ABSTRACT

Keywords: ritual, rite of passage, social change, consumer culture, media

This thesis deals with a ritual observed today in a panorama of extremely dense consumer culture in the highly industrialized society of Japan. The ritual in exam is known under the name of Shichigosan (translated into English as Seven-Five-Three) and it is observed by children of three, five and seven years of age. The ritual has its predecessors in various rural ritual observances that were associated to certain ages seen as threshold in the child’s life. The consolidation of the urban pattern of the ritual went along with the transformation and urbanization during the Tokugawa shogunate from the 17th century onwards.

The thesis describes the historical development of Shichigosan during which it has proved capable of adaptation to changing social and economic conditions without losing those elements that render it recognizable as a ritual mode of expression. The ritual in exam unfolds as a shared platform of meaning where basic social values, views on children and family life, and also individual perceptions emerge, are expressed and shaped at the same time. The main scope of the thesis is to interpret not only the reasons of the popularity of this observance, but more importantly, how its meaning in the modern Japanese urban context has changed through constant interaction between individual actors of the ritual (the family), actors of the marketplace and religious institutions.

Today, market forces, individual actors, and religious institutions, with the media’s intermediary role work together for creating a ritual experience that contributes to the reaffirmation of the family identity by strengthening bonds and solidarity. Finally, the ritual as a communication mode emerges here as an instrument that continues to be regarded by contemporary Japanese families as sufficiently valid and efficient as it satisfies plural interests and contributes to social equilibrium.