduction, these blurrings also give rise to much more ordinary affects – feelings of belonging, attachment and recognition.

The flow of this chapter is a bit different from what we have seen so far. The aim of it is to establish that blurring elicits affects and to investigate what this “affect” might be. Through an ethnographic engagement with the art-works of a Tokyo salaryman¹⁶⁴ I show how the intense non-ordinary experiences elicited by blurring leave an affective “afterglow”, often positive feelings of attachment. The argument is structured however through an engagement with, as well, the rest of the thesis and so it runs backwards to redefine some of the moments of blurring we have seen so far in terms of their phenomenological affective import. This “arching back”, as we shall see in the Conclusion, is central to the thesis itself which will later try to elucidate how the affects this chapter focuses on relate to the wider concern of essentialism.

* * *

Invisible Vibrations: Silence and Self

This section approaches a triangulation of themes in the anthropology of Japan that often feed into and rely onto each other. These themes are affect, silence and the private/public self dichotomy and the section aims to show the ways in which these three elements – silence, affect and self – have been treated as part of the same problem in the anthropology and sociology of Japan. In the same way as Chapter 1 tried to depict an indissoluble knot between beauty, a quasi-religious aesthetic experience and politics, so this section tries to – briefly - show the ways in which ideas of self, silence and affect have been deeply intertwined in much discourse in/on Japan. The section establishes, in other words, the themes and distinctions through

¹⁶⁴ Salaryman (*sararīman*) is an indigenous term, clearly of English provenance, referring to white-collar workers, especially those working in corporations.

which affect has been dealt with in the anthropology of Japan to then move, in the next section, to evaluate if the forms of affect that we have seen in the thesis so far do resonate with them or not. Given that these themes have been, again, deeply entangled with essentialist works I start their treatment from their anti-essentialist critiques to land at the end of the section on their enduring relevance today.

There is an important aspect of Japanese essentialism that hasn't been touched upon yet – the Japanese language. The Japanese language has been a central factor in the perpetuation of what is sometimes referred to as “island-nation feeling/character” (*shimaguni konjō*) and much *nihonjinron* literature (see Introduction) has focused on it as the key to assert the uniqueness of Japanese culture.¹⁶⁵ These works see the Japanese language as utterly different from any other language, incredibly difficult to learn and ultimately impermeable to foreigners given that it reflects the Japanese mindset. Japanese is considered illogical and vague but, at the same time, it contains within itself a soul or spirit that other languages do not possess and this makes possible forms of supralinguistic or non-verbal communication that are not used in any other culture. Roy Miller (1982: 84-101) has noted how together with the “myth of language” one finds an anti-myth of silence. While the myth of language

focuses on every overt aspect of the Japanese language – its words, their meanings, their pronunciation, the socio-linguistic behaviour of its native speakers [...] the anti-myth simply and plainly denies all this [...] The anti-myth all but denies the importance if not the very existence of the language itself. Instead [...] [it] takes as its focus the very opposite of language: silence (Miller 1982: 85).

165 Against the myth of language homogeneity see Maher and MacDonald 1995; Maher and Yashiro 1995; Ryang 1997; Gottlieb 2005. Against the essentialisation of “women's language” see Inoue 2006.

The anti-myth teaches that what is truly unique about Japanese culture is not language but its opposite – silence (...“and if you thought our language was difficult to learn [...] can you ever hope to succeed in becoming fluent in our silence?” Miller 1982: 85). Myth and anti-myth are incompatible mirror images – one sees the language as the very reflection of the Japanese soul while the other sees silence as the very expression of its spirit and language as mere patina.

Miller's work, part of that cultural critique that had a prominent place in Japanese studies in the 80s and 90s (see Introduction), debunks both myth and anti-myth. In parallel with, for example, the works that had disputed homogeneity by highlighting diversity, Miller argues that one finds no proof of what he calls “the worship of silence”, neither in modern Japan nor in the Heian literature, such as the *Tale of Genji*, that much essentialist theory had relied on. While the worship of silence and its upholding as the reflection of a national soul are strong tropes of Japanese nationalism and easily debunked, one can find – once again – a certain resonance the everyday life of many people in the capital. We have seen this kind of argument again and again in the thesis and this is not different. The idea that affective and non-verbal communication plays an important part in people's life is indeed widespread and with this comes an assumption that foreigners specifically struggle with these forms. “Silence”, it has been argued, “is a way of saying nothing but meaning something” (Tannen 1985: 97) and the communicative role of silence has been noted not only in literature (notably by Masao Miyoshi, who wrote about Kawabata and Mishima precisely in terms of silence and its violation¹⁶⁶) but in the Japanese arts more in

166 Miyoshi 1982.

general (e.g. see Pilgrim 1986).

One does not need to buy into dubious claims of a shared Japanese spirit in order to talk about it, and indeed many scholars have focused on the role of non-verbal communication in Japanese sociality. Takie Lebra (2007), for example, has claimed that silence does take a more prominent role in Japan compared to, say, the United States and this silence can carry different meanings (and, with Tannen above, it always does carry some). The two main ways in which silence is endowed with meaning are in its truthfulness and its role in social discretion. Lebra's first point comes close to the anti-myth that Miller was writing against. The equation of silence and truth is embedded for her in the "Buddhism-Shinto context" and sees truth as the transcendence of oppositions between subject and object, self and other, and connected to the idea of *mushin*: "mindlessness, transcending all the boundaries and oppositions, dispensing with words and speech" (Lebra 2007: 118).

But truth does not only have an aesthetico-religious side to it, but also an existential one. Lebra refers to the distinction, close to both Benedict and *nihonjinron* theories, between inner and outer self, *honne* (one's true feelings) and *tatemae* (public façade), to argue that silence is allied with the inner self and speech with the outer. As a consequence reticence and taciturnity tend to be valued as signs of trustworthiness and moral integrity, an expression of one's true inner self, while "components of the outer self" become associated with deception, scheming and falsity. The other meaning of silence is for Lebra "social discretion". Here silence is considered necessary in order to gain social acceptance and avoid chastisement or retribution. Social discretion is built on the same distinction between inner and outer self, but this

time reversed. Social discretion advises to conceal, in the appropriate situations, one's true self and refrain from expressing one's feelings and thoughts. In Lebra's analysis of attitudes to silence we find that, despite its prominent role in Japanese social life, there is a tolerated ambivalence about it: silence both expresses and conceals the inner self.

Regardless this ambiguity, silence maintains somehow a privileged place in Japan at least in its connotations of “not saying”. In fact forms of indirection and roundabout communication are pervasive in Japan to the point that many foreign businesses instruct their employees on how to deal with these communicative forms when dealing with Japanese customers. A lot of work in socio-linguistics and communication theory on these form of non-verbal communication (especially in relation to American English) was carried out around the 1980s (see e.g. Nishida 1977; Okabe 1983; Okabe 1987; Tsujimura 1987; Matsumoto 1988; Ito 1989, 1992; Gudykunst 1993) and interest in it has largely subsided today. This is likely to be because of its sometimes uncomfortable closeness to theories of uniqueness or in general highly holistic portraits of “the Japanese” such as Nakane's (1970) – which inspired much of that linguistic work.¹⁶⁷ A more nuanced analysis of indirection is Joy Hendry's work on “wrapping” and politeness (e.g. 1990a; 1990b; 1993a)¹⁶⁸ where, starting from an interest in gift-giving and its modalities, she analyses the ways in which not only language and silence “wrap” thoughts and intentions but also bodies, space and people in symbolic manipulations aimed to influence and impress.¹⁶⁹

167 See e.g. Nakane 1970: 35.

168 See also Hendry 1992 for a personal example.

169 See Hendry and Watson 2001 for an expansion of the concept cross-culturally.

These forms of indirection often create situations where the meaning is not readily graspable but needs to be “read between the lines”. Invitations, proposals, enquiries are rarely denied explicitly and people might simply suck air between their teeth and scratch their heads, say that they will consider it in the light of their budget or that whatever is being asked of them “is a bit difficult” (or just “a bit...”). This does create a certain impenetrability in inter-cultural communication and many turns of phrase such as “reading the air” (*kūki wo yomu*) - often used in the negative (*kūki yomenai*) or in its more modern slang form “KY” - highlight the importance of the unsaid, what is wrapped within gestures and words, for everyday sociality.

These forms of indirection often entail an important element of sensing and feeling. Teresa Brennan (2004) has argued that affect and emotions are transmitted between people and bodies like invisible vibrations. They enter into and between people in constant acts of communication that do not need wording or even gestures. There is an important affective dimension to the ways these acts of politeness, caring, empathy are understood in Japan that comes close to Brennan's invisible vibrations. I remember commenting to a friend on how on a crowded train people who needed to pass through would never vocalise their need through saying “excuse me” but patiently wait until noticed. My friend replied: “it is on you to notice, not on them to ask”. I awkwardly excused myself trying to argue that the whole point is that I was facing the other way and thus could not have possibly noticed and yet the whole point is that I should have been paying constant attention. This is also an integral part of many intimate relationships where caring for others without them needing to express their needs is a central part of intimacy. Nishida Tsukasa (1977) has analysed these constant acts of awareness and receptivity under the rubric of the concept of *sasshi* – a

term meaning conjecture, surmise or guess and in its verbal form – *sassuru* – expanded to mean imagine, suppose, empathise and making allowances for others.

In Lebra we have seen how these forms of “not saying” map, albeit ambiguously so, onto a binary of outer and inner self. This is a widespread indigenous category, and it replicates itself through different binaries of inside and outside such as *uchi* and *soto* (in-group and outsiders), *ura* and *omote* (surface and rear/private), *kao* and *kokoro* (face and heart), *giri* and *ninjō* (social obligation and personal feelings), and so on. These distinctions have been absolutely central not only to works on selfhood of the 80s and 90s (e.g. Lebra 1976; Smith 1983; Rosenberger 1989), but to a vast array of ethnographies on topics as different as religion (Hardacre 1986); gender (Hamabata 1990), marriage (Edwards 1989), household organisation (e.g. Bachnik 1992), large or small businesses (e.g. Hamabata 1990; Kondo 1990; Gerlach 1992), illness and healing (Ohnuki-Tierney 1984), schooling (Tobin 1992). These binaries are inherently affective – they all divide a personal world of intimacy, desire, warmth and relaxed sociality from a colder one of duty, etiquette and hierarchy.¹⁷⁰ Although discussions of selfhood are now highly unfashionable in the anthropology of Japan (with exceptions, e.g. Lebra 2004; Rosenberger 2011) for their essentialist potential¹⁷¹, these dichotomies – in virtue of their endurance in indigenous conceptualisations both in the literature and “on the ground” – persist still as constant presences in ethnographies of Japan, regardless of their specific focus.

170 e.g. see Doi's treatment of *omote* and *ura* in relation to his concept of *amae* (1973b, 1974, 1982).

171 See Introduction, specifically about the problem of selfhood and essentialism.

As we have seen, the discourse on non-verbal communication relies on these patterns as well – on the navigation of different emotional contexts expressed by binaries of “inside” and “outside”. Up to now we have seen how both silence and selfhood have been theorised affectively and when one turns to the contemporary literature on affect one finds it, in turn, predicated on the same binaries and the same attention to non-verbal communication. Intimacy, for example, has been chiefly treated – and this is not only the case in Japan – as something pertaining to inner familiar bonds, the dimension of *uchi* to do with intimate acts of sleeping, bathing and eating together (e.g. Tahhan 2008, 2010, 2014a, 2014b; Daniels 2015). In these ethnographies non-verbal communication and silence come to take centre stage – Tahhan develops the notion of “touching at depth” as an embodied connection that is not located anywhere within bodies but somehow between them, in the feelings in the space in between created by gestures, looks and shared involvements. Daniels works with notions such as “atmosphere” and the perception of “social heat” (cf. Bille et al 2015). On the other hand, when affect is taken out of the inner familial (or romantic) circle and comes to the “outside” it is often seen as commodified, monetised and thus rendered inauthentic (e.g. Stevens 2004; Lin 2008; Lukács 2010; Takeyama 2010, 2016; Galbraith 2013; Plourde 2014; White 2014).¹⁷²

On top of that, a considerable work on affect has been done in ethnographies of migration. As we have seen in Japan the family has been a politically charged topic and consequently very little attention has been given to intercultural marriages that break the native-migrant ideological divide. After a period when the only of such

¹⁷² Even Allison's book on the affect of precarity which suggests that Japanese society needs to recognise these “alternative modes of being and belonging” (2013: 74) largely focuses on the pain of the absence of true intimacy and attempts to maintain a façade. On the commodification of affect under capitalism cf. Thrift 2010: 290.

marriages taken in consideration were the ones between Western men and Japanese women (cf. Leupp 2003), recent anthropology has focused especially on the affective lives of Filipina-Japanese marriages (Suzuki 2003, 2010b; Faier 2007, 2009; Lopez 2012b). Here again it is the realm of *uchi* that encapsulates affect and the dialectic between the performance and the authenticity of love, between outer lives and inner affects, face and true feelings, remains central. In this sphere we find the same commodification of affect, this time in the intricacies of migrant care-work - and here analyses have focused on the reluctant and fraught admission of foreigners in the realm of *uchi* (Lopez 2012a; Yoshimizu 2014; Świtek 2016).

In other words one finds, in looking for affect, a knot where discourses about affect are entangled with communication (chiefly non-verbal) and self-hood. Affect seems to be the modality - or modalities - through which people navigate, by feeling and not words, this inner/outer binary and move through its intricacies. On top of this, and predictably so given the Benedictian influence, these notions have been charged with essentialism, of trying to define a unique Japanese self with uniquely Japanese communicative modes utterly different from the West, and in particular the US. The next section rethinks the main “moments” of the thesis through the notion of affect to then apply the findings ethnographically to a situation where silence and the divided self are explicitly central concerns.

* * *

So Far – Ordinary and Non-Ordinary Affects

One of the main claims of this thesis has been that this blurring and overlapping of

binaries elicits affect. As we have seen in the previous section the word “affect”, in the anthropology of Japan evokes ideas of familial intimacy which, in turn, are linked to ideas of selfhood and to the binary of “front” and “inside” and its corollaries. However what we have seen so far in the thesis is perhaps a different kind of affect – one that does not map well over the images of silent intersubjectivity of the last section. This section retraces the steps taken so far in thesis and tries to pick out the affective “auras” of the phenomena examined in the previous four chapters in order to understand what it might mean, and whether it might make sense, to speak about “affect” in this context.

The first chapter of this thesis feels somehow out of place upon first reading and the intent of this section is to somehow vindicate it. That chapter – with its treatment of somehow trite essentialist themes such as the beauty of impermanence – is important because it shows and foreshadows the kind of affective experience that the chapters that follow only touch upon tangentially. Chapters 2, 3 and 4 focus on the kind of shapes and movements that these experiences, that we first explored in literature and the arts, are elicited by. Here, like in many of the authors of that first chapter, we focus on the experience itself. Differently from the small affective acts of balancing of the last section, what is spoken about as “affect” in the thesis has a non-ordinary quality to it. The aesthetic experiences of the first chapter are often embedded in the stream of ordinary everyday existence but somehow they disrupt it and transcend it. The appreciation of a cloudy sky, of a flower, of an half-drunk glass of water can elicit something much more powerful, something that takes the person apprehending the object to a different state of being. This state of being has been described in different

ways in the thesis – sometimes a blurring, sometimes a figure-ground reversal¹⁷³, sometimes a coexistence and overlapping of opposites, sometimes the confusion of subject and object. All of these experiences were – and have been throughout the thesis – classified under the same notion or “blurring” or “overlapping”, as experiences elicited by the same logic the thesis is concerned with. All of the experiences happen in the midsts of everyday life and take the person experiencing them away from it – to an intense “otherness” that can be often sustained only for a brief moment.

These moments have a strong affective charge and this charge is markedly different from those “ordinary affects” (Stewart 2007) on which the previous section has focused. The literature on affect has similarly concentrated – as in the invisible vibrations of the last section – on the space *between* bodies, on affect as a key component of inter-subjectivity. Affect is something that accumulates across both relatedness and interruptions of relatedness, it is the sedimentation and accumulation of forces and relations passing between people and bodies (Gregg and Seigworth 2009). Affect is tied to the politics of everyday interaction (Abu-Lughod and Lutz 1990), it is something embedded into the everyday realities of kinship and sociality. Indeed the passage of forces and meanings has been one of the key focuses of anthropological literature on emotions and affect either through attention to so called “emotion talk” or to forms of empathy and feelings of togetherness (e.g. Besnier 1990; Palmer & Occhi 1999; Wilce 2009; Hollan and Throop 2011). All of this maps well on the content of the last section – careful micro-transactions of duty and desire, care and personal space, silence and propriety. However affect in this thesis has been

173 cf. Wagner 1986: 25, 33; 2012.

something more akin to “upheavals of thought”, a phrase that the philosopher Martha Nussbaum (2003) has used to describe the force of emotions which she portrays as two-faced: akin to alien forces coming in to disrupt everyday life and its rhythms but at the same time embodying our deepest thoughts.

Looking at the ways in which people understand and experience the *kami* we saw a similar non-ordinary experience. As we have seen at the beginning of Chapter 2, what often surprises foreigners is precisely how everyday, ordinary and casual Shinto practice is. Encumbered with the legacy of Eliade (1959) and Durkheim (1961), which sees the nature of the sacred in its separation from the everyday, we struggle to understand a devotional practice embedded in everyday activities like work, research and leisure. However these practices, markedly “ordinary”, do have “pockets” of the non-ordinary in them. As mentioned in the introduction, after visiting a shrine regularly and enquiring about rituals and cosmology a *kannushi*, remarking on my overly formal approach to his practices, told me how looking at the ritual structure of Shinto is somehow missing the point. The whole point of these rituals, he said, is to make you *feel* the kami. The offerings, the ritual invocations, the sharing of food and sake – all of the rituals are there to take you to a point where the kami can be felt and experienced. I inquired over and over again about this “feeling” but, the problem was, one must feel it in order to understand it. “Feeling the kami” is something fundamental for all the *kannushi* I have spoken to.

Feeling the kami during ritual actions is something that takes time and dedication – it takes a practice. Ritual - in its “religious” form and not the ordinary one envisaged by theorists of the everyday such as Simmel (1950b) and Goffman (1959, 1967) - is

markedly non-ordinary; in Shinto stiff, repetitive, somehow artificial. Through these ritual interactions, through an intense engagement with ritual forms, one can get to the feeling, to a direct connection with the *kami*. This does not mean that ordinary versions of these “feeling” do not exist. The Yamakage sect in Aichi prefecture for example, a dynastic group the tradition of ancient Shinto (*Ko Shintō*), puts a strong emphasis on this feeling – people attuned to the *kami* can feel them in nature: in stones, mountains, trees and so on (see Yamakage 2012). Similarly, it has been argued that forms of “tact”, subtle attuning to invisible webs of cause and effect, are central to the ways people relate the spirit-world in Japan (Jensen et al. 2016). In Shrine Shinto, however, this feeling is limited to ritual activities.

Nevertheless, there is one moment in the year when this becomes easier for all the people that do not invest much time in their local shrine to feel the *kami* (and, importantly, for the *kami* to feel the community). This time is the festival. Although the explanations of what exactly is happening to the *kami* in the festival changed from shrine to shrine, at least in my enquiries, all *kannushi* agree that the parade is an opportunity for people to feel the *kami*. In these moments – drunk, grunting under the weight of the *mikoshi*, shouting and sweating together – but also sitting on the side of the street on a break eating *edamame*, drinking beer, jumping into water fountains – the *kami* is close and can be felt. The affective intensity of the festival, of these moments when seclusion and diffusion seem to be one and the same, is what the whole festival is, for the *kannushi*, about. If you asked my friends they would instead tell you that the festival is about community spirit, drinking and paying respect to the *kami* but for the *kannushi* these things are precisely what the affective bond with the *kami* elicits. The festival creates feelings of belonging to a community because it strengthens the bond

with the kami.¹⁷⁴

The elation of the festival is similar to the drunken evenings of the community of the Church of the Holy Family. Here affect was expressed through an infusion of belonging and intimacy into a world of rules. The work that the community does to build bonds and belonging is explicitly affective – it is made of smiles across the pews, chats in the courtyard, seating arrangements in the community hall, cooking for each other at community events and helping new people to integrate. The work of Christianity is, for the community, the work of intimacy. In those drunken evenings we have seen the infusion of affect in a world of rules – the Christianity promulgated by the priest – but also the infusion of people's understanding of the Christian message into everyday life outside church. The peak where this is fully achieved is in the blur of drunkenness – when people fall off chairs, shout for more alcohol, fall asleep at the table, spill their drinks all over themselves. The double-encompassment of Ch. 4, the enmeshing of Christian and Tokyo worlds, happens in these moments of drunkenness, barely remembered the day after.

Even Nakamura-san, who we have seen trapped in a double-bind, somehow achieves a measure of intimacy in the intensity of discomfort. Through our friendship he started getting invited to many of these drinking events – people did not think he would be interested in before because he is, in the words of many members, too serious (*majime*). At each of these occasions the same scenes would unfold. On that night, before he managed to slip away, someone started asking about his private life – “do you live alone? Don't you have a girlfriend?” Nakamura-san was visibly uncomfortable

174 For an analysis of the festival precisely in terms of its feeling see Yanagawa 1988.

but that only seemed to increase the barrage of questions until the whole table was focused on him - “Why are you not married yet?” “Don't you like any of the girls in church?”. I remember so many analogous situations: “drink! Why do you drink so slowly?”. We were drunk at Fukuzawa-san's house. He was uncomfortable and two old ladies were closing in on him with questions about his private life. “Why are you not married? Is there anyone you like? How much do you earn? Don't you want children?”. Again he answered each question politely. “Drink!”, cheered the two ladies, “Don't keep your shoulders so hunched.. loosen up!” They watched him drinking waiting to refill his glass, they laughed and patted his leg - “why don't you drink faster? Is this embarrassing? Come on, we are just two old ladies!”. Nakamura-san's discomfort was always palpable and source of amusement for the drunken elders of the community. Yet he kept coming every single time, showing up with wine or sake at every event. Although he was uncomfortable, morally and emotionally, these gatherings did have for Nakamura-san an effect - making him much closer to the rest of the community.

While these moments of overlap and blurring are often momentary and rare, as in the aesthetic experiences of *yūgen* or the elation of the festival, in the chapter on the Takahashi family we have seen something a bit different. Here it is actual objects and not moments that encapsulate this overlap. These objects - heirlooms, buildings, photographs - encapsulate moments of rupture (bombings, marriages, deaths) while at the same time encapsulating continuity. It is interesting to notice how if much of the literature on Japanese kinship has, as we have seen above, assigned intimacy to the realm of *uchi* - often encompassing siblingship and horizontal bonds -, the vertical *ie* is often perceived - in parallel to Evans-Pritchard and Fortes' view of descent as part

of the juro-political domain – as a place of duty and sacrifice. However we have seen how these objects act as “affective catalysts” that, through their blurring of temporal scales, infuse both horizontal and vertical bonds with feelings of intimacy on the one hand, and anxieties and duties on the other. While these objects are markedly “ordinary” – they are a constitutive part of the family – it is their movement that creates rupture and continuity in the *ie*. It is through non-ordinary disruptions – not encoded in the ordinary workings of descent – that continuity and rupture on the one hand, and horizontal and vertical bonds on the other, overlap and kinship is thus lived. These objects are, in a sense, eruptions – they are made and unmade in specific historical junctures where the two dimensions clash and eventually blur.

Words like “invisible vibrations”, “atmosphere”, “touch” (even if at distance), which seem to be key to the “knot” delineated in the previous section, do and do not resonate with these affective intensities. These affective intensities erupt from the ordinary – in the form of festivals, drunken gatherings, gardens and tombs or simply quiet aesthetic experiences. However if, as we have seen above, much affect theory sees affect as an accumulation on the edges of the everyday, this is not the case here. These “eruptions” are not the product of an excessive accumulation, of an overflowing. They are sudden intensities that do sometimes come from nowhere – like the sudden ruptures of *yūgen* or the bombs onto Kobe – or that are sometimes actively pursued and engineered for their affective potential. In fact one might dispute the use of the word affect at all, and resort instead to the words “intensities”. While this is perhaps more appropriate, affect is here the more useful category. The moment of blurring is, in many of the contexts seen, indeed an “intensity” – it is a non-ordinary experience that expresses itself as an aesthetic, religious or affective experience. However this intensity does also elicit

affect, in the canonical sense. This was most clear in Chapter 3 – affect here is predicated on non-ordinary experiences such as “emergency” marriages, returns to the *furusato*, tombs left empty, and yet the affect elicited by these experiences is somehow ordinary. It is a sense of belonging, attachment, anxiety and care. The same can be said for the festival and the Christian drinking parties, especially in the case of Nakamura; through the non-ordinary intensity of blurring ordinary affects and belonging are elicited and maintained. Even Chapter 1, which focused sharply on the non-ordinary, showed how the potential for blurring creates sustained aesthetic (and political) interest – and eventually can be made “normal”. In other words these non-ordinary experiences – which are by nature ephemeral – leave an after-glow or an atmosphere and this after-effect can be called something like “belonging” or “attachment”. Indeed here the original Spinozian meaning is relevant – affect is simply affecting or being affected. These experiences *affect* people and have an *effect* on them, and this effect can be called, canonically, affect.

The next section moves all the considerations we have seen so far into ethnography and looks at a series of art-works that Tajima-san, a salaryman-turned-artist (or, as we shall see, *vice versa*), made in 1997 and did not exhibit until 2015. In his work both silence and self, in the forms we have seen so far, play a key role but the fundamental pivot upon which the work hinges is one of the “intensities of blurring” that we have seen throughout the thesis. His work will then be a jumping point to reflect upon the relationship between ordinary and non-ordinary affects in the logic of blurring.

* * *

Hotel Storms – Careful Explosions at Night-time, Drunk, After a 16hr Day.

This section performs two functions. In a way, it is a rehashing of the argument we saw in Chapters 2 and 3. Given that the knot of silence, selfhood and affect has been central to much essentialist literature, the next section finds, in the midst of it, the same blurring dynamic. On the other hand it also does something different – it brings an ethnographic example of the kind of aesthetic experiences that we have seen in Chapter 1 but one that is grounded in ethnography. These two aspects amount, in the context of this chapter, to an explication of the affective principle just explored. In other words the section is an ethnographic exploration of how silence and self become constitutive to the emotional intensities elicited by the logic of blurring and overlapping to then move to, through it, explore the relationship between non-ordinary intensities and ordinary affects.

Archiving back to Chapter 1 and moving again to the arts we find that link between affect and blurring that the thesis had put on the side in trying to understand the “logic” that elicits affect and not the elicited affect itself. This section, however, explores art not textually but through the words and experiences of a particular artist. The work in focus is 20 years old, but one that was never showed until a few years ago when I saw it for the first time. My conversations with Tajima-san (only Tajima from now on) about his work are then his reflections on what he was doing almost twenty years ago. Because of this, the ethnography in a way “flattens” his reflections, his narration and the work on the same level and my own thinking about it evolved with his own through conversation.

In June 2015 I was part of an art-show in a gallery in Shibuya, showing a collaboration between myself and the artist Yoda Nobuo.¹⁷⁵ The collaboration went on for months and the show was the culmination of our time working together. The day before the opening most of the artists spent time preparing and placing their work in the allocated space in the gallery. By 10:30 pm most people were done and left, but one of the walls still remained unadorned. When I asked someone why no one had put their work there they replied: “Oh.. he is still at work.. he should be here soon”. Indeed about half an hour later a man wearing a suit walked in and introduced himself. In his suit, he looked out of place among the younger artists in the gallery. He politely apologised for being so late and started affixing his work on the wall. The work he showed was not recent – it was from 1997 but he had kept it hidden and was showing it for the first time.

Tajima Tetsuya, the missing artist, is a salaryman in his 50s, working for a big corporation in Tokyo which manufactures optical technology, largely for biomedical use. He lives in Tokyo with his wife and daughter and, like many salarymen in the capital, spends most of his time in the office, often working long shifts that end deep into the night. After studying physics with the dream of becoming a scientist he became disillusioned with the sciences and decided to get a job. By 1997, the year of that art-work, he was in his mid-30s, had just married and was working in the domestic sales division and in charge of special equipment to investigate human cancer tissue and cultured cells. The main part of his job was to travel to medical schools and hospitals around Japan to give demonstrations to prospective buyers. He describes his schedules as follows.

¹⁷⁵ “Itch”, Midori-so Gallery, 13/06 – 27/06/2015. Curated by Shimitsu Sōji.

I would leave the house very early in the morning, take the *shinkansen* (high-speed train), a plane or a taxi and arrive at the site. There I would unload the equipment from the truck, assemble and install it and confirm that it was working. This would be all for the morning. In the afternoon I did the demonstration. I would explain the functions of the equipment to the researchers. They would usually bring their samples and I would measure their samples with our equipment. I would give them the result of the measurements with some advice, without good results they would not purchase the product so this was really important. The equipment was really expensive, about 20 million yen¹⁷⁶, so they had to factor it in the budget for the next year. Because of this I got really nervous during the demonstration all the time. For each customer the demonstration lasted for about two hours and we were done around 5 or 6pm. After the demonstration I would go to the hotel the company had booked for me, leave the baggage in the room and go out for dinner with the company's salesperson for the region. We always ended up in an *izakaya*.¹⁷⁷

Since giving up his dreams of being a physicist he felt uncomfortable and out of place being a salaryman (*iwakan wo kanjiteimashita*). He got interested in art and started dreaming about becoming an artist but his job left him no time to practice. Back at the hotel all he wanted to do was to have a shower, lie down, watch TV or read and fall asleep - but this was the only time he had for himself, away from both work and family. Drunk and exhausted, without any material but the hotel room itself, he would force himself to make art. "As I looked through the hotel room, there were chairs, bedding, pillows, phones and other objects, so I overturned them or stacked them up to make something similar to a sculpture and recorded them with photographs ... Initially it was about placing chairs on the bed, but gradually became bold and began to use the whole room". He would take the mattress off the bed-frame and prop it against the wall, turn the TV upside down, throw the phone on the floor, lay the ironing board over the overturned furniture. Tired and still wearing his suit he would

176 Equivalent to about £100000 at the time.

177 Restaurant-pub, see Chapter 4.

meticulously explode the room until every object in it would be displaced. Towels would lie on overturned cabinets, upside down TVs awkwardly balanced on the bathroom sink, the telephone bale stretched between an upturned chair and an upright mattress. He would then take pictures and diligently put the room back in order. Then go to bed, check out in the morning and go back to work.



27. Tajima Testuya. Hotel Storm 06-02. 1997. 34 x 37 cm. Photographs. (Exhibition Photoshoot by Sunaga Yusuke)

At the beginning of this section I expressed that narration, art-work and reflection would be somehow flattened to the same level. This means that what Tajima told me

about his work was mediated through his own thinking about it and thus this latter becomes the principal ethnographic object, or at least the lenses through which the narration is perceived. The first time we talked about his work he said that he had never thought deeply about it because he knew that he wasn't going to exhibit it anytime soon. It was done, archived and forgotten - and as we shall see shortly no one except his wife saw the collages for short of twenty years. When the moment came it was rather abruptly. A friend nominated Tajima through a Facebook challenge to show something he had made in the past and he unexpectedly found himself posting pictures of his 1997 collages. The curator of the exhibition we were both part of saw it and asked him to be part of the show.

Tajima found himself having to find words for something that until then had only been a silent activity - silent in its performance and silent in its secrecy. In our conversations he was trying to find the right words for it, to think through it loudly for the first time, and his reflections inevitably merge with my own. From this point onwards ethnography and its analysis (my own and Tajima's) are merged and move together. I here focus here on two aspects of his work. Firstly I look at the relationship between balance and chaos to then move to another kind of balance - the one between the life of an artist and the life as a salaryman. In both cases, and predictably so, the logic of blurring makes a reappearance together with its affective outburst in the aesthetic experience.

Tajima-san describes this act as both wild and very meticulous. On the one hand it is an explosion - it is an extreme act done in the creativity of exhaustion. It is the creation of absolute disorder, the deconstruction of an order that is replicated over

and over again in every same-looking business hotel and the creation of something unique and new. The point of his deconstruction is precisely that business hotels all look the same. He calls it a storm. It is wild (*wairudo*) because in the exhaustion, both physical and mental, and the drunkenness it took determination and strength to fight against his desire to just slip into that pre-made order and sleep: the mattress was incredibly heavy and the acts of balance he tried to achieve juxtaposing the objects against each other – mattress against the wall, TV over overturned desk – took both concentration and physical labour.

However Tajima's acts were also slow and meticulous; in fact, “balance” is an important word for him. It was both a visual balance – his artistic sensibility of balancing, for examples, the colours of the objects scattered on the floor with the whiteness of the wall – and a physical balance. Objects were put in precarious positions – prone to falling, about to fall, lasting only for the few minutes when the “storm” was taking place and not made to last longer. He calls this precarious balance “thrilling” (*suriringu*) – heavy and light objects positioned so they are just about to tip, just about to collapse to the floor thus making noise and potentially waking up people in the hotel. There is a tension in the structures he creates, the tension of their impending downfall, the tension of something about to fall that makes it almost painful to watch. Pictures are taken quickly – in the thrill of balance – himself unstably perched over objects to take in as much room as possible.

In a way Tajima's acts are creating chaos: they are deconstructing a preconceived order – the order of the hotel room, of a replicable non-place (cf. Augé 1995) – and creating something that visually looks like a mess. However, he forcefully asserts that

it is not a mess. Everything is carefully placed, painstakingly so, considered in its balance, both visual and physical. Balance and chaos come to overlap: chaos needs a careful order and that order needs the tension of its impending destruction.

Of course, it is easy to see another kind of balance – a grey life of work and duty against creativity and inner desires. Tajima acknowledges these elements in this work. There are, he says, emotions such as “the salary man's sorrow” (*sararīman no kanashimi*) involved in what he was doing.¹⁷⁸ It has been argued that the monolithic image of the urban Japanese man as white collar worker that dominates the imaginary of Japanese masculinity reinforces the stereotypes of homogeneity and conformism of essentialised and orientalised Japan, and that the ways in which masculinity is conceptualised from within are much more diverse and varied (see Roberson and Suzuki 2002). Tajima-san presents a complex image, both reinforcing and defying these stereotypes. His work is indeed an act of rebellion against a system he feels oppressed by. He wants to be an artist but he is stuck in a job he doesn't like - “I want to rebel, but if I do it I will lose my job and be excluded socially, so I must absolutely keep it secret”. He calls it “a kind of secret resistance” (*himitsu no rejisutansu no katsudō no yōna mono*). However he also forcefully denies that “balance” was here what he was trying to achieve – when he talks of balance he means the tension of the previous paragraph, it is pointedly not a mental/spiritual balance (*kokoro no baransu*).

There is no balancing act between the two, none of those balancing acts between inner self and outer façade that much anthropology has seen as central to Japanese sociality

178 See Dasgupta (2013) for a nuanced analysis of the ways in which young men attempt to become salarymen, and hence model citizens, that shows both the acceptance and the minor subversions of the behavioural models of masculinity imposed on them by both their company and society.

at every stage of life.¹⁷⁹ Like in Nussbaum's understanding of emotions, Tajima's upheavals of hotel rooms through 1997 are also “upheavals of thought” (Nussbaum 2003) embodying both the disruption of everyday life and his deepest thoughts. While certain rhetoric used by Tajima in his description of “resistance” recall tropes of frustrated and repressed salarymen toiling under the harsh working conditions of Japanese capitalism, when he talks about his work *per se* he offers a very different image. In this other image the life of the salaryman is infused with thrill, creativity and excitement by his night-time activities and, on the other hand, his artistic life was enabled precisely by what made him unable to pursue it – the duties of work. With the elements of the salaryman life he made art and, with art, he made those business trips into something else. His duties and desires, order and chaos, balance and unbalance, salaryman and artist would in those moments, through the acts of carefully exploding and reversing the explosion, overlap and become indistinguishable.

* * *

Inarticulacy and Everyday Life

In Tajima's work we have seen the dynamics of blurring at work together with some the affective themes that we have explored earlier in the chapter, notably the binary of selfhood. In this section, I tackle the other theme – silence. Here “silence” becomes the operator to talk, though Tajima's experience, about the “problem” of affect in this thesis. When I tried to delineate the “shapes” of affect in the thesis I characterised it as

179 While much of the literature on the binary of selfhood we have seen above focuses on the adult person and her life course, the same discourse of “balancing” has been applied to children and elderly; see e.g. Fukuzawa and Letendre 2001 for adolescence and Kavedžija 2015 for old age.

chiefly non-ordinary – as a non-ordinary experience of “intensity”. At the same time these experiences change something, they leave an affective after-effect, an atmosphere. In all three ethnographic chapters this can be named as “belonging”, “attachment”. Here the relation between the two is explored in order to see how non-ordinary intensities leave an “afterglow”, an affective mood that persists even after the moment of blurring has passed.

The theme of the “secret” (*himitsu*) is for Tajima the most important part of his work. These acts were a secret that had to exist at night, behind closed doors. The thought of anyone – colleagues or hotel staff – finding out what he was doing made him worried and nervous. When finished he would use a disposable camera to document his work and then proceed to reverse the process and put the room back as it was before he started. In this counter-process he would make sure that everything was in the exact position where it was when he walked into the room – to the point of remembering the exact position of the pen on the desk, of the menu for room-service, of the remote control for the TV. This reversal was easier – although he would be, by this point, completely exhausted at least he did not have to consider balance and placement in the same way. In the morning he would check out and leave the hotel as if nothing had happened – but inwardly nervous: “when leaving the hotel, I felt like I committed some crime.. if you are a criminal you would be wondering if there is any evidence left on the scene, that is how I felt”. The same nerve-racking secrecy was also exhilarating – at night, moving furniture while the rest of the hotel slept, he liked imagining himself from the outside: he thought that the image of a salaryman doing this at night in a business hotel on a business trip, unbeknown to colleagues or anyone else, was also strange and amusing (*kimyōde omoshiroi to mo omotta*).

The only other person who would see these works for the next twenty years is his wife. When she saw the pictures he was taking she advised him to not show them to anyone. Herself an artist, she thought that, without contacts in the Tokyo art-world, he would be exposing himself too much and potentially suffer negative consequences. His practice continued throughout 1997, but he never told anyone about what he was doing at night on these business trips. This silence is important because his work acquired, through the years, the feeling of “past things that have gone away” (*satteshimatta kako no koto*), it has aged “like wine” and became something else. Looking back Tajima considers the silence and secrecy to be constitutive of the work. At the time it had to be silent, and today it acquires an added quality through it. I shall come back to this promptly, but before, I move to another kind of silence that is constitutive to his experiences.

We have seen how documenting the storm - in the very eye of it, between the explosion and its reversal - was central to his activities. Given that he couldn't bring any photographic equipment with him he had to buy a disposable camera in a convenience store. While this was not ideal he did like the cheap-looking quality of the prints - they looked like pictures of an accident or a crime scene. Disposable cameras have a very narrow angle of view and cannot contain the whole room in one photograph, so he had to take pictures from different angles in order to capture the whole room. He would then put them together to compose the whole scene. On this particular aspect, Tajima likens his compositions to the photographic collages of the British artist David Hockney (see e.g. Weschler 1984), but with a major difference. Hockney's photographs have an internal principle of organization - they are about

people and landscapes and have a sense of unity, of order. Tajima's work, on the other hand, is different – because the subject is a messy room, it is chaos, he does not have a particular goal when composing, he does not know in advance what the composition must look like.

The narrow viewing angle of the disposable camera is fitting because, for Tajima, it resembles the ways in which people perceive objects, not able to see the whole thing at once. When putting all these single acts of perception, captured by the pictures, together one gets a composition not of unity, like in Hockney's work, but of chaos. “I think chaos (*kaosu*) is essential”, he says. Here Tajima comes close to encapsulating the tension between classification and chaos that Mary Douglas, and Levi-Strauss particularly, had seen as central to the human endeavour (see Introduction). In his words:

I heard a story. When someone who is born blind receives a cornea transplant and can finally see, the patient does not know how to interpret the information of the incoming light. In the story, eventually they close their eyes and return to the world of sound, just feeling their way. The information of the light entering from the eyes is, for that person, chaos itself. There is a particular law (*yarikata*) in the way people interpret what they see through sight. That is no more than human visual interpretation, I think that it is only a part of the true appearance of the object. Originally, the world is chaos. It is only through interpreting that human beings can see. Several coincidences by chance happened simultaneously/overlapped (*ikutsu ka no gūzen ga kasanatte*) and my work may have been able to glimpse the chaos.



28. Tajima Tetsuya. Hotel Storm 07. 1997. 34 x 43 cm. Photographs. (Exhibition Photoshoot by Sunaga Yusuke)

Tajima's experience in the blur of the storm comes close to the aesthetic experiences of Chapter 1. In the way he talks about the "storms" one feels as if his agency is both asserted and negated, as if the objects took a life of their own and his body was swept into the storm together with them. Capturing this experience becomes almost impossible and Tajima needs to resort to oblique collage techniques to capture the essence of it. The medium used to capture the experience is itself swept into it and chaos becomes the only way to capture chaos (where this chaos is, again, carefully curated). Saliently, one finds the same problem with language. Tajima calls those activities in the hotel room simply "doing 'it'" (*"sore" wo shiteiru*). If one asked him in 1997 what he was doing he would have said that he was simply "doing 'it' in the hotel", it is only today – collages hanging on the wall of a gallery – that he can say "I was

making a work of art". In other words, those activities are not only silenced by social constraints and anxieties about them, but also somehow by their impossibility to be put into words. "It" becomes a substitute for something unspeakable – for his activities in the hotel which are more than a mere shifting of furniture.

Tajima's inability to grasp those activities with language – beside the empty signifier "it" – has many equivalences in this thesis. Every single experience of blurring in this chapter was accompanied by moments of inarticulacy in which people, at my prompting, tried to express feelings that cannot be put into words. Piers Vitebsky (2008) has written about moments of inarticulacy caused by the anthropologist's presence. In his case converted Sora experience the loss of their former culture and, with it, the loss of "a way of expressing loss" (Vitebsky 2008: 256). The Sora are like the Urapmin, caught between two cultures and actively working towards fully adopting Christianity. In this gap, some feelings can no longer be articulated while others cannot yet be so.

Here what is happening is precisely the opposite. Instead of the empty gap between a binary (for the Sora tradition and Christianity) what causes inarticulacy here is, instead of emptiness, an overwhelming fullness. The two sides of the binary overlap and merge and the feeling of that merging and overlapping is overwhelming and impossible to put into words. When asked about their experiences people would say that "it's difficult", "it's hard to put in words" or similar tokens for the loss of words. As we have seen the *kannushi* had said – "you have to feel it". Asking people about the feeling of the festival, the feelings around the movements of graves and their consequences, the forbidden drunkenness of Christians, one always precipitates

moments of inarticulacy where words are simply lacking. The words are lacking because what is elicited by blurring cannot be contained in language and as Chapter 1 tried to show trying to describe them in language, for example in literary productions, requires paradoxical, or often religious, metaphors.

Tajima's work can help us understand how these experiences, so unlike everyday life, can actually bleed into it and create those feelings of attachment and belonging that we have touched upon earlier. As we have seen after taking pictures Tajima replaced every object carefully in the exact position where it was when he walked into the room. The whole process, from start to finish, would take approximately two hours. When he was finished he describes an unnatural atmosphere in the room. The room would look exactly the same but “something” had changed, objects would look casually or naturally placed around the room but, at the same time, they would extrude a strange aura. Tajima's perceived unnaturalness (*fushizen*) comes close to Freud's characterisation of the uncanny or, in a better translation, the “unhomely” (1999; cf. Fisher 2016: 8-13). Freud connects the unhomely to mechanical bodies, prostheses, things that look human but that are not - but also to repetition, to retracing one's steps when one is lost, to a feeling of *deja-vu*. The unhomely itself is predicated on a sort of blurring, on the overlapping of the familiar and the unfamiliar, on the perception of the unfamiliar within the familiar and *vice versa*. Tajima's room after the storm would feel strange and unnatural, a feeling not entirely pleasant. There was, however, also a positive afterglow. In looking at the relationship between Tajima's life as a salaryman and his life as artist, we have seen how the activities in the hotel somehow bled into his daily life, making work somehow bearable if not pleasurable and thrilling. The feelings elicited by Tajima's storms at night would carry into the

day-world and leave him with a feeling of fulfilment (*jūjitsukan*) that would make these trips, even when no storms happened, pleasurable experiences.

While these experiences do not give us a blueprint to understand the diverse “intensities” we have seen throughout the thesis, they do help us understand the relationship between them and these lingering atmospheres and affects. These experiences are, as we have seen, markedly non-ordinary. Their non-ordinariness makes them untenable on the long-term, ineffable and barely bearable. Tajima's explosions exist in balance for a moment and then they are gone – and in their “being gone” they need to leave everything unchanged, everything as it was. The intensities of blurring need to slip into the ordinary like nothing had happened. The raucousness of the festival, drunken inappropriate behaviour at Christian gathering, the movement of families – all these intense moments of blurring need to lead back into the ordinary, back to the normality that preceded the non-ordinary experience. Yet something of that intensity is left behind and an affective “afterglow” lingers, one that often translates into feelings of positive attachment and belonging. Tajima's uncanny however also hints back at the less positive emotions elicited by the experiences in the first chapter, a disquiet that can lead to outright horror. These non-ordinary intensities are nested in the crevices of everyday life and, while they fully absorb the subject in non-ordinary mental spaces, they also leave the everyday untouched and yet somehow “affected”.

* * *

Conclusion

In this chapter I have brought into focus the affective import of the logic of blurring. I started by looking at the ways in which affect has been primarily understood in the anthropology of Japan and argued that non-verbal communication and a particular binary conception of selfhood have been the abiding tropes through which affect (often treated as “intimacy” or “sense of duty”) has been understood. I then revised some of the chapters of the thesis through these lenses to argue that what we have seen so far is a different kind of affect, not an “ordinary affect” but instead an experience of non-ordinary intensity. However after these non-ordinary experiences something remains, an affective afterglow of attachment or belonging. Through the ethnography of Tajima's 1997 night-time activities, I firstly showed a case where the elements of “Japanese affect” are expressed through non-ordinary intensities to then analyse the relationship between ordinary and non-ordinary affects in his work.

What we are left with, through the analysis of the *Hotel Storm* collages and the experiences that led to them, is only a depiction of the process and not an explanation of it. While the preceding chapters have tried to understand “blurring” as a logic, this chapter has focused on its affective epiphenomena. Conjoining oppositions, as Simmel (1971: 354-5) has noted long ago, has a generative force and in the logic of blurring what is generated is an affective charge, both in the form of non-ordinary intensity and its lingering afterglows. However, “why” these experiences elicit affect, besides the simple ethnographic fact that they do, is outside the purview of this thesis.

The question, rather, is why these experiences come to be essentialised in the ways that we have seen in Chapter 1. Or, to go back to the question posed at the end of that chapter, what exactly is the relationship between these affective “blurrings” and essentialism? When I suggested to him that his experiences reminded me of the intensities of *yūgen*, and his meditations on secrecy and the value gained with the passing of time of the nostalgic beauty of *aware*, Tajima did not agree with me at all. His work rather relates, he said, to the one of the French-American artist Marcel Duchamp. One cannot claim a straightforward causal link between experiences of “blurring” and essentialism. The intensities of blurring do not elicit “cultural intimacy” (*sensu* Herzfeld 1997) but merely a sense of attachment that can, indeed, be a form of cultural intimacy but does not necessarily have to be so. The argument so far in the thesis has been that, once one looks at essentialised social forms, one finds the logic of blurring as the pivot upon which people's engagement with them hinges. In this chapter we have then seen how this logic elicits affect, both ordinary and non-ordinary. The missing link, one could say, is the one between affect and essentialism and the Conclusion will attempt to make sense of this relationship.



CONCLUSION

“It was already dusk. Don Juan pulled two thin, cotton blankets from his sack, threw one into my lap, and sat cross-legged with the other one over his shoulders. Below us the valley was dark, with its edges already diffused in the evening mist. [...] “The twilight is the crack between the worlds,” he said softly, without turning to me. I didn’t ask what he meant. My eyes became tired. Suddenly I felt elated; I had a strange, overpowering desire to weep”.

- Carlos Castaneda
- *The Teachings of Don Juan*

This thesis has addressed the constitutive role that essentialism plays in the everyday life of urban Japanese modernity. The experiment has been to try to understand essentialism “indigenously”, that is not as an object of critique – as it has been often handled – nor as a theoretical stance, or a true ethnographic description, to be uncritically assumed. This thesis has shown that once one looks at essentialism as it is lived and understood in its everyday dimensions, one finds it predicated on non-ordinary affective experiences of “blurring”. Essentialism is predicated on a dialectic of opposites and the particular “shape” of this dialectic is the dynamic of blurring that this thesis has taken as its central object. I began my analysis by focusing on native expressions of this logic in the modern Japanese history of arts and ideas, and there I showed not only its shapes and presences but also its elevation to a national sentiment, its essentialisation. I then moved on to analyse two social forms that have been at the very centre of essentialist discourses throughout Japanese modern history

- the family and Shinto. These chapters have shown that within essentialism, within social forms that have been made and remade as “Japanese” and culturally unique, one finds a binary where an essentialised understanding, considered atemporal and unique, coexists with a non-essentialist one based on change and historicity. I showed the moments and modalities in which these binaries are blurred and made to overlap and argued that these moments - which in the family are transfigured in stone and photographic paper - are the key to grasping not only the coexistence of contrasting understandings but also the way in which people engage with these forms.

Given that the initial example chosen to illustrate the main problem of the thesis was the one of the coexistence of Western and Japanese elements in what was considered by people affectively “Japanese”, I went on to analyse this problem in a small Catholic community to see how “foreignness” and “Japaneseness” interact. Here the problem is different from what we had seen so far; while with Shinto and the family the binary was within social forms that people already engaged, here people find themselves in between incompatible systems that demand that they make a choice. People in the church's community are engaging something that is markedly foreign and that sets them apart from the world outside while, at the same time, keeping an engagement with this outside. The community is, in a sense, in the space between the binary and, through the logic of blurring, bring both worlds to overlap and coexist in this in-between space allowing them to be, in spite of strong forces of rupture imposed on them, both “Japanese” and “Christians”. The last chapter re-engaged the problem of affect that we had met in the Introduction and the first chapter. Through an engagement with the art-work of a Tokyo salaryman I showed how intense non-ordinary experiences of “blurring” leave an affective afterglow of attachment and

belonging.

The foregoing study, then, develops an argument about an affective logic of blurring in an effort to understand the ways in which my friends and interlocutors in Tokyo engage, understand, and live essentialism in their everyday lives. I argued that to understand essentialism indigenously one must understand this logic, that one must take seriously these non-ordinary moments of intensity that crop up over and over again not only in everyday life but also in the imaginative worlds of art, literature, popular culture. Instead of dismissing these intensities as mere fodder for essentialism – just another trite piece about cherry blossoms, just a drunken hustle – the thesis has argued that they are indeed constitutive to it, that they are indigenously held as important because they *are* important. Even though these moments are by nature elusive and ineffable, I have attempted an ethnographically grounded investigation of the constitutive traits of this logic as the cornerstone upon which a study of indigenous essentialism in Japan can be built. By way of conclusion, I wish to develop these thoughts in three different directions, thinking through the contributions that the thesis brings to the anthropology of Japan.

The first comes in the form of a foregone question: what does a study of these ineffable moments and intensities contribute to the study of Japan or to anthropology more generally? As I discuss in the introduction the main point of this thesis is not in the answers that it might provide to the extensive literature already out there, but rather in the questions one might want to ask of it. Essentialism is, in both the study of Japan and in anthropology more generally, an unresolved and problematic lingering presence. It really is problematic from so many points of view – from Western

scholars accusing indigenous people of essentialism, through essentialism being used as fodder for racism and exclusion, to its rejection and the forsaking of abstraction and analysis on larger scales. Essentialism seems to skirt on the borders of categories that are alternatively seen as desirable or undesirable traits - belonging, identity, nation, culture, alterity - and these are, in turn, all central in a way or another to the discipline of anthropology. Taking essentialism “seriously” in this context means to try to understand what those things mean in a particular context for the people that reckon with them daily. That is not understanding what traits, markers and values constitute Japaneseness today, but how those are engaged by people in their everyday lives.

By doing so, I argued, something else comes to light. The picture of essentialism that emerges from this analysis, from an analysis *of* essentialism, is paradoxically one that does not chime with essentialist imagery at all. The image of Japanese essentialism we are left with is one that encompasses, together with its predictable forms, the very things that anti-essentialist discourses see as its opposite.¹⁸⁰ Foreignness, historical change, inmixing, adoption and adaption are all key parts of this essentialism, not only what is timeless and unique. Weary of “essentialising essentialism” (Herzfeld 1997: 27) the thesis indeed has tried to make sense of the paradoxical fact that one finds in Tokyo today an intense investment in change - through importing, adapting, innovating - together with a concern for conservation. Things that are deemed to be timeless change all the time, indeed it feels like things must change continuously in order to stay the same.

180 Chih-Yu Shih (2012) has compellingly argued that, for Japan and China, the West does not exist in the West but both at their centre and periphery. I completely agree, at least in the case of Japan, and am also reminded on the reflections on the marginality and centrality of the figure of the emperor that we have seen in Chapter 2.

Instead of understanding this through the tropes of “tradition” and “modernity”, analysing this logic has brought a new paradigm. Often Japan is portrayed as a strange assemblage, stuck between traditionalism and reactionary ideologies on the one hand and, on the other, invested in a particular form of capitalist mimesis (cf. Taussig 1993) in its adoption, since the end of WWII, of Western values, economic models and so on. Like Robbins' Urapmins, Japan is understood as “on the road to something”, that something being either Westernisation or a new synthesis. Through taking seriously historical works that show how traditions are always constructed at historical junctions, but also noting how discourses of timelessness are always part of these constructions, I endeavoured to move forward from the binary of tradition vs. modernity by showing how, through the logic of blurring, both can be a constitutive part of Japanese essentialism. Essentialism in Tokyo today, I have argued, always contains a kernel of negation that brings it back to itself through its demise. In this context we find the intensities engendered by this “logic of blurring” as central to the daily life of essentialism and, in turn, these moments essentialised themselves and fundamental to many essentialist discourses.

The second point is a re-evaluation of Benedict's work. Through this redefinition of essentialism we can also reconsider the importance of binaries in thinking about Japan ethnographically. “Blurring”, as we have seen, needs binaries; binaries that are blurred and yet always maintained. Despite the harsh criticism of Benedict's juxtaposition of Japanese culture as the mirror-image of the US, “mirroring” has been, at least since Kluchhohn' *Mirror for Man* (1949), a widespread practice in

anthropology.¹⁸¹ “The other” has been often employed as a mirror to understand or re-think certain methodological baggage that the discipline carries. Examples of this methodological mirroring are analyses of “dividual” models of selfhood in order to problematise Western individualist assumptions and, more recently, the one of “non-dualist” cultures to cast light on the inherent dualism of anthropological analysis. While a version of the first example has been central to much anthropological debate in Japan – in the form of works on “groupism” and relational selfhood – it is the second one that is here more relevant. Something that has emerged from this thesis is how binaries are indigenously fundamental in Japan – old and new, tradition and modernity, inside and outside, Western and Japanese are not only binaries imposed from the outside by anthropologists, but native categories that are pervasive within Japanese modernity. We find then here another form of mirroring – one where “our” dualism as analysts is mirrored not by non-dualism, but by another form of strong dualism, albeit with its own logic.

While many of the theorisations of the *Chrysanthemum* have been employed and deconstructed incessantly since its publication, there is one insight that, while often cited, has not been given much analytical attention. Benedict depicted “the Japanese” as stuck between contradictions. She famously wrote:

181 Cf. Robertson 2002b for a reflection on mirroring and reflexivity in the anthropology of Japan.

All these contradictions however [...] are true. Both the sword and the chrysanthemum are part of the picture. The Japanese are, to the highest degree, both aggressive and unaggressive, both militaristic and aesthetic, both insolent and polite, rigid and adaptable, submissive and resentful of being pushed around, loyal and treacherous, brave and timid, conservative and hospitable to new ways. (Benedict 1946: 2).

In a way then this thesis is a vindication of Benedict's work. Given her method – interviews with Japanese people about “the Japanese” – Benedict received a very essentialised picture of Japanese culture. While this has been heavily criticised, as we have seen in the Introduction, we can now rethink her contribution. Her work can be understood not, saliently, as an ethnography “of Japan” but instead as an ethnography of Japanese self-perception, i.e. of indigenous essentialism. Contradictions are, I argued, central to the logic of essentialism and it is then not surprising that Benedict found “the Japanese” stuck between contradictions. “There is a sense in which all of us have been writing footnotes to [*The Chrysanthemum and the Sword*] since it appeared in 1946” – wrote two of the most famous anthropologists of US-occupied Japan (Plath and Smith 1992: 206) – and this thesis can be put in that category. It is a footnote, albeit a lengthy one, about the logic of those contradictions and their importance in the life of people in Japan.

The third point is more complex and encompasses two interrelated reflections, firstly a reflection on the relationship between form and feeling to then approach the problem of the relationship between blurring and essentialism. The conclusion of Chapter 1 had already raised the latter problem – is blurring a function of essentialism or vice versa? – and, in so doing, already front-flagged the fact that the relationship is ambiguous because ambiguity is central to it. What follows then tries to make sense of

this ambiguity, starting from a reflection on formality and affect to then move the same considerations to the one between blurring and essentialism.

If binaries are here re-asserted as central to the logic of essentialism, so is their transcendence. “Transcendence” is not the right word and yet, as we have seen in the introduction, I cannot come up with a proper “shape” for this logic. In this thesis I used “blurring” as a place-holder for different dynamics that fit a general schema – blurring, overlapping, going in one direction to end up in the other, figure-ground reversal; all of these “shapes” have appeared at one point or another of this work. I have to admit defeat and concede, here at the end, that I cannot establish conclusively the exact contours of it. Through fieldwork and writing I have been chasing it for years and, still, I find it as elusive as ever; this is my best attempt at laying it on paper clearly.

I will, however, bring a mitigating circumstance in my defence to, metaphorically, plead for a shorter sentence. As I tried to highlight at different points in the thesis this logic is, in a sense, not “about” logic at all. It is instead about a certain intense *feeling* it elicits. As we have seen in the last, and the first, chapter the expression of this feeling in words is incredibly hard and leads to moments of inarticulacy or, alternatively, to paradoxical images such as “luminous darkness”. Thinking back to the Introduction and the anthropological equivalences brought to bear upon the object of the thesis it was clear that a structural approach to something inherently anti-structural is somehow doomed to fail. Both Lévi-Strauss and Douglas struggled, together with their material, to contain something that inherently defies categorisation. This they, like Tajima-san in the last chapter, understood as the chaotic unregulated stream of

experience. However, as I tried to show, this logic is precisely about the interplay of structure and anti-structure, or form and formlessness, and the feeling of this interplay. It is, in other words, about something ineffable and it is not surprising that structure should fail to fully circumscribe it.

Myth, Lévi-Strauss argued in the Finale of the *Mythologiques* (1981: 625-695), is tragic. Structure, we learn, can elicit affect and feeling. In this thesis I delineate a “logic” and treated it largely structurally. However I also showed that this structure is there in order to elicit affect and that affect, in the end, is what the whole dynamic is *about*. There is a tendency of thinking about Japan in terms of form – social archetypes such as the salaryman, formality and politeness, the mastery of form in the zen arts such as calligraphy and the tea ceremony. When Alexander Kojève reprinted the famous lectures on Hegel that he gave in Paris between 1933 and 1939 (which were attended by luminaries such as Lacan, Bataille and Queneau) he added a lengthy footnote that mentions, in passing, Japan. This is, again, in relation to the US and, again, as its diametrical opposite (Kojève 1980: 161-162). For Kojève both America and Japan have arrived at the “end of history” but in opposite ways. Thanks to its “snobbery” - “the Noh theatre, the ceremony of tea, the art of bouquet flowers” - Japanese civilisation has detached “form” and “content” so the Japanese person “may oppose himself as pure 'form' to himself and to others taken as 'content'” (Kojève 1980: 162; see also Agamben 2004: 10-12; Aroz-Rafael 2009). The portrayal of Japan as the house of form is, only a few years later, repeated by Roland Barthes in his portrayal of Japan as an “empire of empty signs” (1982).¹⁸²

¹⁸² Alan Wolfe (1989: 222) sees Kojève's and Barthes' positions as an affirmation of Japan's postmodernity.

This thesis has tried to argue against this tendency, to argue that Japan is not “all about the form”. Form and politeness do, undoubtedly, play a big part in Japanese social life (cf. Hendry 1993) but, this thesis has argued, these structures are there to elicit something else, something ineffable – a feeling, affect, intensities – something that, as we have seen in Chapter 5, is inherently anti-structural. One cannot say either that, against Kojève and Barthes, Japan is “all about the feeling” because, as we have seen throughout the thesis, “form” is never fully transcended. Binaries overlap and yet they are maintained even in the moments of intensity. When the moment has passed we are not left with a new synthesis of the ruins of previous binaries, but with the same binary we started with, unchanged. In the context of urban Japanese modernity, this thesis has attempted to show, feeling – although anti-structural – needs form and structure to arise and conversely form can never fix it, drawing boundaries elicits their blurring.

An equivalence can be drawn with the relationship between essentialism and blurring. Chapter 5 has shown how blurring elicits affects, intensities and afterglows, but did not get close to understanding their relation to essentialism. To attempt to elucidate this relationship the argument of this thesis becomes, here at the very end, somehow circular, and arches back to the first chapter. Chapter 1 had attempted to show how essentialism and aesthetic experiences of “blurring” - in virtue of their affective power - become, in post-war Japan and possibly earlier, deeply entangled. With scholars such as Ohnuki-Tierney and Marilyn Ivy on the one hand, and artists such as Kawabata and Mishima on the other, we saw how “blurring” becomes instrumental to discourses by both state and native scholars, which are themselves conducive to the construction of nationalism and essentialism. The nexus of essentialism and blurring

was here a *feeling* - be that nostalgia, the sadness and beauty of the falling blossom/kamikaze plane, the intense experience of luminous darkness. That feeling, elicited by blurring, was where the essence (of language, of things, of performance) was deemed to be. It is by going back to Chapter 1 that one can, at this point understand this relationship. Chapter 1 both delineates the logic of blurring for the work of the thesis and, in a way, delivers the argument by showing the entanglement between essentialism and blurring.

There are two logical levels at work here. This thesis has shown how in essentialised social forms one finds a binary between an essentialised mode and a non-essentialist one founded on change and hybridity, and how it is in experiences of their blurring that people's engagement with them is rooted. We have seen how, through these "blur-rings", the two sides of the binary become entangled and indistinguishable: things need to change to remain the same, approach to grow remote, and so on. The last chapter has highlighted the powerful affective dimensions of these experiences, the feeling itself, and by arching back to Chapter 1 we can see how the distinctions that meet their demise in the experiences of blurring are immediately neatly drawn again. The same experience of dissolution of the binary is, in virtue of its affective power, in turn essentialised, thus re-drawing binaries between what is old and new, Japanese and Western, and so on. The family, for example, contains within itself both its essentialised and its non-essentialist version, and yet through their blurring it becomes the "Japanese family". We meet essentialism as part of the binary which is central to experiences of blurring (e.g. the vertical essentialised *ie*, the hidden eternal *kami*) and then again, one logical level higher, encompassing the blurring itself (the family as blueprint for Japanese society, Shinto as native religion). Sometimes, as we have seen

in examples such as *aware* or Kuki's *iki*, the very feeling becomes itself a cultural practice, the practice of essentialism and boundary-making (cf. Ahmed 2004).

It pays here to think back to two of the authors we have met in the Introduction, Turner and Agamben. Differently from the structuralist approaches of Douglas and Lévi-Strauss, these authors saw the in-between spaces of blurring and indistinction as “possibility”, as a space where society can be remade and categories re-invented. In Agamben, however, we could already see an ambiguity in the notion of possibility: while in works such as *The Coming Community* (1993) this ambiguous spaces provide the basis for social and political change, in books such as *Homo Sacer* (1998) and *State of Exception* (2005) we see how these spaces of possibility can be appropriated by the state and turned into the opposite of social creativity and possibility. Similarly in this thesis we have seen how, through its essentialisation, through the essentialisation of its intensities, blurring becomes central to those nationalist state (and non-state) discourses that scholars of cultural critique set out to criticise.

Does this mean, then, that form – the timeless essence, a “Japan” inherent to people *qua* Japanese – “wins” in the end against feeling, against the intensities and possibilities of affect elicited by blurring? As we have just seen essentialism always re-asserts itself over the “blurring”, captures the feeling within its form: blurring itself becomes essentialised as Japanese and unique. As in the case of the relationship between form and feeling, however, a straight answer is impossible. In this thesis we have seen how, although the affective charge of blurring might be essentialised, it never sits neatly within boundaries – it can always be sensed and felt, it precipitates moments of inarticulacy, it exists in silences lingering after sentences trail off into

nothing. To go back to the *kannushi*'s dictum we have seen in the last chapter – but also to the embarrassed silences of the night walk which opened the thesis – “you have to feel it”. In the logic of blurring the essence is reaffirmed through its demise – the re-essentialisation of blurring – but, at the same time, the feeling always defies the form. We find ourselves with a form that can never be fully undone and a feeling that can never be fully fixed.

This ambiguity is central to the relationship of blurring and essentialism. Like Lévi-Strauss' myth, always attempting to encompass the chaos of experience but never fully managing to do so, essentialism always moves to encompass its demise and yet this can only be achieved partially. Like in Disneyland, we find essentialised blurrings encapsulating a Japanese essence and yet – like the ever-changing eternal family and the hidden polymorphous kami – they always contain the seed of their own demise, a seed that makes them always mutable and in need of new parts. Essentialism and blurring roll and tumble forward, form encompassing feeling, feeling transcending form, in a dialectic of changelessness and change, purity and hybridity, essence and feeling.¹⁸³ The thesis similarly fails to fully encapsulate this logic – we never get to a

183 With a clarification of these relationships – forms and feeling, essentialism and blurring – we can point at further equivalences. In a recently published article, Alex Pillen (2017) explores the concept of antipodal utterances, words that encapsulate a simultaneity of opposite meanings. Relevantly her exploration moves through realms at the edges of language such as trauma, shamanism, poetry and irony. The “sharp communication” of these antipodal word makes paradox speakable and allows incommensurable meanings to be held together for a moment. Another equivalence that has been on my mind throughout the writing of this thesis is the art historian Aby Warburg's concept of *pathosformel*, the “pathos formula” (see. e.g. Warburg 1999a, 1999b) which “designates an indissoluble intertwining of an emotional charge and an iconographic formula in which it is impossible to distinguish between form and content” (Agamben 1999: 90). In the *pathosformel* emotion and form are fused together and become indistinguishable and Ernst Gombrich, Warburg's student and successor, considers it “the primeval reaction of man to the universal hardships of his existence [that] underlies all his attempts at mental orientation” (Gombrich 1986: 223), coming incredibly close to Lévi-Strauss' depiction of humanity's fundamental existential predicament we have encountered in the *Finale* of the *Mythologiques* (1981: 625-695). Like the moments of blurring we have seen in this thesis, both “sharp

determinate conclusion, to the final delineation of clear logic beyond the heuristic and insufficient place-holder that is “blurring”.

In this sense, the structure of the thesis mirrors its content (cf. Cook 2007). The structural work done in many chapters to delineate the “logic of blurring” is important because it points at a feeling, but the feeling itself cannot be fully written. Like essentialism the thesis goes back to go forward - Chapter 1 becoming also Chapter 6, the conclusion of the argument. In the context of Japanese urban modernity essentialism needs always to move forward to stay the same, to generate the intensities of blurring that, by propelling things forward into change, allow things to stay always the same.



communication” and *pathosformel* are momentary attempts to contain the uncontainable, to fuse the incommensurable.

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