

Ephemera in Japanese Religion with Special Reference to Buddhist Pilgrimage

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Introduction

One of the fascinating aspects of Japanese religious culture is the complexity of the source material, which includes many *ephemeral* documents and artefacts. Such perishable and transitory materials are particularly significant in the research process for reasons which will be explained below. Not only that, they are invaluable in teaching because they can easily be transported and make an immediate communicative impact on students, who are thereby encouraged to handle and consider “real things” from the field. Admittedly these real things can be supplemented nowadays by innumerable digital images, which was previously not possible. The latter have the advantage of recording both a context and further examples of similar ephemera. Thus an individual votive tablet (*ema*) can be supplemented by the scene in which many such are displayed at a particular shrine, and by further images of similar examples. Nevertheless it is good to retain specific examples in their real form, and in some cases they may be rare or even unique. This may all seem rather obvious, yet very often such materials, whether documents or other artefacts, remain miscellaneous and eventually suffer from loss of context. To counteract this I have begun to document those relating to contemporary Japanese religion in my own possession, in particular those relating to Japanese Buddhist pilgrimage.¹ I have also encouraged students to assemble their ephemeral sources systematically.²

The main public illustration of this approach to date took the form of an exhibition on circulatory Buddhist pilgrimage in Japan, documented in a small catalogue entitled *O-meguri, Pilgerfahrt in Japan* (Marburg 1987).³ This included a

¹ Inevitably, such a collection grows considerably over the years, and most of it should in due course be lodged in the Museum of Religions (*Religionskundliche Sammlung*) of the University of Marburg.

² A particularly clear case is the tabular presentation in Ian Reader’s dissertation on contemporary Sōtō Zen Buddhism which I supervised in its formative stages (Leeds 1979-82) but which unfortunately remained unpublished.

³ The exhibition was mounted in the main foyer of the University Library, Marburg University, which allowed considerable space. The objects on display were arranged in thirty-three sections, reflecting the number of temples for the bodhisattva Kannon on the traditional

number of photographs but above all many pilgrims' guides, maps, paper slips deposited by pilgrims, completed books of temple seals and calligraphy, small devotional booklets used while going the rounds, and so on. A similar but more substantial catalogue is planned in connection with a special exhibition for the Museum of Religions at the University of Marburg.⁴ The new exhibition again features Japanese circulatory pilgrimage (c.f. the term *meguri*, meaning "going round"), however this time it explores the theme in both Buddhist and Shintō contexts. The exhibition also highlights the more general theme of the function of hanging scrolls (*kakejiku*) in Japanese religious contexts. This illustrates the fact that the concept of *ephemera* is quite broad.

Because of practical constraints on mounting temporary exhibitions in the intervening years, I have tended to emphasise posters and maps which only require walls for display. The range can be seen from the following titles: Japanese Festivals (*matsuri*)⁵, Religion and Travel Culture in Japan, Civil Religion in Mexico, and Islam in Java.⁶ These may sound like obvious themes, but in some cases, especially the two latter ones, an important stage lay in the recognition of the value of the materials in the field and then somehow getting hold of them in sufficient number and variety to develop a narrative. For Islam in Java, the materials, though not all available in the same place, fell conveniently into three main areas: first, posters on Javanese Islam and in particular on the nine saints (the *Walisongo*) who established it on the island; second, posters on traditional themes of Islam such as Mecca, early Muslim personalities and Koranic verses; and third, educational posters for children showing how to visit a mosque, how to pray, and so on. In the case of civil religion in Mexico, it is easy to buy impressive posters of the Virgin of Guadalupe, but more difficult to document the tension between Guadalupe as a national symbol and the attempt of the Roman Catholic church to retain her cult for itself. Beyond that there were links to be explored via educational posters dealing with the development of the national flag and secular institutions, and even with posters about civic values published by electoral authorities. This wide spectrum, not self-evident as a single corpus to Mexicans themselves, is needed for reflection

pilgrimage routes for this Buddhist figure.

⁴ This exhibition is being prepared with the collaboration of Dr. Katja Triplett and is due to be opened in late 2009.

⁵ Selected from a large donation of relevant posters received in Marburg under the auspices of Prof. Sonoda Minoru, also of Chichibu Shrine.

⁶ These materials were collected jointly with Dr. Edith Franke (Hannover, now Marburg), who prepared the catalogue.

on the complexities of civil religion in the country.⁷

It is often necessary to emphasise, with respect to larger ephemera such as hanging scrolls, posters or other articles for display, that these are not necessarily to be regarded or critiqued as works of art. Indeed many hanging scrolls used in religious contexts, though striking, are not by any usual yardsticks works of art and consequently would not find their way into fine exhibitions. Financially well endowed connoisseurs with an artistic bent might regard them as rubbish, or at best religious *kitsch*. I regard them however as fascinating sources which tell us a great deal about religious ideas and practices. Understood in this way, they often become interesting visually. However, their main value lies in the way in which they illustrate variations and shifts in the representation of religious perspectives, as has been most convincingly and instructively set out in Brian Bocking's work on scrolls in the *sanjaku takusen* tradition (Bocking 2000).

In this short paper it will not be possible to set out any substantial group of ephemera in full detail. Rather, I seek here to explain their value from a methodological point of view in the study of religions, while naming a few illustrative items which are relevant to my own research in the field of Japanese religions. These will easily be recognised by specialists in Japanese studies. Needless to say, similar things could be said about ephemeral documents and artefacts in other cultural contexts too. Islamic calendars, for example, are very instructive, though discarded year by year. So too are the little paper images of saints and/or icons used in the Roman Catholic and various Orthodox churches respectively, at the level of the popular piety which varies considerably from country to country.

Methodological Characteristics and Requirements of the Study of Religions

The adducement of ephemeral materials is not unique to the discipline of the study of religions. It is well-established in "European ethnology" and in museum work in general, where relevant. However ephemeral materials can play a particularly important role in the study of religions for various reasons. Indeed, the concept for this paper descends from a conference on methodology in the study of religions which was held in Warsaw in 1989.⁸ The main point of that conference

⁷ Brief details of all these collections may be found on the internet under the department of Religionswissenschaft at Marburg.

⁸ This was held just before the first post-communist government was formed in Poland, and the conference had been conceived and planned during the communist period on the basis of long-standing contacts. A previous international conference of the International Association for the

was to consider the relations between the historico-philological method and socio-scientific approaches to the study of religions, which was a major issue at the time and still attracts a certain amount of attention. The writer's argument then, as now, is that while historical work often demands attention to sources which can be very occasional, fragmentary and at first sight unimportant, social scientific studies can make good use of equally scorned materials current in contemporary contexts, i.e. ephemera.⁹ For the use of ephemera as source material, however, accurate linguistic knowledge is required, among other things, and therefore there is no inherent gulf between the historico-philological and the socio-scientific methods. This needs to be emphasised for the simple reason that it is often asserted that there is such a gulf. There have been and still are tendencies in some quarters to glorify "the history of religions" as a discipline which does not need to be complemented by contemporary research and hence does not need the kinds of data which can be so useful in its prosecution. While, conversely, other colleagues have wished to see a *shift* from historico-philological work to socio-scientific work, it is important to recognise their contiguity and in some cases continuity. This is important in *the study of religions*, as in analogous disciplines. Naturally there are some disciplines and fields where the holding together of these methodological traditions might be thought to be less important, e.g. archaeology or contemporary film studies, to name random examples. In the case of the study of religions, however, it is important.

It will no doubt be evident that these two main methodological strands are particularly important to the researcher of Japanese religions. On the one hand Japan has been an intensely literate society for centuries, so that the study of Japanese religion is laid open to all the complexities of historical and philological research. On the other hand there are few formal obstacles in the way of a field researcher going about his work in any area of the country, nowadays, and studying Japanese religions in their present forms. The researcher who chooses to do the latter can hardly avoid the literary heritage of religion in some form or other. The researcher who prefers to do historical research on the other hand is also unwise to close his eyes to contemporary forms, for the country remains a veritable living museum of its own religious past. Needless to say, this can be deceptive; but it is

History of Religions had been held in Warsaw 1979. Methodology was a particularly interesting focus because of the challenge of correlating "western" and "eastern" approaches during the communist period.

⁹ The writer's paper was therefore entitled "Philology and fieldwork in the study of Japanese religion". (Pye 1990). Some of the following formulations are drawn from that paper.

probably less deceptive than when the historian tries to close his eyes completely to the present in the interests of a purer understanding of the past.

Thus it would verge on eccentricity to write on the history of Shintō or Japanese Buddhism without paying some attention to the layout and architecture of shrines and temples, which are documented not least by their present form. Admittedly the typical lay-out of temple grounds has changed over history in accordance with the changes of temple functions. Similarly, the ambience of a Shinto shrine has changed a great deal. The present-day transport arrangements which surround it, the innumerable small indications in the appearance of the people who visit it, their clothing, their gadgets, their cameras and bags, not to speak of telegraph wires, concrete walls and pillars in various places, and so on, all add up to a total impact which must be significantly different to what it was in the past. The historian who is stimulated by present phenomena must of course be very sensitive to the disturbing effects of current observations on his or her view of the past. Nevertheless it would be unwise for the historian of Shinto to exclude its currently observable forms from consideration. On the other hand, the specialist in religions who is studying some aspect of Shinto today, for example, a village festival, will surely experience features which cannot be understood without reference to the literary tradition, whether formal or informal. This will be seen below in connection with ceremonial prayers (*norito*).

For readers trained in different academic disciplines, let it be recalled briefly that “the study of religions” (German: *Religionswissenschaft*) can be regarded, and is so regarded here, as a distinct academic discipline which has as its subject matter religious systems of any kind, and which draws on various methodological resources in the human and social sciences as the subject matter requires. Any supposed opposition between, for example, historical and social-scientific methods should therefore be regarded as fundamentally irrelevant. Nevertheless, the question of how different methodological approaches and tools can and should be correlated is an important one, and it is thought that this can be achieved by a process of methodological *integration*, as this writer has consistently argued.¹⁰ In all this it is important to realise that there is a subtle relationship between “field”, “sources” and “methods”, often confused by students. The sources are not themselves the “field” but, very precisely, *sources* for the study of a given field. In summary, written sources and oral sources both require what is traditionally called

¹⁰ Most comprehensively in an essay entitled “Methodological integration in the study of religions.” (Pye 1999).

“philological” but may also be called linguistic knowledge.¹¹ Written sources, many of a historical nature, and material sources, from archaeological finds to films of rituals in non-literate societies, may elude further cross-checking with living informants. Oral sources and material sources are predominantly field-based, and hence share to a particular degree what is known as the problem of “access”, that is, access to the data.

Now, evidently, the problem of “access” takes on particular subtlety when the religious systems of living persons are under study. Can the researcher get into particular situations? Can the researcher cope linguistically with potentially difficult specialised religious terminology, or relevant dialect forms? Can observant participation in the situation in question be followed up by further analogous events or visits? Do the persons concerned, social-scientifically referred to as the “actors”, accept the researcher as a legitimate presence? Do they speak to him or her? Do they give information? Or do they just ask questions themselves (a common occurrence in Japan)? To what extent do the actors skew information they give because they see a differently shaped head and a differently coloured skin? This last-mentioned point is a serious problem in Japanese situations, even when the researcher speaks Japanese fluently and naturally. However it does not always arise, and it is of course particularly satisfying when the actor, as an informant, speaks naturally and easily about what is going on, without trying to be too clever or complex-ridden when handling a foreigner. The point is that while problems do not always arise, and can often be overcome, all of these matters add up to a serious task in gaining delicate and reliable access to data in the field. This is where the particular value of ephemera arises as a way to circumvent uncertainties. In the study of Japanese religions, they can ease the problem of access significantly. Moreover, in the particular case of the study of Buddhist pilgrimages, ephemera are a very valuable resource for the simple reason that the informants are always in a bit of a hurry to maintain their schedule!

Ephemera in Japanese Religions

Among the main recurrent types of ephemera relevant to Japanese religion must be counted the following, listed in alphabetical order to avoid any suggestion of a hierarchy:

¹¹ Traditionally the term “philology” has been rather slippery, sometimes meaning thorough knowledge of a source-relevant language but sometimes extended to include much circumstantial cultural knowledge.

- Almanacs (including divination guides and horoscopes)
- Calendars (showing major festivals and often the cycle of six lucky and unlucky days)
- Chirashi (local pamphlets delived with daily newspapers)
- Devotional booklets (varying by religion and denomination)
- Emā* (votive tablets deposited at shrines and temples)
- Entrance tickets (sometimes needed for temples or special treasure stores)
- Fuda* (amulets for the *kamidana* at home)
- Hanging scrolls
- Information leaflets from shrines and temples
- Mikuji* (fortune telling slips)
- Norito* texts
- Notice boards, often with maps
- Posters (from religious institutions, but also of secular or commercial origin)
- Telephone cards and railway cards (a rich source of national and local symbolism)
- Travel guides and maps

Special to pilgrimage (in addition to the above):

- Hanging scrolls, etc. (as used in particular for collecting temple seals and calligraphy)
- Nōkyōchō* (books for collecting temple seals and calligraphy, as proof of visit)
- Pilgrims' slips (for depositing at the temples, also as proof of visit)
- Small pictures of the enshrined buddhas and bodhisattvas (used as devotional mementos)

It is expected that readers will mentally add further types to those mentioned here, and in any case many ephemera are hard to classify, being little more than miscellaneous scraps of paper or impermanent religious accessories. To which genre belong, for example, little paper flags bearing the phrase *Namu Amida Butsu*, planted near the path to the top of Mount Hiko in Kyūshū? Some ephemera have a more transitory nature than others. In most walks of life, the normal way for

ephemera to be lost, or to remain true to their “ephemeral” nature, is that they are thrown away or decay to the point of non-recognition. Newspapers may be used as wrapping paper and then be torn or discarded. Railway cards are increasingly recycled. In the field of religion, it is notable that every year there is a burning of millions of amulets and other religious paraphernalia from the previous year. This is done, usually with an appropriate ritual (but interestingly not always), after all the stuff has been collected at shrines and temples. Even while everything is on its way to the fire, the various materials can be informative. A careful look at what has been deposited at the collection point will be rewarding, for it may often be observed that at major shrines and temples the materials brought “back” were not in fact acquired there, but somewhere else. When *o-fuda* from Meiji Shrine turn up for disposal at major Buddhist temples, such as that known popularly as Kawasaki Daishi, it is clear that the general population regard these institutions as being part of a continuum of religious culture in which they participate without sharp differentiation. In spite of the regular destruction of what to the student *could* be source material there remains a limited availability of some older ephemera. Thus relevant travel guides, *nōkyōchō*, religious scrolls, or recitation booklets may turn up in flea markets. Other types, e.g. the pilgrim slips mentioned above, cannot really be found in later years except when decaying on site. Nevertheless, longitudinal consistency can be assessed to some extent, even after the annual slaughter of source materials.

When analysing pilgrimage, especially in Japan, it is helpful to proceed in three stages, considering first the route and the journey, second the ritual actions or transaction carried out at each temple or shrine on the way, and third the question of the meanings which are important for the pilgrims. The relevant ephemera are of great value in the study of each of these. In particular, the *differentiation* of Buddhist and Shintō significations can conveniently be read off the ephemeral sources, because it is in these that alternative readings of the meaning of the act of pilgrimage are indirectly documented. Thus handwritten copies of the *Hannya Shingyō* (the Heart Sutra) will be seen in Buddhist contexts, while these are not desired at Shintō shrines. Indeed at one Shintō shrine a notice (no doubt an ephemeral one) was displayed reading “Please do not recite the Heart Sutra here”, betraying the point at which meanings are differentiated, or in the case of some enthusiastic visitors evidently *not* differentiated. Some visitors might recite the Heart Sutra in “the wrong place” through ignorance, but there is also a tendency for pilgrims in the Shingon, Tendai or Shugendō traditions to bring Buddhist meanings

into non-Buddhist holy places, i.e. Shintō shrines or on sacred mountains mainly administered (nowadays) by Shintō authorities. And this is not always welcomed.

A printed version of the Heart Sutra is often found in the context of a small, hand-held service book which appears in many variations, differing somewhat even within some of the larger denominations, but more so as between the main schools of Japanese Buddhism. These may at first seem to be little more than varying versions or editions of the more formal sources which have a long history of their own, or which are made available by religious organisations with a publications department. However the local variations and special applications can be of great interest. A similar folding format for hand-held devotional texts is in use in various new religions, even in cases where the main inspiration is Shintoist rather than Buddhist. In such cases the books are usually on sale for use by believers. Nevertheless, although the general characteristics are widely familiar, it is usually not really possible to trace the precise pedigree in a library. The character of such works, which under normal circumstances will be replaced sometime with an edition which is updated or improved in some respect, is essentially *ephemeral*.

In the Shintō context an interesting form of ephemera are the ceremonial prayers (*norito*) recited by the priest, which at least in part must be understood as variations on a centuries-old pattern. It will usually be impossible, in the field situation, to see directly what the Shinto priest has been reciting, and hence it will be equally impossible to use it as a source. The priest recites the *norito* from a large sheet of white paper folded many times. He needs this because although most of the formulations are in themselves traditional, the specific version for the ceremony in question cannot be learned by heart. It is not easy to acquire such *norito* as artefacts, but from the few which have come into my possession on particular occasions I have learned that they are always variations on a set style, geared to the particular occasion, and kept ready for use with various amendments by the performing priests. Short pieces of text may be crossed out or have a strip of paper covered over them. The form used will be a variation of innumerable others which have been constantly revised over decades and centuries, and which are distantly, but not so divergently, related to well-known ancient models which have been preserved in the literary tradition.¹² The *norito* are not discarded but kept in manuscript form, for example in a large box, and are simply revised to suit the situation, either by adding in a phrase or sticking a piece of paper over the original. Clearly such documents are ephemera in the full sense of the word. Under normal circumstances they are

¹² C.f. English translation by Donald L. Philippi (1959).

most unlikely to survive in a fixed form.

Also interesting in the shrine context is documentation of the relative amounts of money given as a contribution by different individuals or families. At the festivals of Shintō shrines such information may be displayed on sheets of paper before the shrine. This material is of interest because it indicates not so much the relative generosity of individuals and families as their relative status in the town or village. It would be difficult to get oral information about this, yet here it is for all to see, for a short while only. If such ephemera are to be analysed, they must of course first of all be read! This requires relevant linguistic knowledge. Once read and analysed, however, they amount to a source which escapes the glosses or the surreptitious distortion characteristic of oral information.

Not to be overlooked are innumerable information leaflets and brochures which carry information about religious institutions, buildings or grounds in all traditions. Without being overtly or self-consciously “religious” documents in themselves, these can be very worthwhile sources for the researcher into contemporary religion. The simple comparison of lists of annual events (*nenjūgyōji*) provided in such miscellaneous ways can, for example, be extremely instructive. These lists show just how any particular religious institution fits itself into the annual, calendrical flow which determines the life of the whole population. Even in the case of very highly organised religions, which more or less consciously seek to control the flow of information, there are usually additional ephemera, such as programmes for particular occasions, or advertisements for ancillary services such as the sale of religious objects, which complement the officially promoted sources. These all provide light and shade for the recognition of the overall religious system, helping the observer to maintain his or her independence from a would-be dominant, institutional view.

Such ephemera as those mentioned are sometimes despised by historians, who do not usually regard them as serious sources if they have not yet acquired any notable antiquity. Needless to say, they would be regarded differently if they were centuries old and were printed by order of a member of the royal family, like the tiny copies of the Dharani-Sutra printed in the year 770 and distributed to temples all over the land! They are also often disregarded by social scientists, who prefer only to ask people questions, or to arrange for other people to ask questions. Thus the historian, who in the traditions of scholarship is supposed to apply the historico-philological method, and the social scientist, who is supposed to *observe* society before giving his description and explanation of it, cannot avoid each other in the study of

Japanese religions. Accordingly, the specialist in the study of religions must be the historian-philologist and the social scientist at one and the same time.

In summary we may list four main reasons why the ephemera are so important. First they are evidence for the communication which is taking place between the religious organisation and the participant in religious behaviour, or between the participant and the gods, or between the participant and his or her own family, colleagues and associates. Second, the information provided by such ephemera does not only have a qualitatively interesting character; it also takes on a quantitative value because of the sheer mass of material which is constantly being produced (but which is only visible in the field). For example, pilgrim slips can be considered as documents of individual journeys, but they can also be *counted* and analysed by gender, place of origin, petitions requested, and so on. Third, such information often escapes the directive policies of the publication and publicity departments of successful religious organisations. Even when it is printed centrally, it is intended for common religious use rather than for conscious publicity purposes. Fourth, materials of this kind are not published, selected, edited or otherwise adjusted for the benefit of researchers who happen to be foreigners.¹³ Thus, at the confluence of historical and social-scientific method, such ephemera provide a particularly reliable and valuable answer to the methodological problem of access in the study of Japanese religions.

¹³ Problems connected with foreignness and with widely current attitudes to "information" in Japan were discussed in more detail in the paper mentioned above (Pye 1990), which was addressed to an audience of non-Japanologists.

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