COMMENTS OF PROFESSOR JOY HENDRY on Melinda Torsello Pappová’s thesis on:

Change and Continuity in a Japanese rite of passage: the case of Shichigosan

The thesis achieves its aim of examining the celebration of the practice known in Japan as Shichigosan in a variety of disciplinary ways. It seems to have been thoroughly researched, at least from the perspective of historical and folkloric materials, as well as newspaper and magazine reports and advertisements, and it is written up in a coherent and interesting fashion. I can only really offer a robust critical analysis from the perspective of my own discipline, namely social anthropology, but as this discipline routinely draws on the findings of other scholars, and is quite eclectic in its use of resources, I approve of the approach, and find it an acceptable way to proceed. The area of longer-term intensive fieldwork, which might have been expected in an anthropological thesis, would have been difficult to carry out for a subject so closely tied to annual observance, and the use of case studies, and written resources, does to some extent compensate for this potential weakness.

For the purpose of discussion, I raise several issues, some couched in a critical framework, but my overall assessment of the thesis is a positive one.

1. The thesis starts with the assumption that the ceremony known as shichigosan is a ritual, indeed a rite of passage, along the lines of that described by the French scholar Arnold van Gennep, so I would like to ask the candidate to outline the reasons why she chose to make this assumption. She offers the explanation that the use of such terminology is taken from her sources, although mentioning a problem on page 51. By the end of the thesis there is an implicit definition of the use of the term, but I would like to have seen an opening query about the definition of the term ritual, and some concluding remarks about what the Japanese case can add to a more general understanding of the term. This could perhaps make a contribution to the way that the term ritual is used in anthropology and other disciplines. Can the candidate make suggestions?

2. A related question is what the research can add to our understanding of the term religion, based on the candidate’s quite detailed examination of the situation in Japan, and the Japanese surveys she cites. Have the changes since the introduction of Western ideas and values since the Meiji Restoration modified behaviour that could be called religious, or just the way that the so-called religious establishments describe themselves and their activities? There is some debate between Ian Reader and Timothy Fitzgerald which might have been usefully addressed about the extent to which “ritual” in Japan needs necessarily to be associated with “religion”. The thesis offers rather a good case for the examination of this argument. Would the candidate like to comment? (see also 9 below)

3. An issue which I found interesting throughout the thesis was the extent to which a diversity of rituals, as described in Chapter 3, have apparently been homogenised through the use of national publications, television, and so forth. The thesis largely focusses on the situation in Tokyo, which would reinforce this idea, although the two case studies offered in the last chapter do illustrate variety even in the capital city. There seems to be some evidence to suggest a gradual return to more “traditional” ways – for examples in the clothes chosen for the children – and I wonder if even urban families are not sometimes influenced by a continuity of diverse practices in the Japanese countryside? City halls very often display examples of their local ritual features, for example. There are also undoubtedly variations in the Kansai region (c.f. p.128 middle of the page where the author assumes things are diffusing out from Tokyo, but p. 217 where local variation is noted).
4. An issue related to this one is the number of times in the thesis that the candidate uses the word “obsolete” when there is little evidence offered that something has actually been completely replaced. For example, on p. 83, “traditional” wedding customs are said to have been “completely replaced”; p. 90, last line, where a “majority of rites of passage” are said to be lost; p. 175 where the words of grandmothers and other family elders have “gradually become obsolete”, see also p. 211 at the bottom. (See also p. 296, line 8, where ritual is said to be seen as obsolete in Western societies).

5. In relation to the family elders, there is considerable evidence, even in this thesis e.g. p. 196, 216, 227, and elsewhere), that the event being discussed often involves grandparents, who may also give the clothes for the occasion of Shichigosan. It is also the case, even in Tokyo, that many old families live in houses they have divided between the two generations, making use of land that they have inherited, but building new homes, so they may be physically close. I am sure that young people these days are less influenced that they were in the past by the elders in the family, but it seems unlikely that they are being completely ignored! It is also the case that people consulted manuals for advice in the past (as discussed in section 7.2).

6. I like the idea picked up on pp. 130-31 that consumer culture has raised the status of women, who are often in charge of the family budget, but it might be an interesting future idea to examine this notion in an historical context. It may be found that women had more power within a family context, which could also have been a business context, than they are often assumed to have had in the past. The introduction of Western ideas may have impacted negatively on the role of Japanese women in the past – but this is just a comment! The candidate may have a view of course.

7. The period covered by the research includes a high peak and a deep trough in economic success within Japanese society. I wonder how this has affected the practice of Shichigosan?

8. On p. 242 there is a discussion about people who hand down kimono, or use them for several occasions. How does this relate to the pressures of consumerism? Also, does such a practice perhaps add an element of continuity to offset a lack of continuity in other ways?

9. The discussion on page 291 about the overlap, or lack of distinction between the secular and the religious, links back in to my earlier comment (number 2 above). There is considerable evidence that ritual occasions involved playing and paying as well as praying (an article by Nelson Graburn uses this alliteration in his title) for people all over Japan historically as well as contemporaneously. For example, visiting shrines such as the Ise shrine offered a legitimate reason to travel in Tokugawa times, and local groups would collect money to send members in turn. Also farmers and other manual workers would take time off for ritual/religious events which always involved costs and playful activities as well.

Extra notes:

p. 71 – a common phrase in use about children today is 三歳まで神のうち (3 sai made kami no uchi)

p. 104 – the use of white is found in other rites of passage, such as for wrapping a baby, a bride, and even a corpse, in white, when it may symbolise a 白紙 or tabula rasa.
p. 197, middle: it has been customary in some parts of Japan for a wife to return to her own family at the time of giving birth (known as satogaeri) and the miyamaori may also coincide with her return (I found people still practising this in 2011)

p. 221 – on the subject of target audiences, I guess the personal blog could be one? Facebook etc.

p. 230 – actually the difference between the two ways of counting can be almost two years – for someone born on December 31st they become 2 the next day in the old system!

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