1.1 Introduction

My thesis deals with a ritual observed today in midst of a dense consumer culture in the highly industrialized and urbanized society of Japan. The ritual in exam belongs to the category called ‘rites of passage’. It is observed by children of three, five and seven years of age and the name of the observance, Shichigosan, itself indicates the three ages. Accordingly, it can be translated into English as Seven-Five-Three. The traditional date of the ritual is 15th of November but the single elements of the celebration can take place on different days. Conventionally, the celebration consists of a worship in a Shinto shrine, a visit to a professional photo studio, and the family feast in a restaurant. The celebration, while highly commercialized, today belongs to the most popular events of the Japanese family. Shichigosan has its predecessors in various ritual observances that were associated in the past to certain ages seen as threshold in the child’s life. The name of Shichigosan started to be used around the end of the 18th century. Before this denomination would have become widespread, a number of different names were in use to indicate the series of rituals that differed greatly by regions not only in name, but also in pattern.

The main research aims of my work are to understand the meaning and significance of the ritual of Shichigosan in contemporary Japan, to elucidate which conditions worked at the background of its rising popularity over the last century, and to analyze the factors that make from the observance a meaningful experience for the modern Japanese family. In the course of my work, Shichigosan unfolded as a shared platform on which basic social values, views on children and family life, and also individual perceptions emerge, are expressed and shaped at the same time. Thus, in this thesis, I try 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 been shaped through constant interaction between individual actors of the ritual (the family), actors of the marketplace and religious institutions. My main perspective is the perspective of the individual actors who observe the ritual, i.e. family members. The actor in my description is appearing not always strictly as an observer of a ritual, but also as a modern consumer. I attribute importance to the commercial aspects of the ritual and therefore, consumption practices as part of the preparation of the overall ritual experience, are duly examined. On the other hand, I pay attention to the institutions’ role: the diverse commercial activities taking profit from the event; the media and the way it shapes views on ritual as well as on ritual pattern; religious institutions, shrines and temples, that actively join the marketplace in

1 Today it is observed most commonly for three and seven years old girls, and five years old boys (at times also boys of three).
preparing the event in support of the individual observers. However, I would like to underline that my interests in these institutions is always aimed to elucidate the meaning that Shichigosan represents today to the Japanese family. I regard the work and function of these institutions crucial for the creation of the ritual experience, though it is in the actors’ hand that its meaning is created and unfolded.

Today, large part of Japanese families with small children observe Shichigosan as well as dedicate great care and time to its preparation. Even though exact data on observance rate are not available, partial data are offered by a number of surveys on the religious attitudes of the Japanese regularly conducted by governmental, academic and other private institutions. In these, Shichigosan appears among the four most popular observances of the Japanese, along New Year and O-Bon.² The ritual has today a dense presence in the magazines, on the internet, in the advertisements of several business activities, in shop windows and shelves, on photographs, and in popular writings. Accordingly, it was first of all the high visibility of the celebration in present-day Japan that caught my attention. In spite of this popularity, no comprehensive study on this subject has been done so far. Whereas there is a rich reservoir of folk patterns and beliefs associated to the rites standing on the origin of Shichigosan have a rich literature in the Japanese folklore studies, studies dealing with the contemporary form of the ritual, with its meaning and role in present-day Japan, are extremely few. An exception to this is the research done by Kenji Ishii who, within his work focusing on the changes affecting the ritual culture of contemporary Japanese, has also addressed Shichigosan (Ishii 2009). While Ishii’s work gives important hints on the factors that influenced the evolution of Shichigosan in the postwar decades in Japan, the study touches upon but on some of the relevant aspects. Moreover, giving the character of his research that embraces the entire ritual culture in Japan, it cannot provide an in-depth analysis of the phenomenon associated to Shichigosan. Recently, Yūko Taguchi has undertaken a research on contemporary forms of childhood rituals and part of this is dedicated to Shichigosan (Taguchi 2011). While the two mentioned studies are important, they focus on certain selected aspects of the ritual and also, they mainly consider the evolution of ritual pattern that occurred in the postwar period. Therefore, I think that a comprehensive research that would deal entirely with the practice of Shichigosan, taking into account its historical development as well as its modern social environment, is still missing. My thesis would like to fill in this gap at least partly. Also, I hope that with the present work, I will be able to draw the scholarly interest to this interesting phenomenon.

² O-Bon are called the memorial rites held for the deceased.
1.2 Theory of the ritual and definition of ‘rite of passage’

Ritual constitutes the subject of study of a number of scholarly disciplines and their theories often overlap. The different scholarly disciplines treat ritual from different perspectives and hence, the theories they present are defined by the angle of perspective adopted by the given discipline. First of all, it can be useful to note that ritual is relatively a recent concept and as such, it does not possess a persistent, coherent structure (Bell 1992) and it often resists efforts to theorize about (De Coppet 1992). Scholars studying rituals on the field often face the problem that the observers themselves are rarely able to express and grasp in words the sense of the ritual they perform. The difficulty of definition is given by the complexity of ritual as social practice. The diverse layers of meanings associated to a given ritual can be only captured partly and indirectly by a careful observation of the different aspects and dimensions of ritual practice. Nevertheless, several working definitions of ritual have been proposed in order to explain the function of ritual, what it does and how it does it in the society. It can be stated that ritual is a complex type of behavior which usually has a stable purpose, more or less rigid form, uses symbols or symbolic mode of communication, hence it usually alludes to more than it says (Moore and Myerhoff 1977). Ritual reconfirms and also shapes cultural ideas, it reinforces social ties, it can reorganize as well as create them.

The ritual that constitutes the subject of my study makes part of a well-defined category, that of rites of passage. The category of rites of passage was first described as such by the French scholar, Arnold van Gennep, in his seminal work published in 1909, *The Rites of Passage*. He was concerned with the internal organization of rituals and by analyzing a big number of examples of rituals from different cultures, he recognized that a common structure is discernible in rituals that derive from many disparate social realities (van Gennep 1960). He introduced the term of ‘rites of passage’ to label those rituals that mark important thresholds in the individual’s life. These thresholds are often perceived as moments of crisis, when a move from one life stage to another takes place, or when a status change is foreseen. The role of rites of passage should be thus to help overcome these critical phases and to accompany and safeguard the individual who goes through a transition of a certain kind (for instance birth of a child, wedding, death). Van Gennep pointed out that physical change alone does often not acknowledge a new social position to the individual. It is
through rituals that the child upon birth is incorporated into the group and become, thus, a ‘complete’ or ‘full-fledged’ member of the community.

Van Gennep’s theory was later developed by Victor Turner, a social anthropologist, who drew attention to the liminal and transcendental aspects of the transition and broadened the applicability of van Gennep’s theory to modern societies (Turner 1969). In recent decades, ritual theory has been enriched by several other perspectives which made the field truly interdisciplinary. At the analysis of Shichigosan, the decision to call in help more than one discipline is mainly given by the complexity of the examined phenomenon which does not permit to rely on one sole perspective. My intent was to study the ritual first of all as a contemporary social phenomenon, hence the traditional aspects and patterns of the ritual were of interest to me in so much as they contribute to the understanding of the contemporary phenomenon. Within the body of literature on rituals, the most helpful for my work were those studies that deal with rituals and rites of passage in the context of modern industrialized societies. Thus, for example, the contributions to the edited volume of Sally Moore and Barbara Myerhoff provide a useful approach as these represent research done on public ceremonies in modern European contexts (1977). In the field of religious studies, Ronald Grimes studied diverse cases of rituals in the contemporary North American society (2002). The author applies a comparative perspective that makes use of diverse case studies of rituals done by generations of scholars also in non-modern settings. Besides, research done by historians Elisabeth Pleck and by Eric L. Schmidt offer constructive insights with regards to the importance of applying a historical perspective in relevant parts of my work (Pleck 2000, Schmidt 2005). The two historians have done extensive research on family celebrations and consumer rites in North America. Another important body of literature that was helpful for my research comes from the field of consumer studies. The work done by Russell W. Belk et al provides important hints on the sacred dimensions of consumer behavior (Belk et al 1989), and Dennis Rook applies general ritual theories on a special category of consumption practices that are highly ritualized or that stand alone as rituals (Rook 1985).

1.3 Outline of the thesis
A study of this kind can be undertaken from a number of different perspectives. First of all, I think that a due attention needs to be paid to the history of this ritual. Therefore, in the first part of my work, I pay attention to the historical development of the ritual pattern and meaning. Any social form is always conditioned by socio-cultural factors of the given period and the pre-modern patterns of Shichigosan were determined by the traditional, close-knit community life typical to pre-Meiji Japan (prior to 1868). These conditions slowly dissolved after modernization and large-scale industrialization hit Japan in the course of the 19th -20th century. My work examines how the historical forms of this ritual evolved and which were the main factors that exercised an impact on its evolution. In the second part of the work, I analyze diverse aspects of the contemporary form of the ritual. My examination focuses on several aspects: the changes that Japanese family and within it the figure of the child went through in the last century; the evolving impact of the commercial sector on the single elements of the ritual pattern; the media’s contribution to the way the public perceives the ritual; the religious institutions’ role in the popularization and legitimization of the ritual; and not lastly the symbolism inherent in the ritual and the way symbolic communication occurs within the ritual experience.

Chapter I gives an introductory outline of the content. The issue of terminology in English language is also addressed in this chapter. A substantial part of Chapter II is dedicated to an overview of theoretical approaches and of the main theories and works dealing with the study of ritual. In Chapter II, I also present the methodological approaches adopted during my work.

Chapter III, apart from a discussion on Japanese language terminology, deals mainly with the ethnographic background of childhood rites of passage in Japan. This theme has a vast literature in Japan thanks to the diligent work of generations of Japanese folklorists who documented the rich reservoir of regional versions and customs related to ritual observances that existed in Japan. In this chapter I give an overview of the traditional cosmology that constitutes the legitimating context for these practices. It needs to be taken into account, however, that the rich documentation produced by Japanese folklore studies was based primarily on data collected in rural communities. Hence, the presented data inform to a much lesser extent on customs and patterns typical to pre-modern urban settings and on customs of upper social classes. Additionally, Chapter III presents a brief description of the development of the discipline of folklore studies in Japan, as well as a discussion of the relevant terminology in the Japanese language.

3 By the term ‘pre-modern’ I refer to the period prior the Meiji Restoration occurred in 1867-68, i.e. before modernization and industrialization would have affected Japan.
Whereas the link of Shichigosan to traditional ritual patterns represents an important element in the complex set of meanings attached to the ritual in present-day Japan, I found it important to make an attempt to examine not only the traditional rural context but also the urban environment in which the Shichigosan pattern developed over time. Therefore, in Chapter IV, I focus on the historical condition of the development of the ritual form of Shichigosan during the 17th-18th century in Edo, the old name of Tokyo, as it is here that the urban form of Shichigosan has its roots. The particular socio-economic conditions and the politics adopted by the Tokugawa shogunate brought about an unprecedented growth of town centers between the 17th and 18th centuries, and together with this, the first mass-scale urbanization in Japan. The highly urbanized society of the capital gave rise to the ritual pattern, called today Shichigosan, that later, in the course of the 20th century, gradually replaced the local versions of childhood rites of passage. Many of the characteristics that the ritual assumed in this particular historical period, remained salient features of its contemporary pattern. Thereby, I found it important to trace the socio-economic conditions of this period as it is this that defines the social reality of the ritual practice.

The second part of Chapter IV describes the evolution of Shichigosan ritual form and meaning from the end of the Tokugawa period (1868) to the end of World War II, focusing primarily on the Tokyo area. The time span of the analysis in Chapter IV is set at the end of World War II since the end of the war marks the start of an era when modern life-style gradually pushed out remaining local traditional customs and when the urban pattern of Shichigosan began to spread out massively from the capital to the rest of Japan. The period after the Meiji Restoration in 1868 to the end of the war, represents the period during which the urban pattern of Shichigosan was affirmed in Tokyo, and the chapter follows this development through an analysis of newspaper articles that reported on the observance during this period. The number of articles, their date of appearance, their content are examined. Also, in order to follow the path of the commercialization of the various aspects of the celebration, I took note of the advertisements of services and goods related to the celebration: the first appearance of adverts in newspapers, the changing number of adverts over the course of the years, the trends they indicate.

I continue to apply a chronological temporal frame in Chapter V. This chapter follows the path of the development of ritual pattern in the postwar period until present days. This evolution is embedded in the context of the social and economic transformation of postwar Japanese society, hence adequate attention is paid to the relevant features of this transformation. The diffusion of the urban pattern of Shichigosan throughout the country took place during the 1960s and 1970s, also due to the intense urbanization as well as standardization of life-style between urban and rural areas.
The high speed economic growth gave rise to a diversification in the market place, new services, goods emerged and this affected also celebration patterns. The rise of service industry in the 1970s caused that new services were introduced also to the celebration of Shichigosan. Among them, the photographs, the rental of festive dress and assistance with dressing, the beauty service became standard parts of the Shichigosan packs offered by several commercial agents. Newspaper and periodical articles help to follow these shifting trends in celebration pattern. The most recent period, the first decade of the 21st century, is also increasingly reflected in electronic media, the internet and accordingly, webpages of agents of the marketplace, articles of news portals, comments recorded in various forums related to the celebration, provide useful information for my study.

Chapter VI focuses more specifically on the social aspects of the ritual. The role of various actors within the celebration, such as the single members of the family, the child, the relatives, are analyzed. The changes that the Japanese family as institution went through in the course of the 20th century, together with its underlying value system, are addressed here. I examine the figure of the mother as central to the organization of the observance. Similarly, attention is paid to the figure of the child and in particular, to the changes that affected the view on children in the Japanese society. The historical transformation of this view is outlined and put into connection with the shifts in the meanings attached to the Shichigosan ritual.

Chapter VII is dedicated to the issue of symbolism in ritual. The single elements building up the ritual experience are identified in order to examine the symbolic meanings associated to them. The festive dress and the changes in its trends and meaning are followed within a chronological frame. The symbolism of chitoseame, the traditional sweet given in gift on the occasion of the celebration, are addressed. The chapter analyzes also the rise of the notion of tradition in relation to the celebration. Other notions with symbolic meanings are also touched upon, among others the symbolism hidden in the numbers appearing in the celebration in the form of the ages of children, or associations evoked by age transition and age awareness within the Japanese cultural context.

The last thematic chapter (VIII) focuses on the role of religious institutions in the perpetuation and popularization of Shichigosan. The activities related to the organization of Shichigosan in two major shrines in Tokyo are here analyzed. I examine the texts these institutions use to inform their visitors on the meaning of the ritual and on the services they provide. Also, the observance is placed into a more general perspective referring to other traditional and new observances within the overall religious fabric of contemporary Japan.
In the above outlined eight chapters, I attempt to trace the evolution of several factors that were playing part in constituting the meanings of the Shichigosan ritual over almost three centuries. While doing this, I analyze the single constituting elements and aspects of the ritual within their socio-economic and cultural contexts. Whereas I adopt diverse perspectives during the work, the most important factor for my analysis is the fact that I see Shichigosan first of all as a social practice embedded in the everyday life conditions of the society. Its contemporary pattern is conditioned by a number of factors, among which Japan’s highly developed consumer culture plays an important role. The most salient features of this consumer culture necessarily emerge also within social forms associated with tradition, such as rituals. Rituals, as any other social phenomenon, in order to be able to fulfill needs of individuals, have to be integral part of the surrounding cultural environment.

1.4 Methodology

The methodology applied in this study has been mainly determined by the following factors: the multidisciplinary approach that a research of this kind necessitates, the limited number of works dealing with this theme, and the accessibility of data. As for the first factor, I attempted to identify the main theoretical fields that could be useful for my research. This part constitutes the theoretical preparation for my work. As I gradually had to face the diverse aspects of the phenomenon in exam, the literature I relied on and the theoretical perspectives I found useful, grew and underwent modifications with respect to the initial phase of my research.

The subject of contemporary forms of rites of passage in Japan is an understudied theme in the scholarly literature. The lack of a coherent body of literature on the theme was also the reason why I needed to turn to many diverse sources for data and information on the development of the ritual pattern and meaning in the course of its history. The necessity to rely on sources greatly differing from each other in character and approach led me to follow a multidisciplinary perspective in my work. In the beginning, I made from the classical studies of the Japanese folklore research my departure point, the result of this work is mainly summoned up in Chapter III. However, as folklore studies present these rites primarily in their rural and traditional contexts, I needed to complement this approach with a historical overview of the characteristics of the examined ritual in urban...
setting, both in the pre-Meiji past (prior 1868) and in modern times (after 1868). Thereby, I decided to use a historical perspective in the parts of my work that discussed early phases of the rise of urban version of the Shichigosan ritual pattern. Concerning more recent phases of this development, I turned to print media of the period (19th and early 20th century) and undertook a survey of articles of major newspapers in order to follow the path of the growth of the ritual into a popular observance. For this scope, I relied on electronic databases provided by main newspapers that gave me access to materials coming from the very first issues covering the period from the end of the 19th century roughly to the end of 1960s. I describe the methodology applied in this part of my research in Chapter IV where I also discuss the results of this survey in detail. This part of data proved very useful since practically no research has been done on the urban development of the ritual during this particular period. To a limited extent, I also followed articles from the postwar decades mainly in periodicals. The examined period stretched roughly to the late 1990s. The most recent data I obtained partly from the online newspapers and their databases, online periodicals, and partly from printed versions of periodicals between 2008 and 2011.

Regarding the postwar development of Shichigosan, I had to organize and analyze data deriving from a number of sources bearing different characters. In 2009 and 2010, I did two field trips to Japan to collect relevant data. During my fieldwork, I interviewed employees of institutions involved in the organization of Shichigosan. I spoke with priests and employees of two major shrines in Tokyo, the Meiji and the Hie shrine. These were guided interviews during which I obtained information about the historical development regarding the observance of Shichigosan in that particular institution, the shifts in number of observers in the last three decades, the description of the purification ritual, details on the service packs provided by the institution to the observers, and the interpretation of the significance of Shichigosan by the interviewees. I also conducted interviews with employees of the two rental studios attached to the shrines, with employees of photo studios and rental shops in Tokyo that serve customers planning the celebration of Shichigosan. Unstructured interviews were also done with families with first-hand experience of Shichigosan, as well as with families just planning the performance of the ritual.

The major problem I encountered during the interviews, concerned the difficulty interviewees perceived at clarifying the meaning and significance of the ritual. While on the practical matters of the celebration the answers were quite precise and detailed, the interviewees found it rather hard to express verbally the significance of the observed ritual. This, however, has to do with the fact, as often argued in scholarly literature, that ritual resists interpretation. Its exact meaning needs not to be clear to the observers in order to fulfill its function. Also, the interpretation that scholars of ritual
provide in their studies, must not necessarily coincide with the interpretation given by actors participating directly in a ritual experience. One of the main aims of my work was, therefore, to attempt an interpretation of the role of Shichigosan through both direct and indirect ways that could help me reduce the complexity of the task of investigating a phenomenon that resists objectification.

It needs to be underlined, therefore, that the large amount of information that I was able to gather in the online and print media proved very helpful and useful. Also because contemporary Japanese observers often turn to forums provided by print and online media (child-rearing magazines, blogs, child-rearing sites, etc.) with their opinions, inquiries and comments. Moreover, in Japan it is mainly the media that collect observers’ views on the celebration and use them to inform about recent trends in celebration manners. Surveys undertaken by public and academic institutions, such as those on the religious consciousness of the Japanese, including observation rates regarding several rituals, often disregard Shichigosan or they include it into categories that group a number of observances. Thus, the only relevant and specific statistic data on Shichigosan are those provided by surveys sponsored by commercial actors, among which mainly media, kimono professional schools, or child-rearing websites. The results of these surveys are often reported on the pages of the journals or websites. Although, it was not possible for me to arrange data collected from online sources into the form of regular statistics due to the multiple and diverse themes and data, the reading of these accounts and blog inserts over an extended period provided me with a range of information and with the type of insights that would have been impossible to gather otherwise. The value of these comments is enhanced also by the fact that online blogs and other forums provide anonymity to the commentator and this assures a relatively uncensored view not restricted by the direct contact with an interviewer.

The period during which I gathered online data in the most active way extended from 2009 to 2011, partly also the first months of 2012. During this period, in order to complement the printed publicity material of the various commercial institutions involved in the celebration, I examined websites of photo studios, rental shops, clothing retail shops, restaurants, entertainment parks, hotels, travel agencies, and gift shops. Rather than on data of statistical character, I focused on qualitative data. I tried to identify the latest trends in services concerning the celebration of Shichigosan, the range of goods offered to customers for the celebration, the range of problems families face when organizing the celebration. The analysis of the content of a large number of sites represent an important share in the data collection of my work.
1.5 Summary of main findings

I would like to draw three important conclusions from my work. First, socio-economic conditions that characterized the capital of Edo during the Tokugawa period gave rise to a dynamic pattern of Shichigosan that demonstrated itself as capable of adaptation over time without losing those elements that rendered it recognizable as a ritual expression. Second, the case of Shichigosan allows us to think that market forces, family, and religious institutions, with the media’s intermediary role can work together for social equilibrium satisfying plural interests. Third, the ritual represents an efficient communication mode with which most Japanese feel in harmony in present days as in the past.

The urban pattern bringing together a variety of patterns of childhood rites of passage offered sufficient space for the expression of the multitude aspects of the newly emerging urban culture during the 18th century in Japan. This ritual pattern continued to embody multiple layers of meanings entailing ancient beliefs related to views on human soul and more ‘profane’ aspects complying with the urban life style. The historical development depicted in case of Shichigosan is an example of a ritual that, while preserving a significant part of its constituents, has successfully integrated new elements into its form. Several parts of the ritual preserved their form from the past with minor modifications (name, dress, ages of observance, just to mention some), but acquired new interpretations. Also, entirely new elements joined in (diverse options, photograph). During its evolution it interacted and continues to interact in an ongoing process with its social reality while it has remained congruent with the surrounding and changing social structures.

Through six chapters I deconstructed the ritual to make an attempt to grasp the various factors that contribute to the continuing popularity that Shichigosan enjoys among Japanese families. By doing so, the angle of examination shifted from actors-observers on the one side, and several agents active in the organization of the celebration, among which the marketplace, the media and religious institutions, on the other side. In particular, I looked at consumption practices and at the work of the marketplace and the media and acknowledged their contribution to the creation of a rewarding ritual experience. I also viewed ritual practice as a subject of continuous negotiations in the wider society as well as within the more private sphere of individual families.
While diversification of options in celebration modes appears principally in the form of options made available and/or invented by the marketplace, consumption patterns act as a vehicle through which to express individual choices and personal preferences. Single families are thus enabled to add their own piece of interpretation or a personalized mode to the celebration and this makes Shichigosan a practice which is truly modern in character. On the other hand, the creative innovation present both on the side of the commercial sector and of the families, is balanced by the adherence to proper manners – represented by mothers’ concerns – and by the more or less determined rules of the shrine ritual. This assures that the characteristics of ritual as ordered action will be preserved.

Ritual is a complex form, presenting simultaneously multiple meanings, functions and possibilities of interpretation. Ritual is also very effective to render manifest controversial issues that abound in our lives. Shichigosan allows families to enjoy consumerism and at the same time it gives space to reconsider or reaffirm ideas about family, solidarity, or simply priorities or aesthetic standards. Providing a dense, emotionally loaded occasion, ritual is a valid and efficacious platform where ideas can be enacted, reflected and validated, but also contrasted and shaped. Nevertheless, there exist significant differences in the readiness with which single cultures reach to this instrument of expression. Recently, the effectiveness and importance of ritual mode of communication and expression in social life is increasingly acknowledged in Western societies where ritual has long been seen as obsolete. Professionals and scholars alike recognize that human experience continues to rely on the use of symbols to express and reaffirm social ideals and personal values.

Whereas the validity of ritual expression is general and universal, there are cultures that give particular value to this mode of expression. Japan can be listed among these cultures. Ritual as symbolic action can be efficacious only if symbols are comprehended and if a sensitivity to symbols is present in the society (Douglas 2003). I think that this sensitivity to symbol and to symbolic communication is still intense in Japan and the continuing popularity of not only Shichigosan, but also of other rites of passage, such as *miyamairi*⁴ or *yakudoshi*⁵ are indeed proves to this. The efficacy of the ritual as a communication mode depends heavily on the Japanese readiness to convey shared meaning of ritual acts through symbolic codes.

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⁴ *Miyamairi* is a rite of passage observed one month after the birth of the baby. On this occasion usually a Shinto shrine is visited by the family.

⁵ *Yakudoshi* indicates those years in the life of an individual which are traditionally considered as bringing bad luck. During these years an increased caution and awareness is recommended and accordingly, a visit in a shrine or temple is advised.
Finally, the study of a ritual can be useful and constructive in a number of ways. It can be regarded as a platform where the dynamics of social life in a particular cultural context can be observed. It can also demonstrate the extent to which a given culture gives importance to symbolic modes of expression and actions. Whether Shichigosan will continue to enjoy a popularity also in the future will also depend on its ability to absorb changes in an effective manner without losing a widely recognizable ritual frame. The complex form of Shichigosan, involving ludic as well as more formal and solemn elements, allows me to think that it will remain a dynamic form that will be able to serve the Japanese family still for long.

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